

Good old time for an oldtimer

Disdaining retirement, though he is 18 years old, Golden Arrow trains in the surf and still performs on the turf

It's a bright, sunny morning at Land's End farm in South Dartmouth, Mass. Down at one end of the shed row a 2-year-old filly named Rison has just lost one of her baby teeth. Up at the other end, in the premier stall, the one that faces Buzzards Bay, stands an 18-year-old chestnut gelding named Golden Arrow, who has made more comebacks than Frank Sinatra. If Golden Arrow could sing like Old Blue Eyes, he'd be crooning, "When I was seventeen, it was a very good year...."

How good was it? Try seven starts, five (count 'em, five) wins, one place and one show for earnings of \$4,845. Not bad for an equine senior citizen. And he's still racing. Golden Arrow's owner and breeder, Louis A. Filios, an airplane-parts manufacturer from West Springfield, Mass., tried to retire him at the end of 1977. That's when he sent him to Bill and Phreddy Sienkewicz' Land's End farm, which is a kind of equine nursing home. "I told Bill to turn him out and give him the good life," says Filios. "He had it coming." Golden Arrow wasn't having any of it. He grew morose. He sulked. He was bored. Bill, who at 25 is only seven years older than Golden Arrow, phoned Filios to tell him the horse was unhappy. "He wants to run," Bill said. "I think you should put him back in training."

Filios did, and Sienkewicz volunteered for the job of getting Golden Arrow in form, even though he had never trained a horse in his life. So after a crash study course, Bill obtained his trainer's license.

On April 1, 1978, Bill embarked on a program that would get Golden Arrow back to the races, with his wife, Phreddy, working and galloping the horse. A typical training day for Golden Arrow starts with Phreddy consulting the Eldridge Tide and Pilot Book. While most horses are sent out onto racetracks to work at monotonously early hours, Golden Arrow must wait for the tide to go out before he can get his works in, a schedule that provides variety as well as fine scenery. After determining that the sandbars in Buzzards Bay are not awash, Phreddy walks up to Golden Arrow's stall and says, "Hey, Row, you want to go out?" The horse perks his ears and eagerly bobs his head up and down in assent. Phreddy saddles up and they walk down a potholed lane toward the beach, a five-minute saunter that takes them through a thickly wooded area dotted with wild roses and raspberries and then to the beach overlooking the bay. It is Golden Arrow's nature not to rush into anything. He stops and takes a good look at his surroundings. On this fine day the beach is splendidly empty, and the Elizabeth Islands can be seen clearly. Phreddy starts Golden Arrow on the first leg of his workout, a slow one-mile jog along the water's edge. The only sounds are those made by a few sea gulls squawking in the far distance and the rhythmic splashy tattoo of Golden Arrow's hooves pounding the sandbar and kicking up silvery ribbons of water. Phreddy increases the pace. Golden Arrow is galloped for a mile, and the work is over. He turns and walks grandly into the bay until he is knee-deep. After a leisurely wade he strolls back to the

barn for a nice soapy bath.

In racing, 8-year-olds are considered aged, so Golden Arrow's longevity and durability are truly wondrous. Owner Filios, who bred the horse in New Jersey (he is by Fort Salonga out of Rock Mart), says, "In his younger years, Golden Arrow was one of the best, and easily my best. He won the Thanksgiving Day Handicap at Lincoln Downs three out of four years. He's really a marvel."

Filios personally mixes special vitamin supplements for all his stock, and he sends a B-complex vitamin liquid meant for humans, not horses, to Land's End for Golden Arrow's consumption. Then there is the little black box. It is attached to a wall in Golden Arrow's stall, and green or gold lights flicker mysteriously within it. It is called an Air Ioniser. Filios believes it contributes to the well-being of horses as well as humans. It is said to improve the quality of the air electronically, reduce cigarette smoke and bacterial counts and extract dust, soot, smog and pollen from the air. It certainly doesn't seem to do any harm. Golden Arrow ignores it. He was winning races before the box was invented, and he did so again last year.

All through April and May of '78 Bill and Phreddy worked Golden Arrow. His disposition improved, his muscle tone came back and he was finally ready to compete. The big moment came on June 9 at Narragansett Park in Pawtucket, R.I. And this is when it all begins to sound like a Walt Disney production.

Sienkewicz entered Golden Arrow in a five-furlong race for \$1,500 claimers. There were those in the crowd at the racetrack who were of the opinion that racing a horse that old was cruel and inhumane, and Bill and Phreddy overheard many remarks to that effect. Bill was too nervous to argue the matter. He was so nervous that he forgot he didn't know how to saddle a horse for a race, a task traditionally performed by the trainer. "I kind of watched what the valet did," he says, "and kind of muddled through it." When 25-year-old apprentice jockey Debbie Riemers was given a leg up on Golden Arrow, someone in the crowd shouted, "Just sit pretty, you're riding a Sherman tank." Another bettor yelled, "I bet that horse 10 years ago!" To their everlasting regret, Bill and Phreddy forgot to bet on Golden Arrow, who, giving away nine to 13 years to the competition, led from wire to wire to score a decisive three-quarter-length victory. He returned a sweet \$71 for a \$2 ticket.

In the kitchen at Land's End Bill recalls that night. "I was so worried about him, I couldn't think about anything except whether he'd come back all right," he says. "I couldn't believe it when he won. He did better for me last year than he did the two previous years combined. All those hard-core bettors in the crowd, they applauded that horse.

"And then I was running across the infield heading for the stable area and I felt tears come up behind my eyes. But I managed to hold myself together. You know, to this day, I'll be working around here, just mucking out a stall or something, and I'll think of that night and that same feeling comes over me again. I'll probably feel it all my life."

Golden Arrow continued to reward the Sienkewicz last year. On July 12 he won the second half of a

sort of geriatric daily double at Narragansett. The first race was won by a 13-year-old gelding named Crying For More. Golden Arrow never finished out of the money in 1978. He even outlasted the racetrack he'd raced over for so many years. Narragansett Park, which held its inaugural meeting on Aug. 1, 1934, folded on Labor Day 1978, just two days before Golden Arrow was scheduled to race there again. Bill and Phreddy took the horse to the Massachusetts fair circuit. For his last race of the year, they entered him at Great Barrington on Sept. 25, Bill's 25th birthday. He won, of course.

Golden Arrow spent most of last winter in the barn at Land's End, being turned out a couple of hours each day, taking it easy. Came the spring and he went back to the beach. He has raced just once this year, at the Great Barrington Fair on July 22, and he finished a disappointing fifth in a field of eight \$1,500 claimers. "It was really hot that day," says Bill, "and he hates the heat. At the start of the race he was second by six lengths or so to a 6-year-old named Film Critic. He chased him for a while, but he had really hooked a bear. Then Arrow stumbled at the top of the stretch, but he still beat three other horses."

"He really gets mad when he loses a race," says Phreddy. "He sulks for a week and he gets bad-tempered and mean."

In his 16 years of racing, Golden Arrow has won at 12 different racetracks (not including those on the fair circuit). His lifetime statistics show 176 starts, 58 wins, 22 seconds and 24 thirds for earnings of \$167,304. He may be 18, but his chestnut coat gleams with good health and there is a youthful spring in his step. There are signs of age, of course. He is literally long in the tooth and his back has fallen a bit, which is only to be expected.

But he has not yet shot his bolt. In September he is going back to the races at the Northampton, Mass. fair. "I almost wish he'd finish dead last," Bill says, "so we wouldn't have to race him again. Or finish first, so we know he's O.K. All I care about is having him come back O.K."

Golden Arrow stands in his stall and keeps his own counsel. He'll let his young trainer know when and if he's ready to retire. Meanwhile, there's the next race...and the one after that.