



Don Dodge & Poco Lena

# Poco Lena

*Voted*

**“Best Horse  
Ever To Perform  
In the Cutting Pen”**

*The 2004 Futurity issue of the NCHA Chatter published the results of a survey asking which horse people thought was the ‘best horse ever to perform in the cutting pen’. Following are the results and story of the winner.*

by Sally Harrison

chose lighter and leaner horses, over stockier ones, believing them to be superior in athletic ability for working cattle.

Compact and muscular Poco Bueno was all Quarter Horse in type. While Johnson admired the colt’s looks, he was skeptical about his ability to perform with speed and agility. Johnson’s stocky student was not long in proving his athletic ability, however, and in a way Johnson will never

“We (the NCHA Chatter) asked cutting horse enthusiasts to vote for the best horse ever to perform in the cutting pen. Based on hundreds of responses from around the world, Smart Little Lena ranked second, Chiquita Pistol was third, Peppy San Badger was fourth and Meradas Little Sue was fifth. Now we turn to Poco Lena, the readers’ choice as the greatest horse of them all.” NCHA Chatter

**P**oco Lena began her life on the 3 D Ranch in Arlington, Texas, now the site of Six Flags Over Texas Amusement Park. The ranch was part of the huge W.T. Waggoner Estate which at one time encompassed over 500,000 acres with headquarters in Vernon, Texas.

E. Paul Waggoner, son of W.T. Waggoner, purchased Poco Bueno as a yearling in 1945 from breeder Jess Hankins to promote him as a sire. Bob Burton, who worked for the 3 D Ranch, started the bay son of King P-234 when he was a two-year-old.

By 1947, Pine Johnson had come to work for the 3 D Ranch and the Arlington division served as sales headquarters for the Waggoner battery of show stallions and their foals. Johnson’s main duty was to work with Poco Bueno.

Johnson developed an expertise with horses and cattle on the famous Pitchfork Ranch and preferred the quick and nimble Thoroughbred/“native horse” cross which Pitchfork hands favored for ranch work. He

forget.

“He taught me to hold onto the saddle horn,” said Johnson. “Back then it was an insult to ride with your hand on the saddle. You’ll notice in photos that we rode with our arms up. “But that changed for me after one contest when Poco Bueno turned out from under me so quick that I landed on my feet, standing up. A lot of people thought I had stepped off of him. But I didn’t. He just dropped down and turned and I never even tripped.”

Because of his aggressive, hard-working style, Poco Bueno was a crowd pleaser. Capitalizing on that appeal, Waggoner entered him in shows around the country. However, during breeding season he came home to the ranch and was turned out to pasture with his band of mares. When Poco Bueno foals began arriving out of Waggoner-bred ranch mares, Johnson had no trouble selling them as weanlings for \$1,000 per head.

In the fall of 1950, besides the stallions Poco Bueno, Pretty Boy and Jessie James, only one horse remained at the Arlington ranch. She was a lanky weanling by Poco Bueno out of Sheilwin by Pretty Boy. Her name was Poco Lena.

“Poco Lena was a quick, growthy kind of colt that looked sort of strung-out,” recalled Johnson. “Everybody then was looking for a Quarter Horse. They wanted compact muscling and pretty heads. She didn’t have any of those things. She was sort of a string bean.”

While Poco Bueno was a standard for Quarter Horse type at the time,

Sheilwin left much to be desired in Pine Johnson's estimation.

"She didn't have a muscle on her body," Johnson said of Poco Lena's dam, "and she was plain in the head. I would never have picked her conformation-wise. In fact, I would have culled her as a broodmare."

Sheilwin's pedigree, however, was a popular and successful line. Thoroughly Waggoner-bred through her sire, Pretty Boy, and her dam's sire, Blackburn, Sheilwin traced to Peter McCue on the top and bottom, and to Yellow Jacket by Little Rondo on the bottom. Poco Bueno also carried Yellow Jacket and Peter McCue through his sire and dam.

Although Sheilwin's pedigree was similar to many of the Waggoner mares bred to Poco Bueno, it was her progeny, crossed with Doc Bar, which altered the direction of cutting horse breeding in the 1970's. Sheilwin produced three AQHA cutting champions from only six foals—Poco Lena, Poco Tivio and Poco Champ.

Since Poco Lena was the only young horse at the facility in the fall of 1949 and Johnson had some time on his hands, he began working with her. She had been easy to halter break and Johnson suspected she would be quick to learn. By the time she was eleven months old she had been ridden. She was introduced to cattle as a yearling.

From the start Poco Lena's intensity in a herd of cattle was commanding. Johnson just needed to channel her energy and teach her control.

"When I first started working her on cattle," Johnson remembered, "she would be so high she would be turning cross-ways and everything else. So I would take her out and gallop her. I just took my time with her."

Johnson's patience was the cement that melded the bay filly's quick mind with her slowly maturing body. Gradually she began to display the tremendous athletic ability which was a hallmark of her sire. In addition, she had an innate sense of authority in difficult situations.

"She always seemed like she had control of a cow," Johnson recalled. "She seemed to play with cattle and was so quick and smooth that a cow kept thinking that he could see daylight behind her. He'd keep trying to go behind her and she just kept blocking him and pulling him into her."

The tougher the cattle, the better Poco Lena responded to the situation, although she could revive dead cattle when necessary. She improved with every trip into the herd, honing her talent with each new cow.

"You never had to go in on her and pick up a cow," explained Johnson. "You just went in and cut a cow and she'd handle it. It didn't matter what kind it was. And if you really asked her to put out a lot, instead of coming apart and losing her training, she'd just get more intense and try harder."

Johnson entered two-year-old Poco Lena in the junior cutting at the State Fair of Texas marking the highest score of his career—a near perfect 78 points. Johnson remembered the judge admitting after the show that Poco Lena probably hadn't been marked high enough. She was Grand Champion of the show over Snippy, a full sister to World Champion Snipper W who had won the senior cutting also under the saddle of Pine Johnson.

While Poco Lena was beginning her career at two, trainer Don Dodge of Sacramento, California was showing her full brother, Poco Tivio, to a fifth-place ranking in the 1951 NCHA World standings. Dodge had acquired Poco Tivio, who had been bred by the Waggoner Estate and trained by Pine Johnson, as a two-year-old.

Poco Tivio, a 1947 bay colt, was Poco Bueno's first foal out of Sheilwin. He developed into a strong and aggressive performer and an AQHA champion. Furthermore, he made Don Dodge a believer in Poco Bueno and Pretty Boy, the sire of Sheilwin and Pretty Buck, the sire of Snipper

W.

In 1952 Dodge won the NCHA Reserve World Championship aboard Snipper W and ranked fifth in the NCHA standings with Poco Tivio. The following year he purchased Poco Lena, placed fourth in the NCHA standings with her and won the World Championship with Snipper W.

"Poco Lena was by far better than Poco Tivio," related Dodge. "He was a nice little horse, but he really couldn't compare to her. I saw Poco Bueno perform when I was riding Poco Tivio and he was a real nice kind of horse. But there were none of those that were equal to her."

For 10 consecutive years, Poco Lena was never out of the NCHA Top Ten standings. She was NCHA Reserve World Champion five times, a record which may never be equalled. She was named NCHA World Champion Cutting Mare three times, and placed in 395 NCHA approved events. When she was retired she had earned \$99,782, twice as much as her closest challenger. She remained cutting's all-time leading money earner until passed by Mr San Peppy in 1976.

Although the World Championship always seemed to elude Poco Lena, she came within \$458 of the title in 1955. Snooky, with rider Milt Bennett, and Poco Lena, with Dodge, had been trading the lead in the NCHA standings all year. When they arrived at the Cow Palace for the final show, only \$27 separated them. Poco Lena won the first go-round. But by the time Snooky was performing in the second go-round, Poco Lena was facing a different challenge at the University of California at Davis Veterinary Clinic. Poco Lena lost the title but won her life through emergency surgery for an intestinal obstruction.

In addition to her success in the cutting arena, the ugly duckling, unwanted as a weanling, had turned into a swan. At maturity she weighed 1200 pounds and stood slightly over 15 hands. Dodge showed her to several AQHA grand championships in halter and was nearly as impressed with her good looks as with her cutting ability.

Dodge owned and showed Poco Lena for six years and earned nearly \$50,000 on her back. But when B.A. Skipper, Jr. of Longview, Texas offered \$18,000 for the veteran performer, Dodge decided it was time to sell.

"When I sold Poco Lena, it was a pretty good price for the time," admitted Dodge. "I'm not in the breeding business. I sold my horses. It was part of the business."

Skipper campaigned Poco Mona, a three-quarter sister to Poco Lena, and was delighted to carry on with another great individual from the same family. However, Pine Johnson followed Poco Lena's career and was skeptical of Poco Lena fitting Skipper.

Skipper was a large man who rode with a car seat belt strapped under his chaps and attached to the saddle. He also relied on his spurs more than the professional riders.

"Poco Lena was very sensitive," recalled Johnson, "and responded to the slightest touch. I would only touch her occasionally. When I heard that Skipper had bought her I thought that she would never be able to stand it. But she just hung in there."

Although Skipper was a Non-Pro, Poco Lena was a professional all the way. She adjusted to weight, balance and spurs, never missing a beat. In fact, she was NCHA Reserve World Champion under the saddle of Barney Skipper three consecutive years, 1959, 1960 and 1961.

Pine Johnson remembered a show in Tyler, Texas where 26 horses had to contend with one miserable bunch of cattle.

"Everybody was having all kinds of trouble. And Barney Skipper and Poco Lena were the last to work. They went in there and cut two cows



and they looked like they were fresh cattle the way she handled them. She won the cutting. She was just that much above other horses.”

In the early fall of 1962, Skipper and Poco Lena were vying with Cutter Bill and King’s Michelle for World Championship honors. The pair won a show in Douglas, Arizona on September 30th and parted company when Skipper flew his private plane back to Texas and sent Poco Lena home in a trailer.

Skipper perished when his plane crashed during the early hours of October 1st. Poco Lena was not located until October 5th. Because of the tragic chain of events, beginning with Skipper’s death, she had been confined to the trailer, without food and water. Poco Lena was led from the trailer with hot and throbbing front feet. Severe, chronic laminitis would plague her for the rest of her life. Her show career was over.

On March 20, 1963 the Skipper horses were dispersed at an auction which drew people from forty states and Canada. Pine Johnson was one of the overflow crowd that day. He came with the intention of buying Poco Lena.

“I’d had pretty good luck with fixing horses’ feet that were crippled,” said Johnson. “Since I had started her and had won the first money on her, I wanted to finish \$100,000 on her. But she brought \$14,200 and

that was more than I could afford. That was a tremendous amount for a crippled horse.”

Although purchased from the Skipper Estate by J.G. Madden of Minden, Louisiana, Poco Lena’s final home was with Dr. Stephen Jensen of Paicines, California. Jensen also owned Doc Bar who he was crossing with success on Poco Tivio daughters. The Doc Bar-Poco Lena cross was a natural extension of the Jensen breeding program.

The Jensens knew of the Skipper Estate Sale and had an interest in Poco Lena as a broodmare. They assumed, however, that her price would be out of their range and did not attend the sale. Meanwhile Madden, unaware of the severity of the mare’s condition when he purchased her, stopped payment on his check and returned the mare to Mrs. Skipper.

At this point, Jack Elliot, a mutual friend of Mrs. Skipper and the Jensens, notified the Jensens that the mare was again for sale. When final negotiations were completed the Jensens paid \$12,000 and Poco Lena headed for the Doc Bar Ranch in California.

The Jensens knew that Poco Lena was foundered, but they weren’t prepared for what they saw when she was unloaded from the trailer.

“They were absolutely horrified at the condition she was in when she arrived here,” remembered the Jensens’ daughter, Stephanie Ward. “She was so horribly crippled.

"Right away they got a good team of veterinarians to check her out. And the radiologist said that he had never seen a coffin bone that wanted to come through the bottom as much as that mare's did. Her coffin bones were rotated perpendicular."

Poco Lena was once again in the hands of the staff at the University of California at Davis Veterinary School. The main objectives were to relieve her pain and to get her in foal. Although 13, Poco Lena had never been bred.

After a year and half of concentrated effort, Poco Lena was pronounced in foal. But little progress was made on her crippled feet. She lived her final years on the soft lawn of the Doc Bar Ranch.

Poco Lena's first foal, a 1967 bay colt, was named Doc O'Lena. A 1968 bay colt named Dry Doc, was her last.

"She was a good mother," Stephanie Ward remembered. "If the colts

When Dry Doc was weaned, Poco Lena, a mare that had never known how to quit, was put to rest with great sadness and blessed relief. Her gallant heart had stopped beating, but her legacy to the cutting world was just beginning.

Doc O'Lena, Poco Lena's first son, won the NCHA Open Futurity in 1970, sweeping both go-rounds and the semis, the first time an entry swept all four levels of Futurity competition. His final score of 223 points was also a Futurity record at the time.

In 1974 Doc O'Lena's daughter Leantoo won the NCHA Non-Pro Futurity and was the first NCHA Futurity Champion to be sired by a Champion. In 1975 Lenaette won the Open Futurity with 224 points, breaking the former record of her sire, Doc O'Lena.

Doc O'Lena's son Smart Little Lena was NCHA's first Triple Crown winner. In turn, he sired 1987 NCHA Futurity Champion Smart Date

## Poco Lena with Dry Doc



would get away from her, she would get up and hobble over to them. She would rear back on her back legs and just barely touch her front feet to the ground.

"We had a board fence around the pasture and when Dry Doc got older and wanted to run, we took the two bottom boards off and he could run out in the pasture with the other mares and foals and then come back to the lawn with his mother. That's how he got his exercise."

Doc O'Lena and Dry Doc both learned to nurse Poco Lena while she was lying down. Although she was a devoted mother, the pain was often too great for her to stand on her feet.

After Dry Doc was born, Poco Lena's condition declined rapidly. She might have produced again, but her future could only be full of pain. It is touching to imagine the courageous mare gazing longingly as her colt ducked under the fence and cavorted in the pasture with the other mares and foals.

from his first crop of performers, and is today the sport's all-time leading sire.

Dry Doc, Poco Lena's second foal, followed Doc O'Lena in 1971 with the NCHA Futurity Championship, and as a prominent sire.

Poco Lena, "the great and game symbol of the world of cutting," lives on. Don Dodge, who was never liberal with superlatives, keened in on Poco Lena's fiber and heart with just a few well chosen words.

"She could stand the hauling and the doing," said Dodge. "She was a tough mare."

*Zantanon*

*King 1932*

*Jabalina*

*Poco Bueno*

*Poco Bueno 1*

*Miss Taylor 1933*

*Mare by Hickory Bill*

*Poco Lena*

*Dodger 1*

*Pretty Boy 1928*

*Little Maud*

*Sheilwin 1943*

*Blackburn 1927*

*Mare by Blackburn*

*Waggoner Mare*

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