

Racing Hero Now Rich Show Horse

By Paul Majendie

LIVERPOOL, England (Reuter)—Triple Grand National winner Red Rum, still a British sporting hero at the ripe old age of 21, is making more money as a showbusiness personality than he ever did in his illustrious racing career.

The equine superstar remains a great attraction eight years after his retirement, touring the country opening betting shops, agricultural shows, taverns and department stores.

He has appeared in dozens of television programs, starred in "My Fair Lady" on stage, presided at Scottish Highland games and even switched on the seaside illuminations at the northern English resort of Blackpool.

"He really is an old 'ham' and loves it. Laurence Olivier couldn't enjoy it more. Whenever a camera clicks, his ears go up," said Peter Rougier, managing director of Red Rum Limited.

The company was set up

when Red Rum quit racing in 1978 "to avoid his image being ripped off with Hong Kong plastic horses and that sort of thing," Rougier told Reuters.

It has proved a phenomenal success with the spin-off products ranging from Red Rum prints, which have sold 26,000 copies, to bags of Red Rum manure offered by a local gardener to help your garden grow by leaps and bounds.

"The trouble was that if you put it onto your cabbages, they would jump into the garden next door," Rougier said.

Red Rum was an amazing racehorse, jumping more than 1,800 fences in his 10-year career without ever falling.

He made light of the giant

Aintree fences to win the Grand National three times and come second twice, a feat unequalled in the history of the world's most famous steeplechase.

He earned almost £150,000

(£220,000) in prize money. But Rougier says this considerable sum has been dwarfed since the horse's retirement, with turnover in Red Rum products exceeding £1 million (\$1.47 million).

Bookmakers lost about £3 million (\$4.4 million) as British housewives wagered heavily on their idol in the Grand National.

Now those same bookmakers happily pay £900 (\$1,320) a day to hire the gelding to open a betting shop.

Red Rum, who paraded in front of the grandstand before this year's race on Saturday, was immortalized in a bronze sculpture to be displayed in the paddock.

The horse's fame has taken him to some strange venues. Rougier said: "We have had wives asking for Red Rum to appear as a special surprise at their husband's birthday."

"Rummy has been in lifts,

up stairs and into people's sitting rooms. But he has never ever left anything on the carpet," he added.

Some critics argue these guest appearances are demeaning. But Red Rum's trainer Ginger McCain disagrees: "If I thought for a moment he wasn't enjoying it, I'd stop it right there and then. We have now cut down to about 25 engagements a year because of his age."

In the 1970s McCain was quick to reject a million-dollar offer for Red Rum from flamboyant Japanese tycoon Rocky Aoki who wanted to display the horse in a safari park.

Red Rum gets about 200 birthday cards every year, is still ridden out daily and "is very well and absolutely grand," according to McCain.

"He has not deteriorated in his looks while many of his old rivals from his racing days are now dead," he added.