



## John McKee

**Born:** Aug. 21, 1981 in Cincinnati, Ohio

**Resident:** Louisville, Ky.

**Family:** Single.

### John McKee's record at Keeneland

**Total wins:** 48

**Stakes wins** (0)

- Leading rider at Churchill Downs in the fall of 2004.
- Leading rider at Oaklawn Park in 2004 and leader by earnings in 2005.
- Leading rider at River Downs in 2002.
- Leading rider at Turfway Park's 2002 fall meeting.
- Finalist for Eclipse Award for leading apprentice jockey in 2002.
- Tied for second at the Churchill fall meet in 2002.
- Broke Steve Cauthen's record for victories by an apprentice at River Downs set in 1976.
- Won his first graded stakes in 2003 aboard Tap the Admiral in the Firecracker Handicap.
- In 2003, he finished third at Ellis Park, fourth at Turfway in the fall, fourth at Churchill's fall meet and fourth at Keeneland's fall meet.

John McKee had the most significant mount of his young career in 2006—Lawyer Ron aboard whom he won four stakes prior to the Kentucky Derby—the Risen Star (G2), Southwest, Rebel (G3) and the Arkansas Derby (G2). After their 12th-place finish in the Run for the Roses, they added a victory in the St. Louis Derby.

By year-end, McKee had 120 victories and earnings of \$4,770,247 to rank 46th. Other stakes wins included the Golden Rod (G2) with Lady Joanne and the Marfa on Level Playingfield.

A year earlier, he won 131 races and his mounts earned \$4.5 million. His biggest coup of the year occurred in April when he won the Oaklawn Handicap (G2) with Grand Reward. He also won the Rebel (G3) and the Southwest on Greater Good, and the pair then finished 15th in the Kentucky Derby.

"Looking back on 2005, my three biggest thrills were winning the Southwest the Oaklawn Handicap and riding in the Kentucky Derby," he said.

Other highlights included winning the Kentucky Cup Juvenile Fillies Stakes with Beau Dare and the James C. Ellis Juvenile Stakes with Red Raymond.

"I had a great year," he said in late November of 2005. "I was lucky to have had some of the mounts I've had. I plan to keep learning and riding hard. To keep learning—that's the main goal."

McKee had been a star wrestler while attending Western Brown High School in Mt. Orab, Ohio, in the 103-pound weight class while weighing 88 pounds. His parents wanted him to wait until after he graduated to pursue a riding career and he agreed. He went to work at Poplar Creek Farm near Bethel, Ohio, starting out mucking stalls and progressed to exercising the horses at the farm.

His father, David, had been a jockey in the late 1970s and early '80s. "When I saw his win pictures," McKee told Maryjean Wall of the *Lexington Herald-Leader* about his father, "it was something that I always

wanted to do after that." His father had known Eddie Campbell from his riding days and he suggested that his son approach Campbell to ask him to work with him.

Campbell had been Cauthen's first agent and was involved with the early development of veteran rider Earlie Fires. Campbell worked with McKee for almost a year before he thought McKee was ready to ride. He insisted that McKee get a lot of practice in the starting gate and be proficient at switching the whip from one hand to the other before he would give the youngster the green light. He lined up work in the mornings for McKee to exercise horses. By March, he decided McKee was ready.

McKee got off to a fast start as a jockey. The now-25-year-old Ohioan, who began riding on March 15, 2002, topped the jockeys' standings at two racetracks and finished second at another before the year ended. He won his first race on May 27 at River Downs aboard Storm Cup and proceeded to break Steve Cauthen's record for wins as an apprentice there, which was set in 1976. He didn't wait long for his first stakes victory; that came on Aug. 11 with Waist Gunner John in the \$45,000 Buckeye Native Stakes for owner-trainer Charles Kovach. In all, he won 114 races at River Downs that summer.

He then topped the riders' standings at Turfway Park's fall meeting with 24 wins, despite missing the final day of the meet, and finished in a tie for second at the Churchill fall meet that year. Before 2002 ended, he also won the Evansville Stakes on Just Emma for Leonard Atkinson and the Hoosier Debutante Stakes on Jenny's Prospector for William Connelly. He then tried Aqueduct during the winter and finished fifth in the standings.

For the year, McKee posted 182 victories from 1,006 mounts with earnings of \$2,374,598 and was a finalist for the Eclipse Award for leading apprentice.

McKee began 2003 as an apprentice, losing his weight allowance on June 6. He won 212 races during the year and his

mounts earned \$6,027,114. He ranked 21st by wins and 32nd by earnings. He won his first graded stakes on July 5, with Tap the Admiral in the Firecracker Breeders' Cup Handicap (G2), and added another in the Golden Rod Stakes (G2) aboard Be Gentle. Other stakes wins included the West Virginia Senate President's Cup Handicap aboard Glorious Grace.

After he lost his "bug," Denny Moore, leading trainer at River Downs in 2003, told Jennie Rees of *The Louisville Courier-Journal*, "It's not going to make a difference with him losing the bug. I think he's going to be the next premier rider.

"He just has a natural ability of not interfering with the way a horse travels. He used to wrestle, and he's very strong. Instead of being a hindrance, he can actually pick a horse up. He has natural rhythm and strength to maneuver a horse."

McKee followed Pat Day's career when he was a youngster and the two later became good friends. "He's set a lot of examples for me," he said several months prior to Day's retirement. "I try to copy him and be the person and the jockey he is now. There's so much to learn from somebody like him."

From 2003 to 2004, McKee held his own. His '04 earnings of \$6,062,316 improved by some \$35,000 from the previous year and his national ranking rose from 32nd to 29th. He won 210 races, compared to 212 in 2003.

"We're right on track," said his former agent, Eddie Campbell, in January of 2005. "We hope he'll be recognized as a top rider by the end of the year. Then the wins and the money will come." Veteran agent Wendell Smith was handling his book at the 2007 Oaklawn meet.

McKee topped the riders' standings at Oaklawn Park in 2004 and at Churchill that fall. In his first meet at Oaklawn, he won 71 races, and his mounts earned more than \$1.6 million.

He won 12 added-money races during the year, nine for veteran trainer Bob Holthus, including the Kentucky Jockey Club Stakes (G2) and Kentucky Cup Juvenile Stakes (G3), both with Greater Good. Other stakes he won with Holthus-conditioned horses included the Kentucky Cup Sprint Stakes (G3) with Level Playingfield and the Mountain Valley Stakes with Pro Prado.

"His skills were obvious and he is a natural lightweight," says Holthus of McKee. "The boy makes good decisions and gets along well with the horses."

He also won stakes for Nick Zito, Donnie Von Hemel and William Connelly.

One of his goals, finding a Kentucky Derby mount, didn't take long to accomplish. His first was Pro Prado in 2004. They finished 13th. Greater Good was his next. "That's what this game is all about," said former agent Campbell, "hopes and dreams."

"I love what I do," McKee said.