

NEAR MIRACLE TO MAKE RACES, SPEECHIFY NOW A GRADED WINNER GELDING CONTINUES REWARDING CONNECTIONS' HARD WORK, PATIENCE GRADE 3 MR. PROSPECTOR TRIUMPH MAKES HIM 5-FOR-6 IN DIRT SPRINTS



Team Valor CEO Barry Irwin leads in Speechify after the gelding improved to 5 for 6 lifetime in sprints on dirt. Irwin bought him as a yearling for \$80,000 at the Keeneland September sale.

Appropriate for his name, Speechify amplified a remarkable story on December 27 as he dismissed another challenge in the Grade 3 Mr. Prospector Stakes at Gulfstream Park.

Thriving against the odds on a near liquid diet and a pair of surgically repaired front limbs, he has emerged as one of the best sprinters in the country by capping his 4-year-old season with back-to-back easy stakes wins for trainer Ralph Nicks.

The success has shed a broader light on the tough road Speechify overcame just to make the races, as described in the following stories:

Speechify Is a Souper Horse By Bill Finley in *The TDN*

The horse eats nothing but soup and there was time you would have had to have been nuts to believe he'd ever amount to anything. Speechify (Harlan's Holiday) is not your ordinary horse. Not only is he a two-time stakes winner, but he has overcome problems that would have ended the racing careers of just about anyone else. But for every problem there is a solution, and sometimes that solution is soup.

Speechify, on separate occasions, has suffered condylar fractures in each of his front legs, but the more vexing problem for his connections has been an esophageal stricture, which is a narrowing or tightening of the esophagus that makes swallowing difficult and dangerous. With a horse who has this problem, a normal diet or standard stall bedding could cause them to choke to death.

Barry Irwin, the president of the Team Valor syndicate, didn't know this at the time when he picked the horse out at the 2011 Keeneland September sales. He bid up to \$85,000 on the son of Harlan's Holiday, but the horse was RNA'ed. After the sale, he met with the consignor and brokered a deal to buy Speechify for \$80,000, or \$5,000 less than his final bid.

The next stop was Tony Everard's farm in Ocala, where Speechify was to be broken. Everard immediately discovered that something wasn't right with the yearling.

"We were bringing him in one morning and he looked a little in distress and we thought he might have

a fever or something,” Everard said. “We took him to the vet who said he had hay and grass stuck in his throat that he couldn’t swallow.”

Everard consulted with the vet who discovered the problem and said Speechify could never be treated like a normal horse again. He could not be allowed to graze, his stall bedding had to be made up of something he would never eat (like peat moss), he could not consume normal grain or hay and his feed had to be liquified.

Irwin says the horse basically subsists on soup.

“Tony is one who developed the formula for feeding the horse,” Irwin said. “It’s a soup, not even as solid as mash. He went to the feed store and talked to the people there and they helped him develop it and told him what to put in it. It started out almost as water but they eventually let it become a little thicker.”

Said current trainer Ralph Nicks: “It’s not like he’s drinking a milkshake, it’s not quite that liquified, but it is close.”

Though everyone who has dealt with Speechify has been told to be extra careful, there have still been missteps along the way. Irwin didn’t want to name the individual, but said someone in his operation mistakenly put down straw bedding in the horses stall and that Speechify ate some of it and almost



Trainer Ralph Nicks, right, with jockey Paco Lopez and one of Speechify’s partners Luc Paiement, at Gulfstream.

died.

At other times, the horse has gotten himself into trouble.

“If he gets one little chunk of something in him it’s a problem,” Nicks said. “He can’t have a bite of grass, can’t have a bite of hay. He can get ambitious coming off track and grab a leaf off a bush and it will clog him up. One time he overpowered the hot walker and started grazing. It’s always something you have to watch out for.”

Once the feeding issues were under control, Irwin and Everard could see that they had an exciting prospect on their hands.

“As a yearling, he looked like a ready-made 2 year old,” Irwin said. “He wasn’t very tall, but was muscular. Literally, it looked like if you brought him over there to run him that day he would have been ready. I had never seen a horse that well developed.”

Preparing for his first start, he suffered a condylar fracture in a front leg. By the time it had healed and he was ready to go, he was midway through his 3-year-old year. But the wait had been worth it. He broke his maiden in an Aug. 24 race at Gulfstream by 10 ½ lengths. ([Video.](#))

“The first time he ran he ran a 1 ¾ on the Thoro-Graphs,” Irwin said. “We’ve never had any horse do that. It was ridiculous.”

From a numbers standpoint, Speechify didn't run back to that race over his next several starts. Irwin was discouraged and perplexed, but he knew that any horse that had run as fast as this one had in its first start still had the potential to be something special.

Speechify won a Jan. 23 allowance at Gulfstream and seemed to be rounding into form, only to suffer another condylar fracture in his other leg.

"I've never had a horse break both front legs and keep going," Irwin said. "If it weren't for that freaky fast number in his first start, I would have given up on him. It so tough to find horses that have that kind of talent. When you do you will go to the ends of the earth to try to figure out a way to keep them going. That's the motivating factor."



They pieced Speechify back together and he was entered in an Oct. 25 grass race at Gulfstream Park West, where he finished eighth. Then it was back to the dirt, and the gelding has never looked back. He won the Kenny Noe by 3 3/4 lengths and then won the GIII Mr. Prospector by 1 1/4 lengths.

"He is a special individual," Nicks said. "I don't know if that comes from the choking incidents or he was just cut out to be that good. He has a whole different class about him that a lot of other horses don't have. He wants to go and do his job every day. He wants to make you happy every day."

Irwin said the next major goal is the April 9 GIII Count Fleet H. at Oaklawn.

"Most of time when a horse has this many problems, it never works out in the end," Everard said. "He has been a real problem child for us. To see how it has worked out, I'm thrilled to death."

Gulfstream Horses To Watch By Dan Illman in *Daily Racing Form*

SPEECHIFY is a sprinter to watch for Team Valor International and trainer Ralph Nicks. The Harlan's Holiday colt closed out his 4-year-old campaign with a solid victory in the Grade 3 Mr. Prospector Stakes at Gulfstream Park on December 27, and has yet to run a bad race sprinting on dirt.

A \$90,000 yearling RNA, Speechify is out of the multiple stakes-placed router Preach It (by Saint Ballado), a half-sister to Grade 2 Peter Pan Stakes winner Oratory. Speechify's second dam, Arrested Dreams (by Dehere), won 8 of 12 starts at distances ranging from 5 furlongs to 1 mile. She took four stakes races, finished second by a nose in the Grade 1 Matron, and earned a career-best 102 Beyer Speed Figure.

Speechify didn't face the toughest field in the world in the Mr. Prospector, but he looked good polishing off his seven rivals as the 9 to 5 betting favorite. His rider, Paco Lopez, moved Speechify into the clear to stalk the leaders 3 wide on the turn, and he finished straight and strong to score by 1 1/4 lengths over the multiple stakes-placed Risk Factor. Speechify completed the six furlongs in 1:09.54 and received a career-best 103 Beyer Speed Figure.

From six starts sprinting on the dirt, Speechify boasts a record of 5-1-0 with his only defeat coming on December 14, 2013 at the hooves of Happy My Way, a gelding beginning a six-race triple-digit Beyer

streak that included a victory in the Grade 3 Maryland Sprint Handicap and a runner-up effort in the Grade 1 Alfred G. Vanderbilt Handicap.

Speechify is remarkable because he runs so well despite suffering from a restricted esophagus. He isn't able to eat solid food and survives on what his connections call a "soupy mash."

Barry Irwin, founder and CEO of Team Valor International, told Gulfstream publicity that his sprinter has come a long, long way.

"Every time I think of this horse," Irwin said. "I remember the first day he went up to Fair Hill (Training Center) and we told the trainer who used to have him up there, 'Do not put any straw in this horses stall. Put sawdust.' He put straw and the horse nearly choked to death. We had to take him to the hospital. It was scary."

"What he has with his throat has to be dealt with as long as he's alive," added Nicks.

Not only does Speechify have issues with his throat, but he missed most of 2014 after undergoing surgery to repair a condylar fracture to his right front leg.

Racing fans can surely root for a horse like this.



Happy partners of Speechify with family and friends at Gulfstream.