

Total Control

Olena Oak and Ron Emmons slammed the door on the competition with a thrilling cow work.

By Erin Haynes • Action photos by Primo Morales



(Left) As Olena Oak circled his cow, every step was a balance of strength, speed and precision. The stallion and Ron Emmons marked the top cow-work score, a 228. (Above) Last year's winner, Russell Didlay, who rode his three-time World's Greatest Champion Topsails Rien Maker, passed the torch to Emmons with a congratulatory handshake. —Photo by Kelsey Pecsek

WORLD'S GREATEST HORSEMAN

San Angelo, TX — Feb. 1-5, 2012

25 Entries — \$50,000 Added — \$93,750 Total Purse

Horse/Rider/Owner/Pedigree/Breeder/Score (herd/rein/cow/steer/composite)/Money

Olena Oak	Ron Emmons	Mel Smith & Nichole Scott
02S (Smart Chic Olena x Fritzs Oak E Doakie x Doc's Oak)		
David Nogle	216/219.5/228/222/885.5	\$25,000
Smart Chic Aloha	Shawn Hays	Labourdette Ranch LLC
01M (Smart Chic Olena x Lei Aloha x Doc Tom Tucker)		
Stan Fonsen Inc.	222/212.5/220/221/875.5	\$18,000
Topsails Rien Maker	Russell Dilday	Kevin Cantrelle & Dilday
99S (Topsail Cody x Jameen Gay x Toby Gay Bar)		
Stellato Revocable Trust	216/221.5/220/204/861.5	\$13,067
Flo N Blu Boon	Doug Williamson	Gardiner Quarter Horses
03M (Pretty Boy Boon x Lena Over Flo x Lena My Way)		
Sylvan & Barb Williamson	213/218.5/204/217/852.5	\$8,600
HA Gay Freckles	Robbie Boyce	Mark & Wendy Froman
05M (Steady Tradition x Gay Freckles Rio x Colonel Freckles)		
Hillis Akin Ranch	209/218.5/204/217/848.5	\$6,750

Bobby Starlight	Zane Davis	John Semanik
02S (Grays Starlight x Cats Bobby Sox x High Brow Cat)		
Polo Ranch	218/222.5/200/201.5/842	\$5,000
Once A Von A Time	Jake Telford	Holy Cow Performance Horses
04S (Von Reminic x Sheza Shinette x Shining Spark)		
Holy Cow Performance Horses	211/219.5/194/216/840.5	\$5,400
Nics Black Diamond	Phillip Ralls	Mark & Kelly Gowing
04S (Nic It In The Bud x Shinersdiamondjackie x Shining Spark)		
Mark & Kelly Gowing	215/213.5/203/205/836.5	\$3,000
Smart Boons	Corey Cushing	Kevin & Sydney Knight
05S (Peptoboonsmal x Smart Little Easter x Smart Little Lena)		
Buffalo Ranch	214/220.5/0/196/630.5	\$3,767
Maximum Echo	John Swales	Flo & Daniel Houlton
04S (Playboys Remedy x Dry Sans Echo x Dry San)		
Twisted L Ranch	189/214.5/scr 0/scr 0/403.5	\$3,000

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Emmons' wife, LaDona (left), embraces Olena Oak's co-owner Nichole Scott after the stallion and his rider dominated in the cow work. —Photo by Kelsey Pecsek



The day began in a mood of peaceful reverence. As spectators rose and sang the familiar words of the national anthem, the equally familiar lowing of cattle reverberated through the arena as a gentle accompaniment. The day ended, however, in a different type of reverence: the jaw-dropping, boot-stomping, whooping and hollering kind of amazement that comes after a horse and rider execute near-perfect control of a cow while taking it down the fence and circling it at full throttle.

That was the kind of respect 10-year-old stallion Olena Oak and his rider, Ron Emmons, commanded when they ran away with the World's Greatest Horseman title during the last leg of the four-event competition. The finals – featuring herd work, rein work, steer stopping and cow work – took place in the First Community Credit Union Spur Arena in San Angelo, Texas, and wrapped up the National Reined Cow Horse Association's Celebration of Champions. Olena Oak, owned by the father-daughter duo of Mel Smith and Nichole Scott, Dunnigan, Calif., and Emmons recorded a 228 cow-work score and a 885.5 composite – the highest in World's Greatest history – and won the \$25,000 first-place paycheck by a 10-point margin.

The warriors

The 10 World's Greatest Horseman finalists included the three-time Champion duo of Topsails Rien Maker and Russell Dilday and four of the event's top-10 all-time riders: Emmons, Dilday, Robbie Boyce and Doug Williamson. In total, the horses in the clean-slate finals, which were whittled down from 25 entries, had earned more than \$1.25 million,

(Left above) "He's an exceptional individual, mentally and physically," Emmons said of Olena Oak. They won the World's Greatest Horseman with an 885.5 composite. (Left) Olena Oak stopped deep and hard and marked the high steer-stopping score, a 222.



Consistency was key. Olena Oak and Emmons were in the top three of both the herd work and rein work.

and the riders' cumulative winnings exceeded \$7 million.

"It would scare you in the prelims as big as the scores were," Emmons said. "Just to be able to get through it and make the finals this year was really great. You had to hustle to get it done."

Both Emmons, Ione, Calif., and Olena Oak (Smart Chic Olena x Fritzs Oak E Doakie x Doc's Oak) know something about battling to the top of a competitive field. Emmons, 55, had \$855,701 on his **Equi-Stat** record coming into the competition, and \$690,679 of that was earned in reined cow horse competition. The versatile horseman has shown in everything from jumping to Western riding. He has decades of experience and since 2003 has focused almost exclusively on the sport of reined cow horse.

Together, Olena Oak and Emmons had earned \$255,567 in reined cow horse competition – money won for titles such as the NRCHA Derby Open Reserve Championship and Open Bridle Championship, the American Quarter Horse Association Junior and Senior Working Cow Horse Championships and two

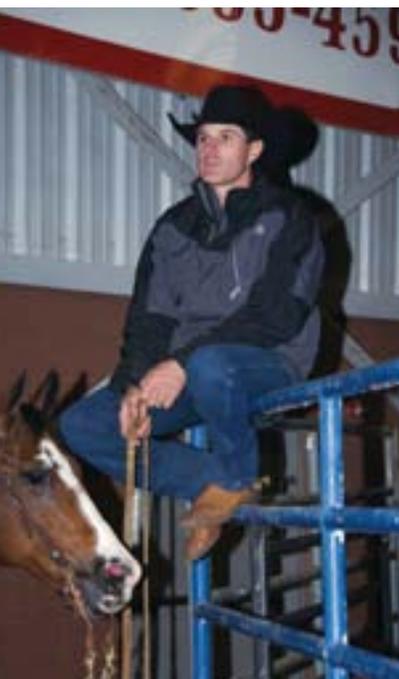
Magnificent 7 Championships. In 2009, Emmons and Olena Oak were third at the World's Greatest, and last year, they were second.

"There was no doubt, none whatsoever, that we'd enter again this year," Emmons said. "He's getting more and more consistent all the time, more and more seasoned."

Emmons was set on one more win to spice up his and Olena Oak's resume – one title that had eluded both him and his mount. By the end of the day on Feb. 5, they'd savor the title of World's Greatest Horseman Champions.

The battle

Experience and seasoning hold a lot of power, but it was a relatively inexperienced mare that got the competition off to a bang in the herd work. Smart Chic Aloha (Smart Chic Olena x Lei Ahola x Doc Tom Tucker) had won an NRCHA Non-Pro Bridle World Championship and her biggest single paycheck at the time, \$5,131, in 2010 with her owner, Frances Labourdette of Labourdette Ranch, Folsom, La., but the mare had the least amount of lifetime earnings of any of the World's Greatest finalists – \$14,711.



Shawn Hays and Smart Chic Aloha, keeping an eye on the rest of the competition, stayed right at the leaders' heels.

—Photo by Kelsey Pecsek



Smart Chic Aloha and Hays began the competition with the high herd-work score of 222 and finished with the Reserve Championship.

Her rider, Shawn Hays, Nocona, Texas, transitioned from a career training and showing rope horses to one with cow horses around 2005, but had already earned more than \$275,000, including \$20,000 for a 2007 World's Greatest Horseman

Reserve Championship, when he rode Smart Chic Aloha into the herd in San Angelo. The mare's foal had just been weaned in September, and Smart Chic Aloha went to Hays in December to prepare for the competition. It was the pair's first big show together, but no one in the crowd could tell.

They marked a 222 in the herd work. The only pair to mark in the 20s, Hays and Smart Chic Aloha secured the high score. Zane Davis and Bobby Starlight finished in second with a 218, followed by Emmons and Olena Oak with a 216.

But with three more battles to go, the war was far from won. Next, in the reining, things opened up. Davis and Bobby Starlight (Grays Starlight x Cats Bobby Sox x High Brow Cat), owned by John Semanik, combined graceful finesse with power as they flowed seamlessly from maneuver to maneuver. Their 222.5 score was the highest of that event and put them ahead in the composite, but four competitors were within just six points. Anything could happen in the steer stopping, and many in the crowd and on horseback believed the event would be won or lost in the cow work.

Emmons and Olena Oak had been consistent, camping out in the top three in both events, and the two events that lay before them offered opportunities to display strengths and take hold of the lead. First up was steer stopping.

"He stood like a stone in the box, straight up, right where he was supposed to be. He stayed in the bridle, and when I turned him loose, he just blew to the cow. He can jump from the back of the box to the line in one jump. He ran, rated and stopped hard," Emmons said of Olena Oak. Emmons' only job was to follow suit. "I just did the same thing I always do: right horn, left horn, saddle horn. When your horse is that big of a stopper, the only thing you've got to do is beat him to the saddle horn."

When the slack was pulled tight, Olena Oak and Emmons had the high score of the steer stopping, a 222. That put them at the top of

the composite with a 657.5, but after marking a 221 in the steer stopping, Hays and Smart Chic Aloha were nipping at their heels, just two points behind in the composite. The next competitors in the chase were nine points behind Emmons and Olena Oak.

"I knew I was two points in the lead, and I was first out in the cow work," Emmons said. "Those cattle had been better earlier in the sets, and I was hoping I'd draw a good cow. I wanted to be at the point where whoever was chasing me was really going to have to make a big run."

Final victory

The first to enter the ring, Emmons confidently loped his familiar mount, affectionately called "Ernie," toward the gate before stopping and approaching his draw, a black cow that was paying close attention. Horse and rider established and maintained control, and then, it was time to let 'er rip.

Olena Oak put Emmons in the perfect position as they headed down the fence. The stallion kept pace with the cow, and Emmons just had to wait until it was time to make his move.

"That first turn was huge," he recalled, the energy and excitement of the run still pulsing through his voice days after the event. "He dropped his rear end, picked up his shoulders and was coming with that cow." After a first turn like that from the first horse and rider out of the gate, the pair defending the lead, the cheers from the stands were instantaneous and earnest.

As Emmons and his mount came out of the first turn, their cow burst ahead and got away for a split second. But at Emmons' cue, Olena Oak surged forward, and it wasn't long before he was right back in step. For a moment, Emmons considered shaping the cow on the wall for the second turn, but quickly realized it wouldn't come together.

"I decided right there that I was going to go for an open-field turn. I figured if I was going to win this thing, I needed to be big,

and I knew the open-field turn, if it worked, was going to be big," Emmons said. "That second turn was total control. The cow was trying to push on me and trying to get away at the same time. Ernie jumped to its head and wrapped that cow up right there. Then he circled great. The cow never left my stirrup. We switched sides, and Ernie jumped right back to that spot."

In both circles, Olena Oak blasted forward with incredible power while never losing control. Every step was a balance of strength, speed and precision. As Emmons and Olena Oak drew a second fast and perfect circle, Emmons reached down and enthusiastically patted their good cow before coming to a stop and tipping his hat.

When the pair's 228 score was announced, it seemed the only horse and rider with a chance of catching the leaders were Hays and Smart Chic Aloha, and they'd have to mark a 230. Two draws later, Hays and the mare tied for the second-highest cow work with a 220, and it earned them the Reserve Championship and \$17,000.

But none came close to matching the leaders' performance.

"There are some great horses that have won a lot of money, but he's an exceptional individual, mentally and physically," Emmons said of Olena Oak, who left Texas with \$292,017 on his **Equi-Stat** record. "He's darn sure strong and knows how to handle himself, but his mental attitude, the way he allows me to train and show him that way, is a big deal.

"It was an honor to win the title," Emmons added. Especially on Olena Oak. "He's a great horse. He'll be one of those that's remembered for a long time, not only by me, but by the competitors, too."

But for now, those competitors will have to hold off on reminiscing and continue to battle the great horse-and-rider duo in the show pen. "I'm not going to quit showing him," Emmons said emphatically. "Heck, he's just now in the prime of his career! He's not done yet. There's still a lot of money out there that he can win." ★