

Charlie Davis

Author: Michael Phelps,
Graduate Student Intern

Places: Orangeburg, South Carolina;
Ocala, Florida

Birth: February 2, 1940

Death: February 7, 2018

Professions: Exercise Rider



Childhood and Early Interest in Horses

Charlie Davis grew up in South Carolina where his father worked on a horse farm. Davis sat atop his first Thoroughbred at the age of ten. "I'd skip school a little bit and hide in the woods near the farm," Davis recalls. "I'd hide behind the trees and watch them ride the horses out on the track. I was saying, 'Oh, yeah, I'm going to be a jock.'" Davis got his first taste of the track life when he traveled with a racing stable to Garden State Park in New Jersey. He helped exercise horses even though he was too young for an official backside badge.

Working with Secretariat

In 1966, Davis helped Amberoid win the Belmont Stakes with trainer Lucien Laurin. By 1971, Davis had teamed up with Eddie Sweat, a stable groom, to form the duo who would later take care of Secretariat. First, they won the Kentucky Derby with Riva Ridge in 1972. In 1973, it was Secretariat's turn and Davis remembered the horse fondly, "Me and him had a bond," says Davis. "He could throw me any time he wanted, but he never did. All he wanted to do was run... We'd be walking along back to the barn, and people would be watching him walk and wanting to take a picture. As soon as he hear [sic] that camera click, he just pose. Maybe I pose a little bit, too."

Legacy

Charlie Davis was best known as Secretariat's exercise rider and continued attending events memorializing the famous horse. In 1985, Davis hung up his riding tack after taking a spill, but he remained in service to the industry for the rest of his life. Davis worked as an advisor on the Disney crew filming "Secretariat." He traveled with the location crew at Keeneland and Churchill Downs in Kentucky, and Evangeline Downs in Louisiana. One of Davis' duties was to help the actors playing horse people to get into their characters.

"I gave them a few pointers," says Davis. "How you don't walk in front of the horse when you're leading him, you walk beside him. How you do everything."³ Davis has a brief appearance in the film. Until his death, Davis continued raising and working with young horses at Pennston Farm, near his home in Ocala, Florida. Davis passed away Feb. 7, 2018.

Sources

Doolittle, Bill. n.d. "The Adventures of Charlie Davis." Secretariat.Com. Accessed October 19, 2019. <https://www.secretariat.com/spotlight/charlie-davis/>.

Footnotes

¹Doolittle, "The Adventures of Charlie Davis."

²Doolittle.

³Doolittle.

