

MID-ATLANTIC REPORT

—PENSIONERS ON PARADE—

GALA SPINAWAY

Early on the morning of July 31, 2009, Gertrude Leviton received a phone call from Adrian Rolls, longtime assistant to trainer Graham Motion. Rolls called to deliver the happy news that 21-year-old Gala Spinaway, owned throughout his racing career by Leviton and her husband, Leonard (Skip) Leviton, was returning to Motion's barn at Fair Hill Training Center.

At long last, the circle was complete. Anita Motion had spent 14 years trying to locate the horse who had meant so much, both professionally and personally, to herself and her husband.

Gala Spinaway played a major role in launching the career of Graham Motion, who now ranks among the nation's top trainers.

As a young employee of Hall of Fame trainer Jonathan Sheppard, Motion had traveled the world as groom to the great steeplechaser Flatterer.

When Motion turned his attention to flat racing in 1991, Maryland-based trainer Carlos Garcia recommended that Motion approach legendary conditioner Bernie Bond at Pimlico. Bond was then in the market for a new right-hand man—as the infamous Gala Spinaway had severely injured his longtime assistant, Earl Begley Sr., prompting Begley's retirement.

Graham served as assistant trainer and was Bond's appointed successor upon his retirement in early 1993. (Bond died a few weeks after turning over the stable to Motion.) The Levitons were among several owners who elected to keep their horses in training with Motion. By then, Gala Spinaway was a star of the stable, as a multiple stakes winner



and champion Maryland-bred 3-year-old male of 1991.

Still, the bay son of Star Choice out of the Fast Hilarious mare Spinnaker Sal “was just so evil,” according to Anita.

Bred by Nancy Leonard, Gala Spinaway was on winter layup at his birthplace, Glade Valley Farms in Frederick, when Anita Motion first encountered him back in 1992.

Then working for Katy Voss at Chanceland Farm, Motion would finish up there each morning, and then drive to Glade Valley to get on Gala Spinaway. His wicked reputation preceded him, but he had an aura about him, according to Motion.

“My hope was that I wouldn't be intimidated by him,” she said. “I thought that going out every day to leg him up was a chance to get to know him and wipe clean his history of being such a rogue.”

Anita Motion's strategy worked, and the pair formed a solid partnership, but it was never easy.

“He was getting ready to make his first start for us,” Motion recalled. “I'd breezed him the week before and gone

way too slow. He needed his six-month gate card. I was so unprepared for what was unleashed when they opened the gate. I was used to looking so pretty on him and just posing along. What a sight I must have been, fishing to get my reins and stirrup back after almost getting thrown out the back door. After his first start he grew horns and got stronger and more of a challenge—but I was up for that.”

In his second race for Graham Motion, Gala Spinaway triumphed in the Chase Me Stakes at Laurel, notching Motion's first stakes score. He followed up a month later with a victory in Pimlico's Polynesian Handicap-G3.

In all, Gala Spinaway made 11 starts for them, winning three stakes and placing in three others. After 41 lifetime starts, he was retired in March 1994 after fracturing a pastern bone in a morning gallop. With a record of 15-10-2 and \$691,867 in earnings, he headed back to Glade Valley to begin a stud career.

But it was not to be, as he showed little interest in mares. It was believed later that he

suffered a testicular hernia in a paddock accident, and he was ultimately gelded.

In 1995, the Levitons decided that no one could give their star a better home than Anita Motion. Busy with her husband's burgeoning training business, Motion leased the horse to a young dressage rider with the stipulation that he be returned if the girl could no longer care for him.

Contact was maintained for a time but eventually Anita's phone calls weren't returned, and the trail went dead. Undaunted, she doggedly continued to try to track down her horse. Over the years, periodic messages would arrive from people who had seen Gala Spinaway or had known of his whereabouts, but those also dwindled and disappeared.

Then this past July, a series of e-mails revealed that Gala Spinaway had been living in Connecticut for the past nine years, with a devoted owner named Connie Whitmer. Elated, Anita got in touch and explained her saga. Whitmer was looking for the best possible retirement home for the gelding, and she quickly agreed that his rightful place was back with the Motions.

Home now at Fair Hill, Gala Spinaway is still alarmingly spry and sharp. As Anita Motion said, “Right now he's still on his toes and is boinging around—it's still that relentless energy he's always had. I'm hoping he'll chill out and act like a normal 21-year-old. We just want to settle into a routine with him, the kids [daughter Jane and son Chappy] and their pony. My dream is for us to all go riding together. Nice, peaceful, leisurely rides.”

/Maggie Kimmitt