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Didi Engler and 'Baby' return to reining at 86 years young

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Didi Engler with "Baby" and trainer Joline King-Pebley at King Performance Horses in Chino Hills.



Horse trader photo

"I can still do it!"

At 86 years young, Didi Engler reenters the reining arena, shines at Cactus Classic

BY HORSETRADER STAFF

CHINO HILLS – In February, when Didi Engler learned of a new National Reining Horse Association Legends Non Pro Division, it was the start of something new.

Actually, it was a *restart* of something quite familiar – and important -- to her. It had been 10 years since she had competed in a reining arena, and new rules allowing competitors aged 70 and over to place their hand on the pommel horn was a difference-maker for her confidence.

"That opened up a whole new world," she says from the breezeway at King Performance Horses, the barn she has been with since 1986. "If I could hold on to a pommel horn, I'd feel safe."

Riding her same beloved mare, Lil' Buckskin Baby, that used to carry her to reining ribbons, the duo competed in last month's Cactus Reining Classic – and finished Top 5 in the Legends Non Pro. At age 86.

"I know that scores are important," she says. "But to me, what was more important was the joy in my heart of being able to compete again."

Didi left WestWorld and returned home from the show without knowing exactly how she had finished. Her trainer, Joline King-Pebley, and barnmates stayed behind in Scottsdale for their classes, winning a collection of Top 5's of their own. When they made it back to Chino Hills, they presented her the buckle.

"I came home early from Arizona because I wasn't showing any more classes, and they stayed another three or four days. Apparently, word came from the award department that some awards had not been picked up, and one of them was for me. I get this text from Joline that says, 'you won a buckle!'; and I said, 'What?!'

The real accomplishment, Didi says, was completing the pattern.

"At the end of our performance, Baby had her head down like she's supposed to, like she was taking a bow," she recalls. "And I had a grin from ear to ear because I knew that I had completed the pattern without going off course. That was a victory right there. The score was not as important to me as just knowing that I can still do it."

Didi's drive stems from passion – for her horse, affectionately known as "Baby"; for reining competition; and for the team at King Performance Horses – where she has ridden since 1986.

"I wanted very much to have the King barn proud of me," she says. "I was going slower than, you know, than everybody else who goes so fast in reining. I was going slower, but I stayed on course. And Baby pretty much behaved herself. Not as well as she could have, but she did well, considering we had five days to practice."

Didi has owned Baby since 2009, and 15 years of teamwork can make up for a short preparation period.

Competing in the 2016 Show Me The Money show at Del Mar Horsepark.



Lee Locke photo



King Performance Horses photo



Didi left the Cactus Classic before knowing what she had won, so when her trainer returned with her buckle, it made for a special moment.



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“We’ve melded,” she says. “She’s done this for so many years, it’s just reminding her now of what she needs to do.”

Joline’s daughter, non pro Kailey King-Hale, had a remarkable showing at the Cactus Classic, too, as she took Top 5 on Gotta Have Style in the Limited Non Pro and also qualified for the 2024 Non Pro “Run for the Million.” Kailey says Didi is an inspiration to the entire barn.

“Didi has been riding in the ranch horse for so long now, we really didn’t think she would jump on this,” says Kailey. “When my mom asked her if she wanted to show at Cactus, she said she was all in!”

Kailey commented how Becky Dunning, the venerable announcer who has known Didi for 35 years, first pointed out at Didi’s last run at the Cactus Classic that the combined age of horse and rider is well over 100, and then said how Didi is “the essence of reining.”

Baby is special, too – the last horse trained by Kailey’s grand-

parents, CRHA Hall of Famers Joe and Donna King.

“Baby always has Didi’s ‘6,’” Kailey says. “She is one in a billion.”

The AQHA hasn’t adopted the Legends Non Pro Division yet, so it’s unclear how many local reinings will be open to Didi. But you can bet she and baby are ready.

“You don’t know what tomorrow is going to bring,” Didi says. “Enjoy each day to the very fullest because nobody knows what to expect tomorrow.”

Didi says she has had her share of illnesses and challenges over 86 years, “and it’s forced me to say ‘enjoy every minute’ because you don’t know what tomorrow’s going to bring.”

“I’ve got the thrill of being able to go back into reining,” she adds. “I hope that more classes will be offered here – it may take another year before they are actually able to do that.”

“So yeah, hurry up because I’m 86,” she smiles. “I don’t have any time to fool around.”



“Enjoy each day to the very fullest because nobody knows what to expect tomorrow.”
– Didi Engler

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