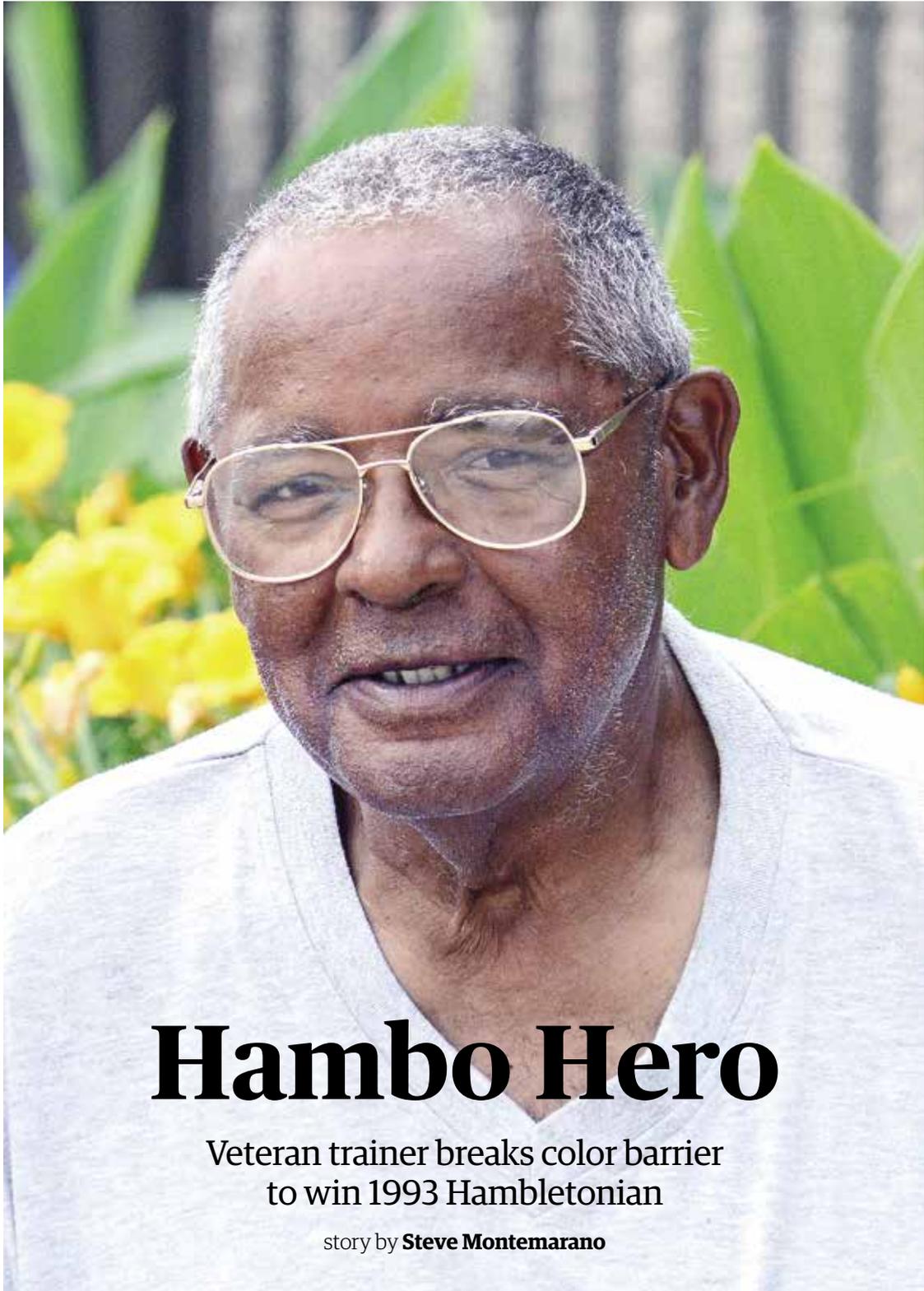


*Profile*

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# Milton Smith



## Hambo Hero

Veteran trainer breaks color barrier  
to win 1993 Hambletonian

story by **Steve Montemarano**

**M**ilton Smith, 76, doesn't stand in today's spotlight. But 25 years ago, the former van driver streaked across the harness racing landscape with blue-collar sensibility and very good horses. Smith trained 1993 Hambletonian champion American Winner and stablemate Hi Noon Star through 3-year-old campaigns that included slugfests with top trotters such as Pine Chip, Toss Out, and Striking Sahbra.

Smith became the first—and only—black trainer to win the Hambletonian, the crown jewel of harness racing's trotting Triple Crown.

His success was amplified with victories in both Hambletonian elimination heats by American Winner and Hi Noon Star—a rare feat. American Winner's 1:53.1 elimination race was the fastest ever at that point in time. His combined final and heat times of 3:46.3 broke Mack Lobell's record by a full second.

Over a three-year period (1993-1995), the meteoric Smith earned more than \$3 million in purses from 724 starts, with 86 wins, and boasted a 35 percent in-the-money rating.

**Yet Smith's fame** ended almost as quickly as it had begun. In 1996 he had only seven starts and not a single win. But his achievement of breaking the color barrier at the sport's top level reverberates to this day.

"Maybe I helped open the door to this sport for other blacks," he said.

Sitting outside of a barn at Ohio's Winner's Circle training center, Smith, who was born and raised in Cadiz, Ohio, lit a cigarette and recounted his brush with fame.

"My dad (also named Milton Smith) and uncle, Clyde Williams, owned and trained a few horses," he said. "I was born into it."

As a youngster, Smith jogged his first Standardbred—a pacer named Rileys Grattan (1950, 2:10.4h, \$3,897)—and the filly abruptly ran off with him.

"I was scared to death," he said. "My dad wouldn't let anyone help, but no horse ever got away from me again."

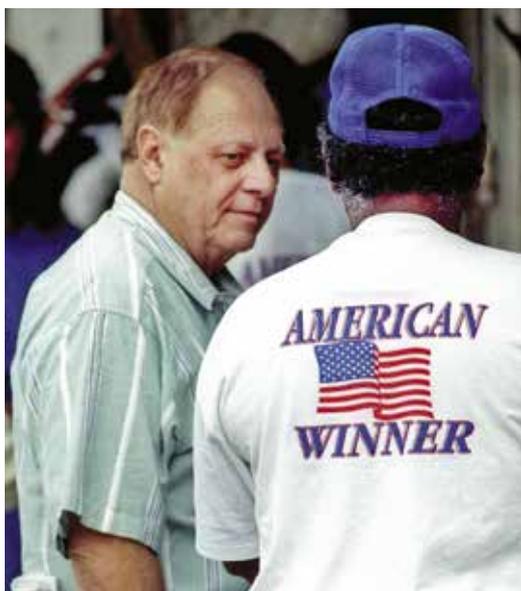
A career with horses, however, was delayed when Smith joined the Navy in 1959 at age 17. He worked on the aircraft carrier USS America,

and once was stationed off the coast of Vietnam for 92 days. His naval career spanned 21 years.

"In April 1980, I put in retirement papers because I wanted to see Nitross," said Smith. He remained in the service, however, until that September to meet pension eligibility.

Smith returned to Ohio and worked with his family, racing horses. His talented relatives included cousin Lew Williams, a legendary Ohio horseman

**MILESTONE** / With American Winner's victory in the 1993 Hambletonian, Milton Smith became the first—and so far only—black trainer to win the classic, thanks in part to the faith of the colt's co-owner, Bob Key (shown in the bottom photo with Smith), who asked Smith, then a shipping driver, to take over training duties after the abrupt departure of another employee.



who earned multiple driving titles, 2,023 wins, and \$8.8 million in purses. "Super Lew," as he was called, was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2008, and was the first African-American to receive that honor.

**After Williams** died in a tractor accident in 1989, Smith established a lofty goal.

"I wanted an opportunity to continue his legacy and make Lew proud of me," he said.

In 1986, he went to the Buckeye Sale at the Ohio State Fairgrounds with instructions from his father to buy a trotter. But as a pacing colt languished in the ring, Smith raised his hand and the auctioneer's gavel thumped. The colt, named Hisswilly, was purchased for \$500.

Hisswilly raced 47 times with 15 wins and a record of 1:59.4h at the Dover, Ohio, Fairgrounds.

"We just clicked," said Smith. "I always wanted to have a horse where people hated to see me coming. Hisswilly gave me that."

Smith often walked Hisswilly to the fenceless infield at the Cadiz, Ohio, fairgrounds. There the shank was unsnapped and the horse grazed freely as the trainer watched. When it was time to return to the barn, Hisswilly never objected.

"I'd call his name and he'd come right to me," said Smith. "Horses are smarter than people give them credit for."

The success with Hisswilly encouraged Smith to attend more auctions. "The problem was I couldn't keep my hand down," he said.

Smith assembled a stable of 21 horses.

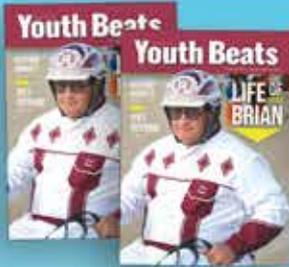
"I owned parts of them all, but none were worth a quarter," he said. "As the expenses piled up, I wasn't broke but I was badly bent."

**By August 1990**, Smith needed steadier income. His brother, Philip Wheller, worked for well-known owner Robert Key and Smith asked if they needed a truck driver. Key called Smith and hired him.

"I went to work hauling horses all over the place," said Smith.

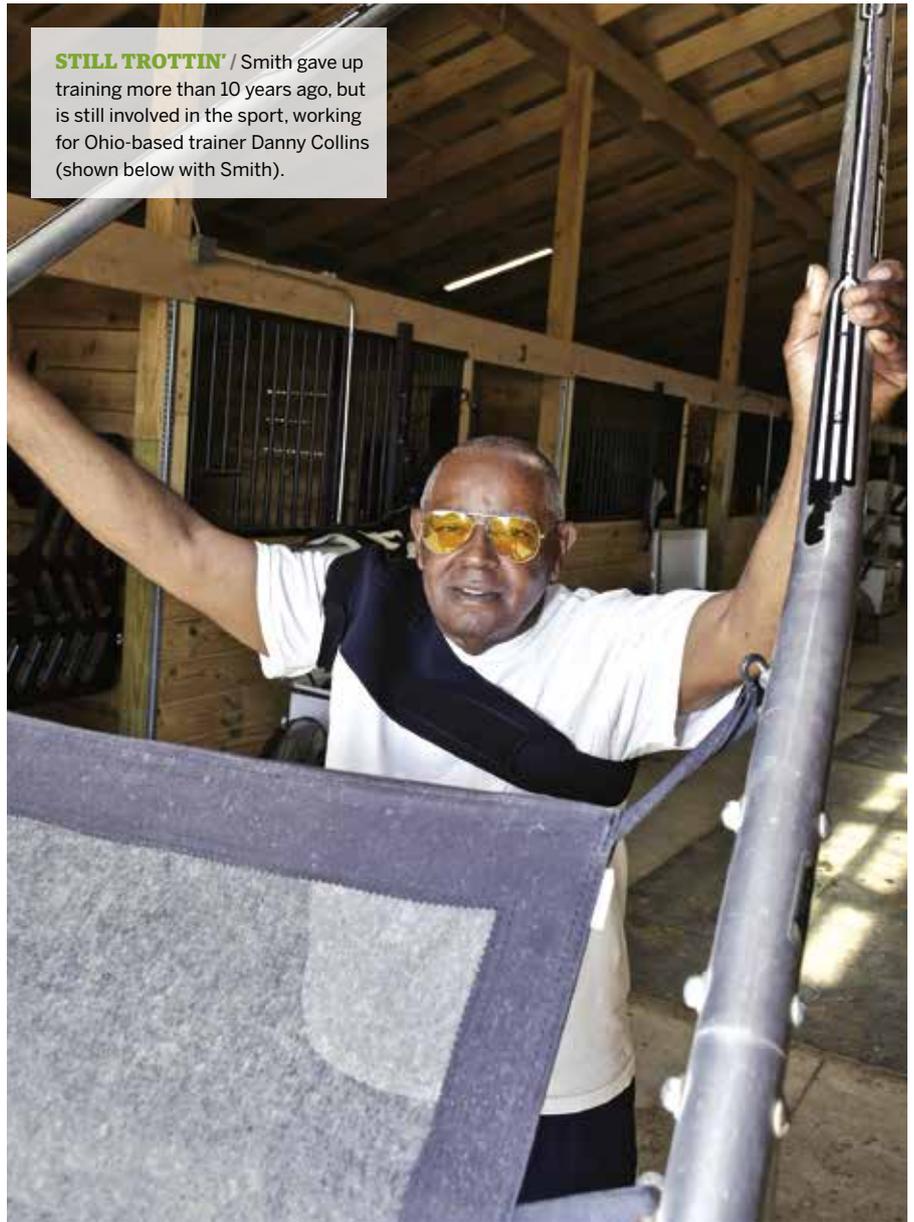
But as he settled into a life of shipping horses, the phone rang

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**STILL TROTTIN'** / Smith gave up training more than 10 years ago, but is still involved in the sport, working for Ohio-based trainer Danny Collins (shown below with Smith).

**“The first attribute about Milton is that he’s the nicest person you’d ever want to meet.”**

Danny Collins



again. It was Key.

“In May 1993, Mr. Key called and said we lost an employee,” recalled Smith.

American Winner’s trainer Steve Bush had just won the Currier and Ives at The Meadows—but quit in the winner’s circle. Smith asked who the next trainer was going to be and that is when Key popped the question.

“Will you take over?” he said.

A shocked Smith agreed.

“Everyone was surprised that Key

put his trust in me,” he said.

Smith went from being a \$300-per-week horse shipper to training a stable of more than 60 horses with two Hambletonian contenders.

“American Winner wasn’t hard to take care of,” said Smith. “He was sound but we had to work on that knee all the time.”

A homebred of Robert Key and Dr. John Glesmann, the bay colt was closely related to champion Mack Lobell through the maternal influence of Martina Hanover.

Smith’s first start with American Winner was June 4, 1993, at Hazel Park. And he didn’t disappoint as he drew off by two lengths to beat Striking Sahbra. That was the beginning of a six-race winning streak for American Winner and Smith, including a victory in the Yonkers Trot.

If Smith lacked experience training top-caliber horses, he had no shortage of confidence. During Hambletonian week he proclaimed to reporters “We’re going to win it.”

“After that comment, I felt like crawling in a crack because my mouth

overloaded my brain,” Smith said.

But true to the trainer’s prediction, American Winner dominated the Hambletonian, with Pine Chip finishing second, and Hi Noon Star third.

With the Yonkers Trot and Hambletonian under their belts, American Winner and Smith were poised to become the first Triple Crown winners since Super Bowl and Stanley Dancer in 1972. However, it was not to be, as American Winner broke stride in the second heat of the Kentucky Futurity at Red Mile on Oct. 8.

Smith raced American Winner once more in the 1993 Breeders Crown at Pompano Park, where he finished third. The colt’s knee was problematic yet again and he was retired to Hanover Shoe Farms to commence his stud career.

**The stress and strain** of the Triple Crown campaign also took a toll on Smith. He developed stomach ulcers and decided to leave training by 1996. He then started a vaning company near The Meadows. In 2002, Smith met owner Bud Hatfield and began training

Billings Series performers for Hatfield for six years.

Smith decided that being a trainer was no longer what he wanted to do with his life. While in Florida one winter, he met Ohio-based trainer Danny Collins at a bowling alley.

“We just became friends,” said Smith.

He has now worked with Collins for the past nine years.

“The first attribute about Milton is that he’s the nicest person you’d ever want to meet,” Collins said.

Smith revealed his secret to success while taking a drag from his cigarette. “My dad,” he said. “I still feel connected to him through racing horses.”

Smith’s emotions bubbled over while recalling his father’s influence, and that the elder Smith saw his son win the Hambletonian in person.

Reflecting on his Hambletonian win 25 years ago, he said, “I probably won’t go this year. Things are expensive and nobody knows who I am anymore.” **HB**

**Steve Montemarano** is a freelance writer living in Ohio. To comment on this story, email us at [readerforum@ustrotting.com](mailto:readerforum@ustrotting.com).

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