

Illini Duke



The all-time leading open point earner in western pleasure wasn't always a pleasure to be around.

By Jim Bret Campbell

ILLINI (PRONOUNCED ILL-LIE-NIGH) DUKE WAS born in Virden, Illinois, on May 6, 1965.

By the time he was 10 years old, the "Duke," who was by AQHA Champion Illini King Hand and out of Susie Duke by Grand Duke, was already one of the best-known western pleasure horses in American Quarter Horse history. (See the complete list of all-time point-earners at the back of the western pleasure/hunter under saddle section in this issue.)

"Once you had a saddle on his back, he would go to work, and he enjoyed the show ring," said Gail Ross of Barrington, Illinois, who bought the gelding in 1972, about halfway through his career. "You could do anything with him on his back, but on the ground, he was a terror. It took two men and a gorilla to clip him and, believe me, I had the best horsemen helping me."

Just ask AQHA Regional Representatives Larry Myerscough and Billy Steele or trainer Don Ellis (none of whom happens to be a gorilla). All three horsemen and many unnamed others helped subdue Illini Duke when the clippers came near his ears or face.

In addition to ribbons and trophies, All American Quarter Horse Congress competitions brought the gelding standing ovations as he demonstrated western pleasure as part of the show's versatility showcase.

"He was just a horse you could always recognize," Gail said. "He probably had the worst head of any horse I have ever seen, but the most beautiful eyes. They were large, clear and never missed a thing that went on around him."

In addition to his open career, which spanned 13 years (1967-1980), Illini Duke was shown in the amateur and youth divisions. Debbie Smail of Vandalia, Illinois, made the gelding an AQHA Youth Champion and a youth performance champion in the early '70s. Gail acquired numerous AQHA World Championship Show and high-point honors with Duke in the mid-1970s. Later, Wendi and Teri Ross showed the gelding in youth competition.

"He had been up and down the road so often that he gave me directions," Gail said. "I took him for granted and just expected him to give his all every trip. It wasn't until I had shown a bunch of other horses that I realized how great that horse was."

Long after he retired his saddle, Illini Duke still retained his spit and fire on the ground.

Ironically, though, people could put a toddler on Duke's back and the horse would act like a perfect gentleman, according to all of the horsemen who were wary of the gelding's legs and teeth when they were working with him on the ground.

"I promised the man I bought him from that Duke would die with me," Gail said. "I owned him more than 20 years. He was a good friend who taught me so much. To this day, when I go to the barn to feed, I wish he was there to greet me." □

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Gail Ross and Illini Duke took the title in amateur western pleasure at the first AQHA World Championship Show in 1974.

Duke Facts

Breeder: Donna Hulcher of Virden, Illinois
Owners: Debbie Smail Bowles of Vandalia, Illinois (1968-1972)
Gail Ann Ross of Barrington, Illinois (1972-1994)
Trainers: Don Ellis, Heyworth, Illinois
Sam Smail, Vandalia, Illinois
Total Points: 2,212
Open Record: 1,217.5 western pleasure points, all-time leading open western pleasure point-earner
22 halter points
2 hunter under saddle points
Major accomplishments: 1974, amateur western pleasure world champion, 1969 high-point in junior western pleasure, 1974 high-point in amateur western pleasure. AQHA Champion, youth champion and youth performance champion.