

'Go, Jack, go'

Two valiant boys team up with a racehorse to battle leukemia

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What does a nine-year-old thoroughbred racehorse have in common with two-year-old twins Sean and Ryan Friberg?

You might never guess this mature but spirited racer literally runs for their lives.

Every time he places in the money, five percent of the winnings go directly to both siblings.

No, it's not an allowance, a trust fund allotment or a share of the monies because they're related to the owner, Joe Michael Welch – they're not. This gallant horse is running for the physical well-being of these special young brothers – pure and simple. And when you come to know the full story you, too, will root for

Ninety Nine Jack to wind up in the money. To date, this racer has won \$650,000 in his career, but you have to hope he has enough left in him to win some more.

At the age of four-months, both brothers were diagnosed with childhood leukemia (acute lymphoblastic leukemia). For the parents, Andrew and Jennifer, it was obviously a devastating, traumatic blow to the family.

Normally, chemotherapy is given in intermittent bursts, but the twins were subjected to this treatment on a near-constant basis.

After a year-and-a-half of consistent, intense chemo, Ryan's illness has been in remission now for the past seven months. His brother Sean's case is another matter.



MARK JONES/FOR THE RUIDOSO NEWS

See **BATTLE**, page 3B

Ryan Friberg, above, and his twin brother Sean partner with Ninety Nine Jack to fight leukemia.

BATTLE

FROM PAGE 1B

On the last day of his chemo in Albuquerque, Sean went into a relapse. During a spinal tap, leukemia was found again in his young body.

He was moved to the University Medical Center in Tucson and has since had three bone marrow transplants – none of which have taken.

A younger brother, Aaron, who is now seven months old, contributed stem cells at birth as the initial treatment for recovery. Along the way, he contracted a fungal infection and was sent to the pediatric intensive care unit.

Almost three-fourths of his right cheek had to be removed and he developed acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS, a stiffening of the lungs).

He was put on a ventilator and put into a chemically induced coma for six weeks.

Three or four times doctors said he wasn't going to make it.

"We dug deep and had faith that Sean had more fight left in him," the father said.

Since then, the stricken boy has had bone marrow contributed to him, again from Aaron, and the same from his twin, Ryan. Unfortunately, they were not successful.

He is currently undergoing chemotherapy in preparation for another transplant, this time from an outside source. The procedure will take place Wednesday.

In the meantime, Ninety Nine Jack, will be stepping into the starting gate for both boys.

This gelding may be nine-years-old, but he has some glory in his past.

He is co-holder of the six-furlong track record at Ruidoso Downs Race Track, which he tied in July 2004. And the other six-furlong co-record holder?

It's his father, Jack Wilson, who originally set the mark in August, 1992.

Monday, Ninety Nine Jack contributed \$1,000 to the Friberg (pronounced, Freeberg) family. And at

the presentation he looked spirited and ready to accept the challenge that lay ahead of him.

"Ryan and Sean are the brightest boys you'd ever meet," the elder Friberg said.

"Everything they have gone through hasn't got them down. They keep smiling through the rain. It blows my mind."

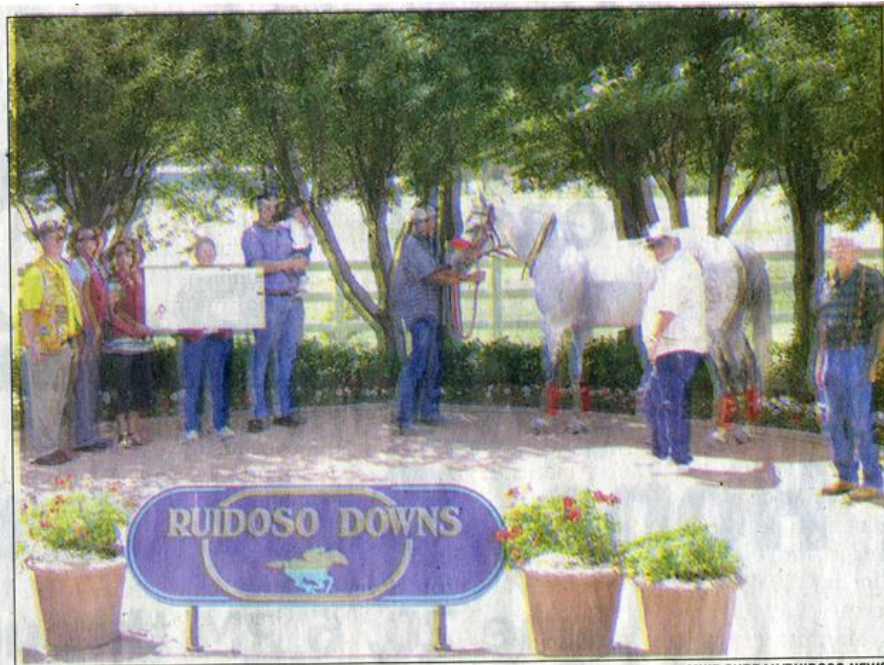
Jack's owner/trainer, Welch, was approached a month ago by a friend, Tom McElligott, a member of the Ruidoso Optimist Club, with the idea about contributing a portion of the horse's winnings to the Friberg family.

"The high cost of gasoline, to and from Tucson, can be monetarily draining," McElligott said. "Maybe we can help."

While Sean is in Tucson, one of the parents must always be there.

This presents additional financial burdens to the young family. Food and housing these days are not trivial expenses. Not to mention the medical bills.

It's uplifting to know there are organizations who act as the corner-peo-



MIKE CURRAN/RUIDOSO NEWS

Monday's \$1,000 check to help in the fight against leukemia is presented to the Friberg family, represented by Andrew and Ryan Friberg, center. Others pictured, left to right, are Mark Jones, Maria Misquez, Rita Griffin, Lora McElligott, Victor Acosta, Ninety Nine Jack, Mike Welch and Tom McElligott.

ple for these courageous boys. The Ruidoso Noon Lions Club and the Optimist Club are all committed to the fight and have matched Ninety Nine Jack's donation.

Jennifer and Andrew Friberg are most appreciative of the efforts on their sons' behalf.

"We truly thank all of those who have taken up the fight on behalf of our boys," their father said. "The community response has been overwhelming, including the parents, ours and others. They have all aided immensley."

Welch and Ninety Nine Jack will be doing their

part on their given field of battle – the race track. Not only here in Ruidoso, but also at Hobbs and Sunland.

If you happen to see them in a race, you might want to yell, "Go, 'Jack,' go."

It couldn't hurt a thing – and who knows – it may help.