

How do you follow up your best year ever?

What do you do in the racing season following one in which you've blown away your rivals for the title of top trainer?

For **Jerry Gourneau** at Assiniboia Downs it's to strive to do even better. Which is a scary--but challenging--thought for other trainers. After all, a good horse can be beaten by a better horse and that's what other trainers are looking to do.

Last year, Gourneau did what no trainer in memory has done: He posted almost double the number of wins of his closest competitor, **Tom Gardipy, Jr.** who has six training titles himself. Gourneau won an impressive 24 per cent of his races, 73 of 300 starts, and six of those races were classy stakes events. That totally blew the doors off his first training title in 2018 when his win rate was 14 per cent.

Certainly Gourneau has lots of horses--52 and counting--but winning isn't easy and he was no overnight success. At 59 he reflects on his first foray to the Downs at 16, a First Nations Chippewa from Turtle Mountain Reserve in Belcourt, N.D. He was schooled by some of the best trainers on the grounds including all-time winningest trainer **Gary Danelson**.

He only dabbled in racing in the decades that followed, working primarily in school administration but in 2010 he bit the bullet, joining brothers **Dave and Bill** to train full-time.

Enter **Henry S. Witt, Jr.**, a former race car driver in Texas who loved horses. "I can help your horse win," Gourneau recalls telling Witt about a difficult mare. Witt gave him a chance and Gourneau came through, not only with a victory "but three seconds as well." The rest, as they say, is history and you can easily tell many of the Witt-owned horses in the Downs race programs because "Witt" is part of their names.

No performance by a horse has made him prouder, Gourneau told At the Races, than ASD Gold Cup winner **Witt Six** when, in March of 2017, the gelding captured the \$50,000 Star of Texas Stakes at Sam Houston race track "by eight lengths!" Joy turned to gloom the following month, however, when the 4-year-old darling of the stable died following an operation.

The other horse who captured Gourneau's heart was the bargain basement ("well under \$10,000") **Big Blue Caboose** who finished second in the 2011 Manitoba Derby and later that season repelled 11 other horses to win the coveted Gold Cup. "I like those cheap grinders," he says.

So what's Gourneau's goal? Is it to win a particular race or races? No, he says, "I want to make sure owners are successful. We've lost too many good owners."

That's what gets him up at 4:30 each morning, working with assistant trainer **Jennifer Tourangeau** and seven grooms he praises to the hilt for their tireless dedication. "I believe in hiring First Nations," he said, so most are aboriginal.

He's off to a quick start again this season with another timely-claimed Witt horse, **St. Louie Guy**, winning the One Night Lover Stakes for top ASD horses. It's obviously a horse to watch for as you play ASD races on your HPIbet.com account since the races go spectator-free Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday at 7:30 p.m.



Trainer Jerry Gourneau (with fingers giving the Texas Longhorns sign) with St. Louie Guy, a stakes horse claimed in Texas (Jason Halstead photo)

