

THE WEIGHT OF THE RIDE



More than only Justin Wright rode on Zak 34's back, as the stallion earned incredible scores on his way to the Open Champion win.

By Kate Bradley Byars
Photos by Primo Morales

The 2021 National Reined Cow Horse Association Snaffle Bit Futurity® Finals on Saturday, October 23, at the Will Rogers Coliseum in Fort Worth, Texas, might go down as the loudest and the most intense in many years. A clear front-runner didn't emerge until the last set of cow work. When Darren Moore called out an incredible judge's score of 226 for Zak 34 and NRCHA Million Dollar Rider Justin Wright's fence run, it was clear who would add an Open Snaffle Bit Futurity Champion to his résumé.

"I've had dreams of this for as long as I can remember. It's consumed my life to win the Snaffle Bit Futurity," said Wright of Santa Maria, California. "It's emotional, but it's everything I've ever dreamed of."

Wright has been close to winning the championship before, taking the Open Reserve Champion title in 2018 aboard Scooter Kat. This year he had three Open Futurity Finalists in the field of 30 horses. The cream of that crop was "Zak."

At the 2020 NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity Sales®, Wright saw a 2-year-old named, at that time, R Tuff Diggin Louie (Woody Be Tuff x Cats Dig Lucinda x High Brow Cat), bred by Center Ranch, go through the sale pen and something made him speak to the buyer, Melissa "Missy" Fischer of Wagner, South Dakota.

"I didn't recognize her, and I asked if she had a trainer. One thing lead to another and he came home with us," Wright said.

What drove Fischer to attend the sale was a need to be in an environment that felt "second nature," she says. In reality, the mother had just lost her son, Seth.



2021 NRCHA OPEN SNAFFLE BIT FUTURITY®

PRESENTED BY METALLIC CAT

TOP 10

Fort Worth, TX – October 7-23, 2021

Horse/Rider/Pedigree/Owner/Score/Money

- Zak 34; Justin Wright;** 18S (Woody Be Tuff x Cat Digs Lucinda x High Brow Cat); Melissa Fischer; 670 (H:221/R:223/C:226); \$125,000.
- Jule Smart Rey; Dustin Mills;** 18G (Dual Smart Rey x Soula Jule Forever x Soula Jule Star); Shawna Miller; 666.5 (H:222/R:219/C:225.5); \$100,000.
- SJR Royal Diamond; Justin Wright;** 18S (One Time Royalty x Shiners Diamond Girl x Shining Spark); San Juan Ranch; 664 (H:219/R:220.5/C:224.5); \$75,000.
- Juliette Jonez; Sarah Dawson;** 18M (Travelin Jonez x Shine Smarter x WR This Cats Smart); Linda Mars; 663 (H:216.5/R:223.5/C:223); \$50,000.
- Chittchatt; Chris Dawson;** 18G (Smooth Talkin Style x Bet On Nurse x Bet On Me 498); Russ Mothershead; 661.5 (H:216/R:218.5/C:227); \$40,000.
- Metallic Casanova; Clay Volmer;** 18S (Metallic Cat x Dark And Sultry x Spots Hot); Sandra Kuntz; 660.5 (H:218.5/R:222.5/C:219.5); \$35,000.
- Boons Sticky Spot; Todd Crawford;** 18M (Once In A Blu Boon x Sticky Spot x Spots Hot); Matacorp LTD; 655 (H:215/R:218/C:222); \$30,000.
- Metallic Little Lena; B.J. Avila;** 18G (Metallic Cat x TF Smart Little Linda x Smart Little Lena); Lorri Hollister; 654.5 (H:211.5/R:221/C:222); \$25,000.
- Major Adams; Shane Steffen;** 18G (Hickory Holly Time x Dueling Chic Olena x Smart Chic Olena); McSpyder Ranch; 654 (H:218.5/R:220/C:215.5); \$23,000.
- Metallic Daisy Dukes; Todd Bergen;** 18M (Metallic Cat x Scooters Daisy Dukes x Dual Smart Rey); Bit Of Heaven Ranch; 653 (H:214.5/R:221.5/C:217); \$21,000.



Aboard Zak 34, Justin Wright captured his first Futurity Champion title, but the run carried so much more than just one rider's hopes.



Qualifying a horse to the Snaffle Bit Futurity Finals guaranteed Clayton Edsall, of Oakdale, California, the \$5,000 he needed to cross the NRCHA Million Dollar Rider mark, and he was notified in-arena following his cow work.

“We were overwhelmed with grief and decided to take a breather,” Fischer recalled. “We just wanted to go. We looked at the catalog, but we didn’t even have ‘Zak’ on the radar. The one we looked at we did get [Time ToGet Wreckless], but before he came into the ring, I saw Zak in the back ring and fell in love with him. There was something about him.

“He was my first time to go after a stallion,” she continued. “The bids kept going higher. My dad looked at me and said, ‘That’s enough Missy.’ I said, ‘No, he has to come home.’ I put in another bid and we got him. It was meant to be.”

The Fischer family lost Seth, nicknamed Zak after one of his school teachers had a hard time pronouncing “S” names, and it shook them to the core. A farming fam-

ily from eastern South Dakota that had raised Paint Horses and Quarter Horses for decades, the horses helped anchor them.

“I had lost my faith in God after they took [Seth] from me,” Fischer said. “But it was like [Seth] was there when I was bidding. I knew Seth, God, they all had a role in that day. I knew this was Seth’s horse. He loved [football player] Walter Payton, so 34 was his number. He raced late models on the dirt track. He was an adrenaline junkie. He always pushed things to the limit, like Zak 34.”

From that moment, Wright says that the journey to bring Zak to the Futurity had a different feeling than his past attempts. When Wright brought Fischer’s first entry to the Snaffle Bit Futurity® in Fort Worth, he said it just felt like something was going to happen.

“It was a perfect storm,” Wright said as he reflected on the Finals. He and Zak rode to a 670 (H:221/R:223/C:226) on their way to the title and \$125,000. With support from title sponsor Metallic Cat and the Owner’s Incentive Fund, the total purse that Open riders were riding for in 2021 was \$726,000.

“Coming out draw 29, it is a lot of time to contemplate fence runs,” Fischer said. “We had a good feeling until we saw the 226. We didn’t have any expectations but



As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a kid and so it goes when a trainer reaches the pinnacle of Futurity wins. Justin Wright and Zak 34 are in there among a sea of friends, family and well-wishers.

knew that Justin was positive. He was leading going into the fence, then there were these big scores.

“My son always said when he died, he wanted to come back as a cat because cats have nine lives. [Our friends up top] sent down a picture of a cat that was up [by their seats] a couple runs before he went in. That cat gave us hope. Zak comes out and the song ‘Bad to the Bone’ is playing. We all had tears in our eyes. Seth had a heart of gold, but he was bad to the bone. We had a feeling that he was in Zak and riding with Justin. We all smiled, through our tears, we were smiling.”

With Seth’s memory tied to the horse, the emotion of accomplishing his lifelong goal, and the exhaustion of completing the marathon that is the Futurity, Wright was overwhelmed after the win. However, he was quick to share the credit.

“I’ve got the best team at home. There are guys that aren’t there [training with me anymore], Russell [Probert] and Nick [Howard] that have gone on to do their own programs, but they’ve all contributed so hard,” he said. “Jared’s [Jones] is there now, Lilla Bell and the Lloyds. We have a great team and I couldn’t do without them. My family is awesome. My mom came out; three kids and Gloria are here, and you know, they’ve made everything so easy. My crew and my family have done twice as much work as I have to get here.”

Wright follows his brother, 1985 Snaffle Bit Futurity Champion Greg Wright, into the NRCHA history books with the win. There were a lot of family ties coming together in one final cow work. While goals were achieved and titles earned, Fischer says that her greatest joy is people will remember Seth through Zak 34.

“Zak 34 gave us all something to cling to the past year. I think without hope, it would have been so easy for all of us to

give up and quit after Seth drowned,” she said. “Everybody is going to look at Zak and remember Seth. Seth’s two kids [Layton, 9, and Rainey, 5] will know the story of Zak and how their dad helped us find him. They will know that I believe their dad’s spirit lives within this magical horse. We are happy Zak won but overjoyed Seth’s memory will live on.”

INTERMEDIATE OPEN

Dustin Mills made the Open Finals on two of his hopefuls this year, an incredible feat for a young trainer. Aboard Jule Smart Rey (Dual Smart Rey x Soula Jule Forever x Soula Jule Star), Mills piloted to a 666.5 (H:222/R:219/C:225.5), a score that held the high composite until Justin Wright and Zak 34. When the final cow exited, Mills still stood atop the CINCH Intermediate Open and was the Reserve Open Snaffle Bit Futurity Champion.

“People told me there is nothing like being in the Open Finals and they were right. It’s pretty cool. It’s overwhelming,” said Mills. “To have two back here in my first Open Finals, it’s pretty special.”

If the Futurity had a theme in 2021, it was that the champions were not out there alone. Similarly, to Wright riding for Zak 34, Mills felt he was also carrying on a legacy.

“The guy who owned [Jule Smart Rey], Mike LaGrande, passed away. Phillip Ralls had him early in his 2-year-old year, then we bought him and we wanted to carry on his legacy,” Mills said.

However, it was not clear that the horse would make it to the show. Mills says it took a while for the 2018 gelding bred by Garth and Amanda Gardiner to understand his job.

“When he was a 2-year-old, I didn’t know if he was going to make it, to be



Dustin Mills rode Jule Smart Rey earned \$100,000 for Open Reserve and an additional \$40,000 for the CINCH Intermediate Open Champion win.

honest,” he said. “As soon as he understood the job, he turned into a monster [athlete]. I had to back him off a lot. It is pure talent. As soon as we broke the ice, got to the talent, he came on and he came on hard. It was cool to go through it all to get here.”

Though he rode cutting horses with his father, trainer Mark Mills, all his life, Mills only zeroed in on reined cow horse in 2014 when he started working for Todd Crawford. Today, the soon-to-be-dad with wife, Hope, can add a few more titles to his list.

Owner Shawna Miller earned \$100,000 for the Open Reserve Champion title and another \$40,000 for the CINCH Intermediate Open win.

LIMITED OPEN & LEVEL 1 LIMITED OPEN

For Cara Hencratt, it’s been a year of firsts. Today, she can say she rode her first National Reined Cow Horse Association Snaffle Bit Futurity® entry to a Champion

title. Piloting Shiney Little Rock (That CD Rocks x Uno Smart Starlight x Smart Little Pepinic) for owner/breeder Paula “Polly” Bremel, Hencratt topped the Level 1 Limited Open standings by six points.

“It’s pretty cool and I didn’t think things would go this well,” Hencratt said. “You take it one event at a time and it’s pretty cool to end up on top.”

Hencratt has had success riding Bremel’s homebred horses, but this one will stick with her for awhile. The California trainer was all smiles following the awards ceremony, matching the delight seen on Bremel’s face.

“It’s so exciting and fun for me to watch my babies get shown by other people and have success,” Bremel said. “I raise my [horses] and don’t buy them. I raised his mother and showed her to \$40,000 before I started breeding her. My hope with every single baby is to be a nicer baby than the year before. He’s the

PRELIMINARY HIGH SCORES

(Horse/Rider/Owner — Score)

HIGH REIN (TIE)

Tuff Tuesday Cat; Luke Jones; Good Ole Boys — 223.5
 Metallics Got Shine; Todd Bergen; Teton Ridge — 223.5

HIGH HERD

Call Me A Cool Cat; Phillip Ralls; Neiberger Performance Horses LLC — 220

HIGH COW (TIE)

Stylish Rebel Boy; Ryan Gallentine; Amber Haglin — 222
 Stankish; Lance Johnston;
 Kenneth and Karen Haugland — 222

HIGH COMPOSITE

Cats Nu Shine; Nick Dowers; Clinton Marshall — 659.5


12th I’ve raised out of that mare.”

With a composite 650 (H:216 /R: 215.5 /C:218.5) Hencratt and the 2018 gelding earned \$16,000. The pair was back for the Intermediate Open and Limited Open Snaffle Bit Futurity Finals on October 22. They were only one-point away from the Open Finals bubble.

“This gelding is really strong in the reining and a really great fence horse. We wanted to make a solid run out of the herd and he did,” Hencratt said. “We missed the Open Finals by one point, so that was pretty exciting to sit in the top 30 until the last go, which was pretty cool for my first Futurity! It’s so fun.”

Level 1 Limited Open Reserve Champion was Cody Hanson riding 2018 mare Shiners Voodoo Doll (Shiners Voodoo Dr x CD CR Slide x CD Lights), bred and owned by Elie Willoughby, to a 644 composite and earned \$12,000.

In the Limited Open, Abigayle Mixon rode Reyzin A Princess (Reyzin The Cash x Pink Catty x Catty Hawk), a 2018 mare bred by Cowan Ranch LLC and owned by Andrea Luce, to Reserve Champion and earned \$14,000.

For complete results on the 2021 NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity, presented by Metallic Cat, visit www.nrcha.com/snaffle-bit-futurity/. 



Ridden by Cara Hencratt and bred and owned by Paula “Polly” Bremel, Shiney Little Rock (That CD Rocks x Uno Smart Starlight x Smart Little Pepinic) scored a 652 (H:217/R:219/C:216) to earn \$17,500 for the Limited Open win.