
Inside Track: Rehab Specialist

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Leigh Gray and Fusaichi Samurai

Photo: courtesy of Leigh Gray

Hundreds of former racehorses owe their second careers to Leigh Gray. Manager of Dr. Don Shields' lay-up facility, Winner's Circle Ranch in Bradbury, Calif., Gray not only rehabilitates racehorses for a living, she does it in her spare time.

Usually, Gray fixes up former claimers, geldings, and horses that might not have had a future without her help. But one of her current projects is a more distinguished individual – Fusaichi Samurai, who in 2004 sold as a 2-year-old for a then-record \$4.5 million. Gray is retraining "Sammy" to begin his new career as a riding horse.

First on her own and now under the non-profit Thoroughbred Rehab Center (which she established five years ago), Gray has retrained and placed more than 200 former racehorses in loving homes in the last 15 years. She serves as president of the TRC, while other members of the board include vice president Cindy Wilson, Mary Knight, and Pam Mabes.

Eventually, Fusaichi Samarai will be turned over to Japanese translator Mikki Tsuge and retired to Wilson's Blue Dog Ranch in Creston, Calif. Wilson already has provided a home at her ranch for a couple of geldings that Gray rehabilitated.

"Mikki followed Sammy his entire career," Gray said. "She really wanted to make sure he'd have a good home, and she asked if he could be donated here."

Following his arrival at Winner's Circle Ranch, Fusaichi Samurai was gelded. He is adjusting well to life at the lay-up farm and enjoys his regular sessions on a Eurocizer, the tie-free exercise machine that functions somewhat similarly to a mechanical hotwalker. Tsuge has ridden show jumpers and eventers, and though she plans to make her new mount primarily a trail horse, she may also teach him to jump.

"Mikki had told us that his disposition was wonderful," Gray said. "Even as a stallion, he was very friendly."

A 6-year-old son of Fusaichi Pegasus—Hidden Storm, by Storm Cat, Fusaichi Samurai topped the 2004 Fasig-Tipton Florida selected sale at Calder when Fusao Sekiguchi successfully bid \$4.5 million. Sekiguchi had bought Fusaichi Pegasus at auction as a yearling for \$4 million and won the 2000 Kentucky Derby (gr. I) with him. Fusaichi Samurai was from Fusaichi Pegasus' first crop.

A series of injuries kept Fusaichi Samurai from fulfilling his potential following a sparkling debut at Hollywood Park in December 2004, when he won a maiden race by two lengths. For trainer Neil Drysdale, he started four times in four years, finishing eighth in his final race at Hollywood in May 2007.

Fusaichi Samurai is one of seven horses that Gray is currently rehabilitating. Many horses she has retrained have gone on to competitive second careers, one even making the long list for the Pan-Am Games.

A former exercise rider for the late Charlie Whittingham, Gray began rehabilitating racehorses while working as a veterinary technician for the Southern California Equine Foundation. When a horse suffered a career-ending injury, she and SCEF hospital administrator Karen Klawitter would often work with veterinarians who provided pro-bono surgery. Gray then performed the aftercare and found homes for the horses.

Gray received the Race Track Chaplaincy of America's inaugural White Horse Award in 2003 for heroism when she was the foot person on the carriage at Santa Anita that takes the patrol judges to their trackside positions. Fireworks caused the four carriage horses to bolt, throwing the driver, but Gray managed to safely stop the team.

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