



## Horse Of A Lifetime: Red

*With one unforgettable victory—the first Rolex Kentucky CCI\*\*\*\*—  
Red changed Nick Larkin's life forever.*

BY JOHN STRASSBURGER



"Red kept me going," said Nick Larkin of his 1998 Rolex Kentucky CCI\*\*\*\* winner. "He got me to this country, to Europe. Certainly without him, I wouldn't have been riding now."  
KIT HOUGHTON PHOTO

**T**he story of Red's triumph in the 1998 Rolex Kentucky CCI\*\*\*\* with Nick Larkin reads like a modern-day "National Velvet."

It's the story of a young man who likes to take on challenges that seem impossible to most people and who had a horse with an extraordinary temperament and extraordinary talent.

Here's how it starts:

A 25-year-old event rider from New Zealand decides that he and his horse have done all they can do Down Under, so they head to the biggest event in America, to see how they can do against the best there. And they win it. "What to do now?" though, the rider wonders. While enduring a series of pitfalls with Red, he spends the next 20 years trying to figure that out.

Naturally, along the way to the victory gallop, there is an anxious plot twist. "I took a big, big gamble getting there—I took out a loan that was for more than I was making in a year—and the first vetting was terrifying," recalled Larkin, who now lives in Lexington, Kentucky, with his wife, Jeannie Larkin.

Nick's anxiety spiked during the first horse inspection, when the ground jury sent Red to the holding box after he'd jogged up and back once, showing some unlevelness. The treating veterinarian quickly diagnosed the problem: Red was developing corns—from new stud-hole plugs Nick had just purchased, which were longer than his shoes were thick. The veterinarian advised the jury to accept Red, which they did, but one judge told Nick "they'd be watching me like a hawk for the rest of the event. That made me realize how close I was to the whole thing falling apart," he said.

But then the American eventing community came to the aid of the young man and his horse from so far away. Bruce Davidson got his farrier to reshoe Red; Phillip Dutton asked his veterinarian to treat Red's corns, and body worker Dougie Hannum went to work on the rest of him, including having a saddle fitter re-stuff his saddles.

"Basically everything got changed, and I had a new horse for dressage," said Nick.

## **Badminton—No; Kentucky—Yes**

The story begins in the summer of 1997, after Nick and Red had won the Adelaide CCI\*\*\* in Australia (also that event's inaugural run at that level). So the next logical step was to go abroad to do a four-star.

England's Badminton CCI\*\*\*\* lured him first, but the legendary event had become such a popular international goal that the organizers were limiting foreign countries to three or four riders each. That meant he had no chance to ride there as a New Zealander, because the great Mark Todd, Blyth Tait (the 1996 Olympic gold medalist and 1992

**“I took a big, big gamble getting there, and the first vetting was terrifying.”**

—NICK LARKIN

Olympic bronze medalist), Vaughn Jefferis (the 1994 World Champion), and team stalwart Andrew Nicholson were all ahead of him.

And then New Zealand event official Jennifer Miller suggested he aim instead for the new Kentucky CCI\*\*\*\*. So Nick set his sights on America, thinking that if he did well enough there, he might make the squad for the 1998 World Championships in Rome and maybe for the 2000 Olympics in Sydney. A long shot, given the accomplishments of his compatriots, but maybe ...

"In any case, it was leave New Zealand and find something," Nick recalled. "I was pretty much set that I was going to do this. And I did. I wasn't really thinking about going back home to New Zealand; I was thinking of going to Kentucky and then carrying on to Britain."

As 1998 began, Nick, who was then working as a course builder and training a few horses, was putting together the details of the trip. Red would fly with Masterpeace, whom

Heelan Tompkins would ride to ninth place at Kentucky, and other horses on an 18-hour flight from Auckland to Honolulu to refuel and go through customs, before going on to Los Angeles for quarantine. After three days, Red would fly on to Atlanta to spend about three weeks at Carl Bouckaert's farm before shipping to Lexington.

Nick said that the flight across the Pacific was smooth, and he got to watch their descent into Los Angeles from the cockpit. "I remember thinking, 'Oh, my God, there's so much concrete!' Everything just looked so built up—I'd never seen anything like that before," he said.

The U.S. eventing world was about to meet Red and Nick Larkin.

## **“You’re Going To Do What?”**

Red's only U.S. start before Kentucky was at North Georgia, at Bouckaert's farm in Chatsworth. While walking the cross-country course, Nick was concerned about a combination that included a bank drop, followed by two

strides to a wide table with a drop on landing. He thought the striding was a bit tight for his big-strided horse, so he crawled underneath the table to see how strongly it was secured to the ground, because he expected that Red was going to take one stride and bank off the table.

One of the course builders saw him and asked if he didn't trust their construction techniques.

"I told him that I was going to jump on top of the table and that I wanted to know if it was going to be safe enough, and he looked at me like I had three heads," said Nick. "I reckoned there was a 90-percent chance it would have been a really ugly two short strides, so I knew I was going to have to ride it in one stride, jump on the table, and then jump off the table. And that's exactly what we did."

Nick said the course builder sought him out afterward to say he couldn't believe what he'd seen.

"We knew each other so well, that I could tell what was going to happen. Sometimes I would have



four or five plans and decide what to do based on what he felt like when we left the ground," Nick added. "That's the sort of athleticism that he had."

At Kentucky, Red's cross-country round displayed no such drama, but Nick pointed out that Kentucky was then a classic-format three-day event, so Red had three phases in which to settle down before he reached cross-country.

Following Nick and Red's upset Kentucky victory, New Zealand team officials put the pair on their short list for the FEI World Equestrian Games in Rome that September. Before the Games, the squad competed at Thirlestane Castle in Scotland, where Red provided some extraordinary examples of his jumping prowess.

At fence 2, a vertical jumped after

galloping up and over a mound, Red left the ground at the top of the mound. "I got jumped clean out of the tack; I think my feet were above the saddle," recalled Nick.

Red made another "innovative" effort at a four-stride combination, including making a two-stride distance into one stride and making two one-stride distances into bounces, before banking off the table at the end.

And then, a bit past halfway around the advanced track, he met a combination in the shape of two Cs curving away from each other, allowing riders to choose their own line between the two elements. Nick planned to jump a point where there should be a one-stride distance, "but at this point I was well aware something was wrong, so I went wider to take the oxers on an angle, thinking to do two or three strides, depending on how he jumped the first. The take-off over A was powerful enough that I was committed to two strides. It wasn't until after the fence that I realized why it felt a bit different from what I was expecting!" he said.

After his ride, Nick returned to walk the line he'd ridden. He measured a 48' distance, which Red covered in one stride, easily. "The jump judge said that was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen—his jumps were huge, and the stride was massive," said Nick.

But Red's boldness caught up with him a few fences from home, when he tried to jump a bounce as an oxer. "It didn't quite work—he basically landed on top of the B element," said Nick. Red didn't fall, but it counted as a refusal, so he had to retake the second element.

Nick said he sometimes jumped Red over oxers that were 6' high by 6' wide—"Yes, he really had that kind of scope"—but he was baffled by this hair-raising performance.

It was while writing an email to Vicky Latta, the team's chef d'equipe, to ask her opinion, that he realized what the problem was. At home in New Zealand, Nick would ride four horses a day and work building cross-country courses. But in Wales, where he was staying that

**Nick Larkin rode Red to one of the fastest times in the Kentucky Horse Park's first CCI\*\*\*\* to earn the title for New Zealand.**

CHARLES MANN PHOTO



summer, he had only Red to ride. So he had plenty of time to experiment with a new conditioning schedule on the rolling hills.

"I realized I just plain had a horse that was too fit. He thought he was at a three-day, and it was only a horse trial," said Nick.

Despite Red's over-exuberance and one stop at Thirlestane Castle, he made

the WEG squad as an individual. In the previous 12 months, Red had traveled to Australia twice before making the trip to the United States and then on to England and Italy.

"I knew on the trip to Rome that he was very fit but exhausted," said Nick, so he requested to ride his dressage test on Friday instead of Thursday, to give Red one more day of rest. But

## ► Red, In Brief

**Breeding:** Red was a New Zealand-bred Thoroughbred born in the fall of 1986, so he was 11 when he won the first Rolex Kentucky CCI\*\*\*\* in 1998. He was by Taipanui out of Dark Isle. He didn't race under rules, but Nick Larkin believes he ran in a point-to-point race. "I suspect the outrider may have crossed the wire before Red did," he said. "He was a very slow race horse."

**Finding Red:** Larkin saw a classified advertisement in a local New Zealand newspaper, along with two or three other horses, and he paid about \$800 for Red. "I've always liked the look of chestnuts, but it was more that when I got near him, I thought he was cool—I had that instant connection you get with certain horses," recalled Larkin. "I was concerned, though, that he might be too quiet. I even asked the woman if he was drugged!"

**Retirement:** After developing cellulitis from a severe laceration on his leg and retiring from eventing in 2002, Red played around a bit at endurance riding. (He started a 50-mile ride at the Kentucky Horse Park and completed about 25 miles.) Larkin also used him to pony the race horses he was then training. Finally, Red had the run of their farm in Kentucky. "He was like a dog—he roamed the whole farm. He would just hang out with different horses and put himself back in a stall now and then," said Larkin.

**Death:** Red died in January 2011 at age 24, after developing lymphan-

gitis. "The last month or so, we knew it was pretty close," said Larkin. "The day that we finally put him down, he'd had two or three pretty tough days, and then he walked out of the barn and just laid down in front of it. He'd never done anything like that before. He just kind of said, 'I'm done,' and that was it."

**Burial:** "We buried him on the farm alongside our other pets and horses," said Larkin. They considered burying Red at the Kentucky Horse Park, but the park would only take ashes, and the crematorium in Lexington couldn't cremate horses separately. "That would have lacked dignity, and we always preferred the private route anyway," said Larkin.

**What would Red have been like if he'd been human?** "He was a very intelligent horse. He was kind of quiet, but with a dry sense of humor," said Larkin. "He was an old soul, definitely. There was a lot more below the surface."

**Why was his name just Red?** "My uncle in New Zealand had a big sheep, cattle and deer operation in rugged farmland, and I just loved being there. My favorite sheep dog of his was named Blue, and Red is the opposite," explained Larkin. "It's a New Zealand/Australian cultural thing—if someone has red hair, we call them 'Blue.' If they're tall, we call them 'Shorty.' I wanted to call him Blue when I got him, but another girl in my Pony Club had a gray horse with a wall eye named Blue."



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his gold-medal teammates also wanted to ride on Friday, when the judges are “warmed up,” so Red was relegated to Thursday. “He had a tired dressage test,” said Nick.

Still, when he reached the vet box after Phase C on cross-country day, Nick said the attending veterinarians were “absolutely staggered” that his pulse was only 48. And then Red finished the 13-minute course in exactly the optimum time. “He would have gotten the award for the fittest horse, if we’d completed the event,” said Nick.

But that evening Red wasn’t sound. He’d pulled a front shoe at fence 18, which had caused him to strain a check ligament. Nick decided to withdraw.

“I was in about 20th place and was an individual, not on the team, but there was a lot of pressure on me to continue,” he said. “I stood up for my horse before I stood up for the team, and I’d do it again, even if I’d been in a higher spot.

“Rome wasn’t a great event,” he added with disappointment. “I was obviously

“I had no idea what the deal was—I didn’t even know the winner got a Rolex watch,” said Nick Larkin, who came from New Zealand to claim the first Rolex Kentucky four-star at the age of 25 and receive a watch from Rolex Chairman Roland Puton. CHARLES MANN PHOTO

the absolute junior member of the team and had no clout, but it was a real eye-opener and something I didn’t want to go through again.”

### Red’s Final Three-Day

Red returned to the United States after the WEG for a long rest. Nick was aiming to defend their Kentucky title in April 1999, but while he was in New Zealand (“trying to figure out what I was going to do next”), Red was injured where Nick was boarding him. It was “a severe laceration” on a hind leg, from which he developed cellulitis that forced Nick to withdraw from Kentucky.

So Red’s next three-day was the Fair Hill CCI\*\*\* (Maryland) the following October. Red claimed second in dressage, but Nick wasn’t happy: “I was pissed about that, because I messed

up three or four movements, and if I hadn’t done that, I could have been way ahead.”

In the deep going on steeplechase, Red stumbled on landing from one fence, and Nick felt him grab himself, although he didn’t pull off the shoe. Concerned, he pulled off the bell boot and saw the wounded heel bulb, so he ran alongside Red for part of phase C. “It was through the woods, so no one would see,” he said.

Without the bell boot, Red trotted sound for the first jog in the vet box. But when he put the bell boot back on for the second jog, Red wasn’t sound. “It wasn’t much, but he was a little off, and I didn’t think it was going to get any better,” he said, so he withdrew.

The 1999 Fair Hill CCI\*\*\* would be Red’s last three-day event, although Nick wasn’t finished



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**“You’re there with your horse, and you’ve had that partnership through the course that day. ‘The crucible,’ as Jimmy Wofford calls it.”**

—NICK LARKIN



competing him.

The 2000 Olympics were in Sydney, which inspired Nick to give the team another try. But Red picked up a small tear in the medial branch of his suspensory ligament that spring, and Nick withdrew from team consideration.

Unfortunately, this movie script doesn't end with one more great victory. Nick tried again in the spring of 2002, but after unsoundness kept Red from finishing the Red Hills CIC\*\*\* (Fla.), he decided their ride was over.

### **“Out In The Back With My Horse”**

Still, in the 20 years since their unexpected victory—when he bested Dorothy Crowell on the great Molokai, Phillip Dutton on his first Olympic horse True Blue Girdwood, and Bruce Davidson on Squelch—no other winner has even approached the romance of a 25-year-old on the horse for which he paid \$800 as a teenager and who traveled halfway around the world to get there. (The other two Kiwi winners—Tait and Nicholson—and the three Australian winners have each come to Kentucky from their bases in England.)

Nick rode a “safe” dressage test because, “I was riding a horse that I’d never ridden before. He felt great—but he felt like he was about to blow up and leave the ring,” he said.

It was good enough, though, that when Red finished the cross-country course 1 second fast, he was in fourth place. “I remember catching some big air over a few of the fences,” said Nick. “He was such a machine on cross-country. That was what he loved the most. It was his game.

“The thing I remember most was the cheering” he continued, from the huge crowd gathered around Kentucky’s signature combination, the

**There were a few moments during his weekend at Rolex Kentucky when Nick Larkin thought things might fall apart, but he persevered to win against some of the sport’s top horses and riders. CHARLES MANN PHOTO**

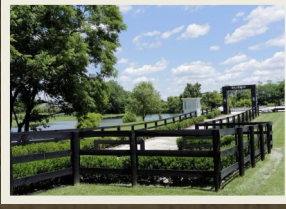


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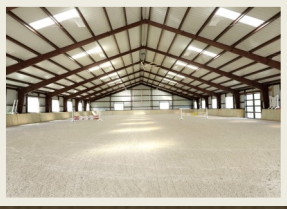
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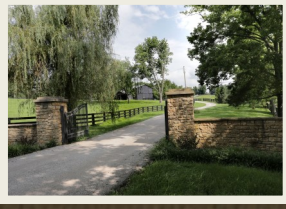
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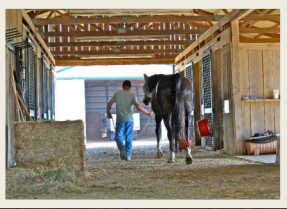
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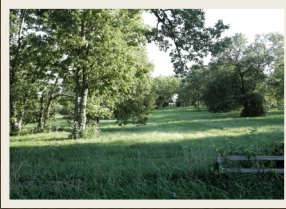
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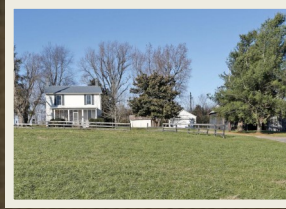
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Head of the Lake. “The rest of it, you have the wind in your ears, and you’re not aware of much else going on.”

After a fabulous, fault-free show jumping round, Nick dismounted and walked Red away from the stadium, while the top three—Davidson, Dutton and Crowell—jumped.

“I just wanted to be out in the back with my horse. I think I sat under a tree holding him as the others went,” he recalled.

As each one faulted, Red’s position improved.

“I could kind of tell what was going on—I could hear the crowd groaning,” he said. “I knew that we’d moved up a spot and then another spot. And then finally someone came running toward me, shouting, ‘You won! You won! You won!’ I was in shock. It was sort of a

dull feeling, an unbelievable feeling.”

Throughout its 38-year sponsorship, the Kentucky winner always received a Rolex watch, and when Rolex Chairman Roland Puton presented the \$5,000 watch to Nick, the rider gleefully ripped the cheap timepiece he was wearing off his wrist and threw it into the crowd, to make room for the new Rolex.

“That really was spontaneous,” he said. “I had no idea what the deal was—I didn’t even know the winner got a Rolex watch. What I did probably seemed stupid, but it was absolutely spontaneous.”

That jubilant moment is not what Nick remembers most fondly about that weekend, though. He most treasures a few moments with Red on Saturday evening in the hours after

cross-country when, no matter what would happen in show jumping the next day, he realized that no one could take away what he and his horse had just done together.

“You know that quiet feeling after you’ve just rocked it?” Nick said. “It’s that little quiet moment when you’re there with your horse, and you’ve had that partnership through the course that day. ‘The crucible,’ as Jimmy Wofford calls it.

“That’s just special. It’s you and your horse, and you know what you’ve done,” he continued. “I was obviously very pleased with his show jumping round, but there’s a whole whirlwind that goes on after it, so that moment after cross-country is so special, especially because there is still more to do. It’s not over yet.” 🐾

## ► How Red Changed Nick Larkin’s Life

“Without Red, chances are I wouldn’t have come across a horse of that ability in the window that I had given myself to see what I could do,” said Nick Larkin.

He suspects that without Red, he’d have a degree in geography or environmental science. “If the horse thing didn’t pan out, I was going to be in some jungle or on a glacier somewhere taking measurements,” he said. “I had given myself two years to get to the international level, to prove that I could do it—and we did, and I said, ‘OK, we’ll carry on.’”

Red also facilitated Larkin meeting his wife, Jeannie Larkin. They met in January 2002, not long before Red’s final competition. Jeannie, then a sales rep for Devoucoux, had contacted Nick about buying a saddle. When she came to his farm, he asked her out. They were engaged while on a trip to New Zealand in June and married later that year.

Jeannie stepped into Nick’s life at a time when he was trying to figure out what to do. “I was just a little over the eventing, and I’d always had an interest in looking at racing,” he said.

He’d long been intrigued by the conditioning aspect of eventing, and he was fascinated by the thought of improving horses’ stride rate and efficiency across the ground.

“And somewhere along the line, we started thinking, ‘What about Kentucky? There are lots of horses and racing, and it’s affordable,’” he said.

So they bought a farm south of Lexington, near Richmond, in cattle and tobacco country. They went to the track and found horses near the end of their careers, did

some breeding and even dabbled in steeplechasing.

But that didn’t work out. “There’s so much more to racing than just the horse,” Nick said. “I was hoping for a more objective sport, but there’s a lot more to it than just the horse, and I’m not good at schmoozing and selling horses.”

So he looked around again. “I’ve always been a bit weird about inventing things,” he said. “Ideas were popping into my head from time to time, and I’d write them down and sometimes build a prototype.”

He built a device that sifted manure out of shavings to clean stalls and another device that attached to a wall to prevent stall-walking. “But I’m terrible at marketing, and that’s sort of where they sat,” he said.

Then, three years ago, he went to the Kentucky Three-Day Event and walked the cross-country course. “I’ve got to get back into this,” he thought.

And now, at age 45, that’s what he’s doing. He and Jeannie have bought a new farm near Lexington, where he’s been busy building fencing and barns this spring, while riding and teaching lessons. He’s even going to start competing again. “Hopefully I’m hard back at it,” he said.

Pondering the full-circle turn his life seems to be taking two decades on from that life-changing victory, Nick mused, “Red kept me going. He got me to this country, to Europe. Certainly without him, I wouldn’t have been riding now; it would have just been a phase that I went through.”

He added with a smile, “He’s been responsible for a degree of poverty at times, a lot of stress, and a 24/7 lifestyle where you never get a vacation.”