

General Charley set to match win record at Arlington

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There's one sure bet at Arlington Park this summer.

If General Charley wins, he'll receive a terrific welcome.

More than 40 people have filled the winner's circle to celebrate each of the 8-year-old gelding's three straight wins this summer.



Today, the pride and joy of the Red Rabbit Racing stable tries for his fourth win of the Arlington season in the fifth race, a feat accomplished only by Bank Account (4-for-5) and Belle Girl (4-for-4) this summer at Arlington Park.

But winning is not what it's all about for this one-horse stable under the direction of prominent Arlington trainer Chris Block.

"Win, lose or last, we're here to have fun," said Rick Johnson, a vice president for Information Technology for Hendrickson in Itasca and one of four co-owners who claimed the horse for \$35,000

in 2008 and has seen it earn nearly \$200,000 in winnings. "We have no illusions of making a lot of money. We just want to have fun as a family and have big get-togethers at the racetrack every three to four weeks when the horse runs. We invite all our friends and then go and do something after the race, too."

Johnson, of Arlington Heights, his sister Jean of Deer Park, aunt Peggy of downstate El Paso, cousin Jeff of Morton Grove and Johnson's late father Richard got into the business in 2004 when they claimed Marion's Man for \$35,000.

"It was Peggy's idea," Rick said. "She always thought it would be fun to get a racehorse. Peggy and Jean have been involved with equestrians their whole life.

"Jeff (owns a roofing business in Morton Grove) always followed the ponies and when I was in high school I was a janitor at the old Arlington Park. I'd be up at 4 a.m. in the morning blowing the garbage off the apron for \$1.80 an hour.

"So the five of us said, 'What the heck, let's have some fun and get a horse.'"

Shortly before Marion's Man ran her first race for Red Rabbit Racing, Richard Johnson died at the age of 75.

"It was very sad timing," said Jean. "But we like to think that he (Richard) and Jeff's dad (Robert, who died earlier this year) are riding in tandem with jockey Eddie Perez with General Charley."

Gaining public attention was something Rick and Jean's father Richard experienced in 1971 when he was named the 'Average American' by the Public Broadcasting System.

Along with his family, the Rolling Meadows resident was the subject of many newspaper articles, and the recipient of good, bad and ugly letters from around the country after starring in a number of nationwide TV shows chronicling the challenges of middle-income families and what they desired from their political leaders.

Rick said the high point of the odyssey was when his father spent an unforgettable week on the 1972 presidential campaign trail with Democratic nominee Sen. George McGovern, who was challenging Richard Nixon for the presidency against a backdrop that included Watergate, the Vietnam War, the Apollo moon missions and Civil Rights struggles.

The adventure was chronicled in story written in the Daily Herald by reporter Doug Ray, who is now the chairman, publisher, CEO and president of the newspaper.

"I still remember Doug coming to our house," Rick said. "And now he is the CEO. He's a great guy."

Block calls Rick Johnson and his owners great people to work for.

"I don't know why he even wants to bother with us having just one horse," Rick said. "He certainly has bigger fish to fry. But I think he enjoys working with us because we just want to make it fun. Every year Red Rabbit has its 'racing awards dinner' and I know he really enjoys that."

"It's great to train for people who love their horses like them," said Block, who has 23 wins at the meet. "That's what I always look for in owners, people who are passionate."

Rick Johnson realizes his group may be over the top with loyalty. They visit General Charley every day at Barn 12 with carrots in hand.

"I think that's why Chris has Charley in the first stall rather than in the middle of the barn," Rick said with a laugh. "That way we're not always distracting the other horses."

And the General clearly is in charge.

"If you pet him first without giving him a carrot, he's likely to take a nip at you," Johnson said. "Everything has to be on his terms."



He'll try to take charge again in today's \$25,000 claiming race as the 3-1 morningline favorite.

General Charlie has collected 7 wins, 4 seconds and 3 thirds over 23 starts while racing for Red Rabbit, which is named for Rick's grandfather Russell, who lived in Wilmette.

"He had flaming red hair," said Rick, who graduated in the first Rolling Meadows High School Class in 1973 and studied journalism at Northern Illinois. "At Easter, he'd pass out the Easter baskets so we called him Red Rabbit. At Christmas, he passed out presents and we called him Red Claus. So Red Rabbit fit well for horse racing."

And the sport has been quite a fit for this suburban family.

"We didn't know it would last this long (surviving economically)," he said. "And we didn't realize how much everyone else in the family would appreciate and enjoy it."

"Now we're getting together every three to four weeks, and that's pretty cool."

Especially when the reunions are in the winner's circle.

