

Humberto Ascanio in Profile

By Steve Schuelein



Pitchfork in hand, trainer Humberto Ascanio walked down the shedrow in Barn 70 North at Hollywood Park early this year wearing a purple Ventura Breeders' Cup cap en route to the stable office.

The royal blue and white tack trunks and stall webbings with the initials R F of former boss Robert "Bobby" Frankel were still visible, as was a winner's circle photo on the office wall of Frankel winning a stake in New York with Fighting Fit in 1985.

At times, Ascanio can still not believe that his legendary boss of 36 years, who died in November at age 68 after a battle with lymphoma, is really gone.

"The last seven or eight months were tough; he was such a strong man, and for him to deteriorate like that was very sad," said Ascanio with a sigh. But life goes on.

The stable has shrunk to 15 horses, and the help to three grooms, two hot walkers, and one exercise rider, but Ascanio, 63, is hopeful that he can continue to run a winning stable on his own.

"I'm no Bobby Frankel, but I learned from the Bobby Frankel school," said Ascanio, noting that the training routine will remain the same, but he will now be placed in the position of deciding where horses run.

The transition will be testing and nerve-racking, but four decades on the backside have toughened the Mexican native into believing in himself.



The late Bobby Frankel was Ascanio's boss for 36 years.

"Bobby was a survivor," said Ascanio, recalling two major jolts--one in the late 1970's and the other in the late 1980's--when key owners transferred their horses away.

"Bobby said not to worry, that we'll be okay and have good horses someday," said Ascanio of a vision that came to fruition the past two decades. "Bobby was a fighter and built it up again."

Ascanio is similarly trying to rebound after the loss of most of the Juddmonte Farms horses and the sale of Frankel-owned horses. Prince Khalid Abdullah's Juddmonte, Frankel's biggest client since 1990, transferred eight of their nine horses to Hall of Famer Bill Mott, selecting a higher-profile trainer and leaving Ascanio with just one, multiple stakes winner Midships. The five Frankel-owned horses were headed by Mast Track, winner of the 2008 Hollywood Gold Cup, sold to Frank Stronach and moved to trainer John Shirreffs.

"Sometimes bad happens and sometimes good happens," said Ascanio philosophically of the vicissitudes of the sport and hoping that good will be in store in 2010.

"I won a few stakes at the end of last year, and that was good," said Ascanio modestly. "So I'll keep going and see what happens. I hope to make the right decisions. Knock on wood, so far, so good."

Ascanio concluded 2009 in a blaze of glory, both as a memorial for Frankel and a testament to his own skills.

Ascanio was named top trainer at the Hollywood Park Autumn Meet in a media poll after saddling three graded stakes winners after Frankel's death. He sent out Fluke to an upset victory in the Citation Handicap and Ventura to a popular score in the Matriarch Stakes on consecutive days to highlight the Turf Festival that Frankel had dominated.

He deferred all the credit to Frankel after the emotional victories less than two weeks after his death in the two \$300,000 Grade 1 races. The Matriarch was particularly poignant since it had been Frankel's dying wish to send Ventura out a winner before joining the broodmare ranks.

"This is what Bobby wanted--that she would retire a winner," said Ascanio, choking back tears after helping to accomplish the mission.

Ascanio continued his hot hand by winning the \$100,000 Grade III Native Diver Handicap at Hollywood Park with Mast Track and the \$150,000 Grade II San Gabriel Handicap during opening week at Santa Anita with Proudinsky.

Stakes winners Fluke, a 5-year-old Brazilian-bred horse; Proudinsky, a 7-year-old German-bred horse; and Midships, a 5-year-old English-bred horse; form the nucleus of his stable.

Ascanio saddled Midships to victories in the Grade 2 San Luis Rey and San Juan Capistrano handicaps and Grade 1 Charlie Whittingham Handicap in Frankel's absence last year and hopes to keep the horse on a similar path in distance grass stakes this year.



Fluke in the winner's circle after his win in the Citation Handicap at Hollywood Park. Jockey Joe Talamo on board.

"A few owners have said they will send me some horses," said Ascanio, optimistic some newcomers will join the horses left with him by such owners as Alfredo and Patricia Bozzano, Johanna Louise Glen-Teven, Sumaya Us Stable, Agri-Harvest and Michael Bello.

Ascanio is particularly enthused about an unraced homebred 3-year-old colt owned by Bello named Cause It Hertz, by Giant's Causeway out of Megahertz.

"He's just like his mom, feisty," said Ascanio in deference to Megahertz, a compact comet who won several graded turf stakes in Southern California for Frankel. In 2002, Ascanio deputized for Frankel when he was in New York and saddled Megahertz to victory in the rich American Oaks at Hollywood Park.

Humble Humberto and brash Bobby formed a winning team for more than three decades, the volatile Frankel the genius calling the shots and the reserved Ascanio the glue that held the powerful stable together.

Long before his fatal illness kept him away from the track for most of 2009, Frankel knew he could spend weeks on the Triple Crown trail and summers in New York because of his reliable assistant.

"Humberto is a better trainer than 90 per cent of the trainers in the country," Frankel was quoted as saying in 1993. "He makes my life a lot easier."

Ascanio learned from early on that his life was made a lot easier if he talked straight to Frankel and ignored his frequent temper tantrums. "I remember one morning I had to tell him that a filly had a little problem--and then a few minutes later the board went flying," said Ascanio in reference to a clipboard with training charts he was holding. "And many times I saw the telephone go flying."

Yet it was from the stable office that Ascanio observed another example of Frankel's brilliance. "He could see horses go by here, and he could see if the slightest thing was wrong and get out of his office chair," said Ascanio.

Ascanio understood some of Frankel's quirks and seeming contradictions in his enigmatic personality. "When he came to the barn, he was all business," said Ascanio. "In the morning, he wanted things to go right. I went to a barbecue at Del Mar, and he was a different guy. I've been to his house, and you wouldn't know it was the same person."

Ascanio felt lucky that he worked for three top trainers since arriving in this country penniless from Guadalajara in 1968. "I've been blessed," said Ascanio. "I worked for Buster Millerick, who I can't believe isn't in the Hall of Fame, and before that for Farrell Jones, another real horseman.

"I learned a lot from those old-timers before I went to work for Bobby in 1973," said Ascanio. "All three were winners.

"Bobby hated to lose," continued Ascanio. "Every morning he wanted things to go according to plan. He wanted his horses taken care of first class. He didn't care if it was a Grade 1 horse or a claimer, he wanted each taken care of the same way.

"And Bobby would give his horses time. If they weren't 100 per cent, they wouldn't run."

Ascanio and Frankel agreed that their favorite horse was Exbourne, a Grade 1 stakes winner in 1991 whose life each saved on different occasions.

"He was supposed to be going to the Arlington Million and colicked at Del Mar (in 1991)," said Ascanio. "I got a call from the night watchman and rushed over. We had to get him to a van and I saw one parked by the kitchen. I knocked on the door, and luckily the driver was in there sleeping.

"I explained that we had an emergency and he drove him to the hospital at San Luis Rey Downs a half hour away in the middle of the night and they saved his life."

The following year it was Frankel's turn following a near-fatal training breakdown. "Exbourne broke his leg, and Bobby ran onto the track and held his leg up screaming for an ambulance," recalled Ascanio.

"I could see Bobby was crying while he waited," said Ascanio, noting his soft heart for animals.

"They took him to the barn, and Dr. (Larry) Bramlage did surgery for a broken cannon bone," said Ascanio. Frankel talked Juddmonte officials out of putting the horse down, and against all odds, he survived and later sired a small crop of yearlings in Kentucky.

Ascanio, married, father of six and grandfather of eight, has three sons in racing: Matthew, who works with him in the barn; Michael, a blacksmith assisting Wes Champagne; and Mark, who works in a warehouse tack shop.

Ascanio is no stranger to being a head trainer, conditioning a small number under his name while assisting Frankel during the late 1980's. He won three races with Caballo de Oro and two with Cachuma before Frankel's stable grew to the point where he was needed full-time again and gave up his small string.

The situation is different now, but as to what his future holds, Ascanio knows some basic tenets will always apply. "If you've got the tools, you can do the job," he said, welcoming the challenge. □



Emotion-filled hugs between Ascanio and jockey Joe Talamo following the Citation Handicap win.