

All Aboard -- The Midnite Express Carries Leslie Willis to 3rd \$100,000 Championship

By Tanya Randall

Multiple futurity champion Leslie Willis returned to the BFA SuperStakes winner's circle on Tuesday, November 19, aboard The Midnite Express ("Josey") after a 12-year hiatus.

Willis previously won the 2007 BFA SuperStakes on the Paint gelding Bet Or Check. That victory came on the heels of her first \$100,000 victory at the Run For The Bucks the week prior on Hesa Dashing Boone.

"It's been so long I was beginning to wonder if I was doing something wrong," said Willis, who posted a 15.790 aboard Josey to win the \$100,000 Championship.

Ironically, Willis was considering skipping the BFA SuperStakes this year because she didn't think she had a horse ready. She contacted Lisa Anderson, the manager at Copper Spring Ranch and suggested selling the slot she had shared in partnership with the Bozeman, Montana, the last handful of years.

"I told Lisa, 'Let's try to sell it to someone that has a colt they really think highly of and give them a chance. Mine are kind of green.' The few people I contacted before publicly putting it out there, they either had a slot or didn't want a slot. I called Lisa back and said well before we let it go, I've got a colt that's talented but green. She was all for it," she explained.

One of the reason Willis says her colts are behind is because she and her husband Jason, a former futurity competitor too, are in the process of moving to another place not far from their current Chester, South Carolina, home.

"It's been overwhelming this year," she said. "We've been clearing land, planting pasture. It's got a house and barn, but it only has three stalls, which doesn't work for me, so we're building a barn too."

Once she named Josey to the slot race the first of October, she made hauling him her focus.

"Once we named him, I got really serious," she said. "He had to go somewhere every week between now and then. The last couple of times I took him, the timers didn't work so I didn't know where he was clocking. I knew he was fast, but I hadn't had a time on him in the last 30 days."

The veteran competitor wasn't nervous about running the green colt for big money, she actually prefers the slot race type setups to multiple runs.

"I find myself more comfortable in a one-run, give-it-your-all than riding for an average," she admitted. "I think I over analyze stuff and think too much. I've always said whoever's day it is, it's their day. Go make the best run you can make. If it stacks up, great. If it doesn't, they'll be another one down the road. I didn't get nervous the other night. I knew I had to focus on every step this horse

Mr Eye Opener SI 106	Dash For Cash SI 114
Fly The Red Eye SI 97	Bedawee SI 92
Gaetana SI 92	Bully Bullion SI 104
The Midnite Express	
<i>SI 92, 2016 Brown Gelding</i>	
Jess Louisiana Blue SI 109	Mr Jess Perry SI 113
Dina Blue SI 80	The Louisiana Girl SI 100
Dianetomeetcha SI 103	Special Show SI 99
	Jimmis Josey Jet SI 87
<small>Rider: Leslie Willis; Owner: Jason & Leslie Willis; Breeder: NR Stevenson</small>	

made because he was green and he was fast and I had to keep it all between my hands."

Willis also noted that the BFA's setup at the Lazy E made the runs seem less overwhelming to the young horses.

"The arena itself was more like going to a barrel race rather than going to the Oklahoma City Coliseum, where colts walk in, look up and get stage fright," she said. "With my colt being a little more green, it helped him stay a little more focused and not get the stage fright. Everyone was sitting by the first barrel and if you got a good first barrel, they kind of screamed up across the pattern instead of making you back off and hit the second."

Willis and Josey's SuperStakes run wasn't perfect, but it was smooth and fast as the gelding kept moving forward rather than upward as some colts do when they get in bind or out of position. "I had some friends text me, 'There's no substitute for speed!'" Willis chuckled. "When they interviewed me right after I ran, I was like the first barrel was OK, the second was like 'Whew' and the third barrel...you can't tell how badly we looped the third. I kept thinking 'Don't hit the second barrel on the way home!' It went through my mind to not run on the outside of the second barrel on the way home. It wasn't a pretty run. It was just fast."

Bred by N.R. Stevenson, Josey is from the second performance
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age foal crop of AQHA Supreme Champion Fly The Red Eye out of the Jess Louisiana Blue mare Dina Blue. The gelding won on race in his three starts on the track, earning \$2,408 and a high speed index of 92. Willis purchased him this past January at the Winter Mixed Sale at Heritage Place in El Reno, Oklahoma, for \$6,200.

Willis had owned another Fly The Red Eye that she ended up selling to a local barrel racer, who has done really well with the gelding. The colt's maternal side also appealed to her. Louisiana Senator, sire of her 2018 Old Fort Days Futurity Champion Ryon Rocks, is also by Jess Louisiana Blue.

"That was probably it even more because I always look at the

mare side," she said. "The Louisiana Senators just seem to have a lot of sense."

She says that Josey was really laid back for much of his training. "He did everything we asked of him," she said. "He didn't require lots of riding. We'd ride him two or three days a week, take him to the jackpots, exhibition and take him back home and give him a couple of days off. He just didn't take that riding that some of them seem to do. If you want to go long trot around the cow pasture and pony an older horse, he's the one I take. This horse is really good minded."

BFA World Finals - Super Stakes
Nov. 18-23, 2019, Guthrie, OK

Super Stakes

1	The Midnite Express	16 brn. g.	Fly The Red Eye-Dina Blue, Jess Louisiana Blue	Leslie Willis	Leslie & Jason Willis	15.790	\$100,000
2	Vf Eddies Alive	16 ch. s.	Eddie Stinson-Vf Burrs Alive, Burrs First Down	Kelsey Lutjen	Victory Farms LLC	15.800	\$35,000
3	Jet Fuel Only	16 bay s.	Blazin Jetolena-Kr Famous Pearls, Dash Ta Fame	Jolene Montgomery	Busby Quarter Horses	15.950	\$23,000
4	Forbez	16 brn. s.	Dash Ta Fame-Ej Martha Feature, Marthas Six Moons	Cayla Melby- Small	Cayla Melby- Small	15.960	\$15,000
5	Imake Men Blush	16 brn. m.	The Red Dasher-Small Memories, Leaving Memories	Kendal Makovy	The Rocking R Ranch	15.990	\$14,000
6	Last Chance Ta Heaven	16 b.g.	JL Dash Ta Heaven-Tiny Red Woman, Dinkys Red Man	Brandon Cullins	Ricky Moomau	16.010	\$12,000
7	Chasin Misty	16 s. s.	Chasin Firewater-Mistys Dash Of Fame, Dash Ta Fame	Ceri Ward	Ceri Mcaffery Ward	16.090	\$11,000
8	Flingin Roses	16 bay rn. s.	A Streak Of Fling-Dancing Rose Lady, Disco Jerry	Tyler Rivette	Rose Mary Harrison	16.110	\$10,000
9	Br Big Red Dog	16 s. g.	Blazin Jetolena-Loretas Honor, Dr Nick Bar	Brian Wheeler	Blaise Bercegeay	16.140	\$9,000
10	Jesswatchmestreak	16 bay rn. m.	French Streakin Jess-Jerrys Tp Seepai Bb, Jerrys Disco Moon	Hallie Hanssen	Dave & Lori Zabel	16.140	\$8,000
11	Cfour Paddy Okelly	16 blk. s.	Darkelly-Lil Smidge O Whiskey, Paddys Irish Whiskey	Kelly Conrado	Kelly Conrado & Jeff Willis	16.160	\$7,000
12	Midnight Flyin	16 brn. s.	Hard Hitting-Dashing Dootsie, Strawfly Special	Mitzi Duke	Holly & Tony Fenoglio	16.180	\$6,000

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THE RUNDOWN w/Leslie Willis

The Midnite Express "Josey" 15.2-15.3 hands, 1,100 lbs.-1,200 lbs. "He's not a giant like most of mine seem to be," said Willis

BIT: Short shank rope nose combination. "I started him in an O-ring, but he felt too round. I put a tiedown on him and he got really scotchey going into his turns. I tuned him with a Stop And Turn. I had to knock the dust of it because it's been a while since I used it. I was scared that with him being as green as he was I would get in trouble with the Stop And Turn and not be able to guide him with it. I put the combination on him hoping that it would have the feel of a rope nose but with the control of a bit."

SADDLE: Older Caldwell with a Talmadge Green tree. "I have tried everything. He's kind of long. I bet I've put 10 different saddles on him, trying to find a comfortable one. I actually took two saddles with me (to Guthrie) because I still wasn't sure."

SADDLE PAD: Classic Equine Zone

LEG GEAR: Classic Equine Cross Fit, polo wraps behind

SHOEING: Special steel rims on front; shod by her husband Jason Willis

FEED: Whole oats with a little Nutrena Safe Choice

HAY: Homegrown winter rye grass hay and a flake of alfalfa a day

SUPPLEMENTS: Cox Vet Lab products

CONDITIONING-TRAINING REGIME: "I do have to work him on the pattern once or twice a week, just to remind him—"You do have a job.' Even then, its jog to the barrel, lope circles around the barrel. It's mainly just to keep him where I can move his shoulders and keep him listening to me."

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