

# Whitmore's Next Chapter

RACING STARS CAN BRING ADDED ATTENTION TO AFTERCARE

By KRISTEN KOVATCH BENTLEY



Whitmore, under Laura Moquett, confidently steps into the water at Kentucky Horse Park's Head of the Lake

**T**HE CROWD GATHERED at the Kentucky Horse Park's Head of the Lake water complex in October was perhaps a bit smaller than the crowds Whitmore was used to seeing. After all, his seven-year racing career had taken him coast to coast, north to south, performing with characteristic grit and determination on some of the biggest stages North American racing has to offer. With a Breeders' Cup Sprint (G1) win, multiple graded stakes victories, and an Eclipse Award (champion male sprinter) under his belt, Whitmore had little left to prove on the track.

On this October 2022 day he faced a very different kind of test. With Laura Moquett in the tack—the person who understood his active mind and often challenging personality best—Whitmore paused for the briefest moment at the edge of the famous Head of the Lake. The gathered crowd fell silent.

Whitmore lowered his head, examined what lay before him, and stepped confidently into the water on a loose rein like the most seasoned trail riding horse. As the old familiar sound of camera shutters clattered over the lake through which he splashed, he swung his head casually toward the gathered press, ears pricked, still working the crowd. From champion racehorse to off-track Thoroughbred beginning his new career at the Retired Racehorse Project's Thoroughbred Makeover with a top-10 placing, Whitmore remained a star.

BETHANY P. PHOTOGRAPHY



In March 2022 Whitmore leads the post parade ahead of the Whitmore Stakes at Oaklawn Park

## GREATEST SERVICE

While Whitmore might have earned some notoriety for challenging behavior around the track, particularly a penchant for kicking, his grit and determination set him apart as a racehorse.

“He always was competitive,” said Laura Moquett, wife of Whitmore’s racing trainer Ron Moquett. “He wanted to run horses down, to intimidate them. He wanted to be the one that moved their feet. That grit, you can’t train that into them.”

Horses come and go through a racing stable. Trainers might get two to five years with a particular horse before a racing career ends while others arrive in the barn. Plenty of great horses stand out in the Moquetts’ memory, but Whitmore remained in a class of his own—not only for his

achievements as a racehorse, but for his strong character and challenging personality. Having Whitmore in their lives now, in Laura’s words, is “a dream come true.”

The Moquetts are no strangers to after-care. It’s been the natural next chapter for many horses in the Moquett stable, with Laura networking retirement through a few individuals who help place horses in suitable homes. Laura herself is experienced at transitioning Thoroughbreds to second careers, finding herself particularly drawn to challenging and athletic horses that need an experienced trainer to help set them up for post-racing success—horses that, were they to end up in less-experienced hands for the initial transition, might ultimately be at greater risk of slipping through the cracks.

“You’ve got to have them ready for the

next step in life,” she said. “The greatest service we can do is to prepare them for a new career. If I were gone tomorrow, my horses need to have the skills to be ready.”

## MENTAL SIDE

Second-career trainers of Thoroughbred ex-racehorses learn how to read past performances and watch race replays to glean insight into horses’ personalities and character, and how those on-track tendencies can translate to a life after racing. A horse that washes out in the post parade, for example, might struggle to adjust to a busy schooling ring at a horse show.

Laura Moquett had the added insight that comes with working with a horse day-in and day-out for years in a race-track setting. Certain characteristics in



Whitmore that might have been considered quirks became key for helping him transition to his next chapter.

“At Belmont Park, there’d be grills and bicycles and just stuff around on the backstretch,” she recalled. “He would always drag me over to these things to investigate them. At Saratoga Race Course he tried to walk up the manure ramp.”

With few riding disciplines as physically demanding as racing, intelligent horses such as Whitmore often need mental challenges. Taking that natural curiosity displayed on racetrack backstretches into consideration, Laura turned her immediate considerations to competitive trail, a discipline that requires horses to navigate a wide range of sensory obstacles with precise footwork.

“He loves mind games,” Moquett said. “I don’t think he’d have been happy just being thrown out in a field—I think he’d get bored.”

Whitmore needed a physically lower-impact sport for his first year of retirement, as he was rehabilitating a minor injury from August 2021 that occurred during his final start, the Forego Stakes (G1). Nevertheless, Laura set sights on the

Thoroughbred Makeover, knowing that if the timing was right, his presence at the event would speak volumes for the importance of aftercare for all horses—even champions.

Fortunately, competitive trail is a popular option for many horses and trainers targeting the Makeover, for many of the same reasons: The sport is free from the higher impact of jumping, and the skills developed on the trail course apply to many other situations and scenarios for horses after racing.

### THOROUGHBRED MAKEOVER

Laura and Whitmore’s training did not begin in earnest until April 2022—a relatively late start for horses aiming for October’s Thoroughbred Makeover each year. Along the way, they met with many of the same setbacks as the rest of the Makeover class: unforeseen challenges with hoof health as horses’ feet adjust to a different lifestyle and nutrition; finding the right prep events to ensure horses were ready for the big environment of the Makeover; and learning the ins and outs of a new discipline.

“I learned so much about competitive

trail,” said Laura, whose equestrian background is primarily in the hunter/jumper disciplines. “Trail, when I was a kid, used to be things such as picking up a rain slicker. As a competitive sport now, it’s a lot more intense.”

Moquett and Whitmore practiced on everything from teeter-totters to boxes filled with noisy, empty water bottles.

Laura had never attended the Thoroughbred Makeover, but she had several friends who had taken horses. After moving Whitmore into the Kentucky Horse Park for the week—he was coincidentally stabled across from grade 1-placed Finnick the Fierce, causing their barn aisle to be nicknamed “Millionaire’s Row”—Laura met her fellow competitors and got the lay of the land of the expansive event. While the Makeover is a competition—the largest and most lucrative retraining event of its kind globally—she was struck by the friendly energy.

“The overall positivity was incredible,” she detailed. “There was a nice energy you don’t feel at a typical horse show—it felt like everyone was happy. And I think it’s because most of us were in the same boat: We had our challenges and our setbacks, and we had all made it, and we were just having so much fun. It was incredible to realize how many people are interested in doing this—transitioning these Thoroughbreds to something new after racing.”

Horses such as Whitmore—former champions who go on to second careers—captivate two audiences. They bring racing fans along for a second journey, bringing the unique challenges of Thoroughbred aftercare directly to the racing audience. They also invite the equestrians who appreciate the athleticism of the breed to learn more about racing. These horses serve as natural ambassadors, representing the thousands of lesser-known horses making the same transition each year, making Thoroughbred aftercare the natural next step in a horse’s career. **BH**



At the 2022 Breeders’ Cup, Whitmore served as the pony for NBC’s Donna Brothers

ANNE M. EBERHARDT