

## **Craig Morris had a dream**

by Sally Harrison

Winning the National Cutting Horse Association (NCHA) Futurity is every cutting horse trainer's dream. Craig Morris's dream seemed so real, he could see the hairs on his horse's coat. The only trouble was, they didn't match the horse he was riding.

"I was on a different color horse in my dream than the one I was showing that year," he recalled. "So I assumed it wasn't going to be that one,"

Morris had to wait 13 years for his dream to come true and, sure enough, his Futurity winner, One Smart Lookin Cat, had a bright sorrel coat, just like the horse in his dream. Last December, Morris and One Smart Lookin Cat, owned by McGregor, Texas Chevy dealer John McClaren, delivered a stunning one-two punch with a win in both the NCHA Futurity semi-finals and finals. It was just the second time in his career, and the first time since 1993, that Morris, 36, had qualified for the Futurity finals.

"I'd had some accomplishments and some heartaches, too," said Morris. "But winning the Futurity was definitely icing on the cake."

The win, worth \$200,000, boosted Morris's earnings past \$1 million and made him eligible to be inducted into the NCHA Hall of Fame during this year's Futurity at Fort Worth's Will Rogers Equestrian Center.

If the Futurity win was icing on the cake, Morris claimed the bakery this past March, when he won the MillionHeir Classic in Las Vegas riding Movin Downtown, a four-year-old gelding owned by Bobby and Francie Butler of Valley Mills, Texas. The winner's payout of \$300,000 is the second largest winner's share in the history of the sport.

"Movin Downtown was kind of a Cinderella story," said Morris, who acquired the yet to be proven horse just 45 days before the event. "He had been really well trained and from what I could tell about him, he was one of the best (horses eligible for the MillionHeir Classic) that I had seen."

Morris has seen a lot of good horses in the past 30 years. He grew up in the shadow of Will Rogers Coliseum. His stepfather, cutting horse trainer Jimmy Purselley, lives in Fort Worth, and his mother, Dixie Purselley, is a non-professional competitor at NCHA events in Fort Worth.

"Cutting was something I thought about all the time when I was a kid," said Morris, who save for the cowboy gear, could be mistaken for a business professional. "I loved riding and wanted to be out there with the horses and the cows. I actually quit college to do this."

Success came early for Morris. He won the Sunbelt Cutting in Oklahoma City at 22, on a horse called Doc O Dynamite, owned by Montana rancher John Scott. That same year, he hooked up with Judy Venezia, of Scotch Plains, New Jersey, and her gelding Short Doc, who had been 1990 NCHA reserve world champion. Morris and Venezia were married in 1993.

"Shorty taught me a lot about what it really takes to win in adverse conditions," said Morris, who continued to show Short Doc at championship cuttings across the country. On one trip in 1993, he stopped at a breeding farm in Rutledge, Georgia to look at some young horses. He picked out a yearling colt named Snackbox from a herd of 40 and hauled him home.

Morris trained and showed Snackbox with success as a four-year-old, then sold the stallion to Weatherford, Texas auto dealer Jerry Durant. Durant hired Morris to ride Snackbox and to manage his cutting horse program, first in Lipan, Texas and then at Silverado on the Brazos in Weatherford. In 1998, Morris showed Snackbox extensively to earn the title of NCHA World Champion Stallion.

Two years ago, Morris leased a ranch with a cutting facility near Fort Worth and hung out his shingle as an independent public trainer. He feels fortunate to be close to Fort Worth where NCHA produces three major events - the Futurity, Super Stakes and Derby – which each last 20 consecutive days. In addition to being able to sleep in his own bed every night, Morris's close proximity to Will Rogers Coliseum affords him the ability to work his horses at home during the shows.

Still, he is on the road with show horses at least 10 days out of each month. With 60 horses in training, including 15 that are currently competing, it takes Morris and a crew of five helpers to handle a day's work, beginning at 6:00 a.m. and often ending after dark. Judy Morris also helps care for the horses both at home and on the road, and rides herd on their children, Alex, 6, and Amanda, 10.

Running a successful cutting operation requires more than a talent for riding, according to Morris "You're a cowman whether you want to be or not," he pointed out. "You have to keep cattle to train the horses and you have to look after those cattle. You have to be a little bit of a mechanic and a builder to keep things running around the ranch, and a little bit of a psychologist because you have to deal with the public. You also need to be a businessman.

"Success happened to me a little too fast, when I was really too young," he added. "I wasn't adept at handling business affairs and I had a lot of cash flow that I wasn't keeping track of the way I should have been.

"It's like the young guys that come right out of high school and sign into the pros for ten million dollars a year. Guys that had nothing before, all of a sudden have a lot of money in their pockets. Life can kind of get turned upside down."

In spite of his success, Morris never counts on a win the next time around. "You've got to have a little gambler in you to want to be a trainer," he admitted. "You've got to have a little ice in your veins. This business runs in cycles. If you can make the finals when you're in a down cycle and stick with your program, when it's time, you'll get on an up cycle and start winning, again. Consistency is the real trademark of a successful trainer.

"You are only as good as the horse you are riding and the people who help you, but you have to have a lot of faith that what you are doing is right," he added. "It takes a tremendous amount of self-confidence to compete. Sometimes that can be misconstrued as arrogance, which is unfortunate. But it is a business and you have to believe in what you do."

Morris is showing One Smart Lookin Cat and Movin Downtown this week during the NCHA Super Stakes at Will Rogers Coliseum. For information, contact NCHA at (817) 244-6188 or [www.nchcutting.com](http://www.nchcutting.com).