

Deborah Holmes – Phoenix Rising Farm

As the name suggests, Phoenix Rising Farm has indeed risen to prominence under the guidance of Deborah Holmes, whose small but powerful Thoroughbred breeding program has become one of Canada's most successful boutique operations.

Her long-term vision is ambitious yet clear: to develop female families so distinctive that they become instantly recognizable as Phoenix Rising lines.

“My dream is to build a female family people will know when they see it—this is a Phoenix Rising Farm family,” Holmes explains.

Recently, Holmes and her husband Barry returned from the Keeneland September Sale, where they sold an Ontario-bred yearling by War of Will for \$65,000, exceeding its reserve. They also bought back the star of her 2024 crop, a Practical Joke colt, for \$350,000. Holmes plans to re-offer him at the Fasig-Tipton October Sale.

Holmes' path to racing success was anything but direct. Born in California and raised in British Columbia from the age of 18, she was an accomplished horsewoman who showed Appaloosas across English, Western, and even costume classes. After two car accidents forced her to give up riding, she looked for another way to keep horses in her life. A graduate of Simon Fraser University and a chartered accountant, she ventured into Thoroughbred auctions, purchasing her first yearling simply because “she was so pretty—black with a white blaze.” The filly, unfortunately, lacked the conformation for racing, but the spark was lit.

By 2000, Holmes had purchased mares and even a share in Grade 1 winner Mr. Redoy, though his sudden death after covering one mare was a setback. “I was dabbling until 2007 but not getting anywhere, so I essentially started over under the name Phoenix Rising—I was going to rise from the ashes.”

The turning point came with a \$1,000 mare named *Glory is Forever*, by graded stakes winner Roar. She produced *Goldstryke Glory*, a multiple stakes-winning sprinter who competed successfully in Ontario in 2013–2014. That success gave Holmes a foundation—and confidence.

“I am fascinated by breeding and choosing stallions for my mares,” she says. “I've never had more than 10, but I study every mating.”

Her instincts soon paid off in a big way. Among the mares she foaled in Kentucky was *Mona Mia*, by Kentucky Derby winner Monarchos. *Mona Mia*'s first foal for Holmes was stakes winner *Haunted Heroine*. But it was *Mona Mia*'s 2012 foal by Scat Daddy—then standing for just \$11,000—that transformed Phoenix Rising. Sold by Holmes for \$100,000 as a yearling,

Celestine went on to win the Grade 1 Just a Game Stakes at Belmont Park in 2016 and earned more than \$1.1 million.

Holmes' success continued when Mona Mia produced *Silent Sting* by Ontario stallion Silent Name (JPN). She has also demonstrated a sharp eye at auctions, purchasing mares like *Vulcan Rose* (from Chiefswood Farms' famed Rose of Tara family), who produced Grade 3 winner and Kentucky Derby runner *Flameaway*. In 2024, Holmes sold a \$200,000 Maxfield yearling out of *Vulcan Rose*. Another mare, *Kin's Ghost*, a full sister to *Vulcan Rose*, has already produced stakes winner *Friendly Ghost*.

Holmes continues to race a small but promising stable with trainer Gail Cox, including two-year-old *Regal Kate* and *Incoming*, a winner earlier this year. Looking ahead, she is particularly excited about offering *Kin's Ghost's* Ontario-bred *Mucho Macho Man* yearling.

"There's so much money in the Ontario-sired program—I love it," she says. "Of course, breeding a King's Plate winner is the Canadian dream."

Of her 10 mares, six are due to foal in Ontario next spring. For Holmes, it always comes back to the mares.

"It's all about the mommas and the babies. I try not to get attached to the foals, but I get attached to the mares. I make sure they have the best nutrition possible and even have their hearts cardioed. The only thing I can't control is Mother Nature—I just try to breed the best racehorse I can."

Her record speaks for itself: of 57 Phoenix Rising starters, 12 percent are stakes winners and 21 percent have earned black type. Perhaps most impressively, a full quarter of her starters are winners of \$100,000 or more.

From modest beginnings to international success, Deborah Holmes' Phoenix Rising Farm has lived up to its name—rising from the ashes to soar at the top levels of Thoroughbred racing.