



Alexis Barba in Profile

By Steve Schuelein

Alexis Barba picked a good year to join the Eddie Gregson stable as an exercise rider in Southern California.

It was 1981, when Gato Del Sol was a 2-year-old, and Barba was able to observe first-hand how the colt was meticulously developed a Kentucky Derby winner the following spring.

Now, 29 years later, trainer Barba has her own Triple Crown aspirations with a pair of stakes-winning colts, Alpie's Bet and Make Music For Me, with whom she also hopes to apply the Gregson touch.

"Gato had just won the Del Mar Futurity," recalled Barba of her timely introduction to the Gregson barn as she returned to her stable office at Hollywood Park recently after helping groom Juan Orozco give Make Music For Me a morning bath.

"I was just galloping horses at the time and not Gato's regular exercise rider, but I did have the luxury of getting on him a couple of times," said Barba under a "Dream On" baseball cap from an office chair.

"Just for Gato to go to the Derby, and not being expected to win, and pulling it off, it was so exciting," said Barba with a nostalgic smile of the colt's 21-to-1 upset victory under Eddie Delahoussaye that highlighted Gregson's career.

The Gregson influence is still apparent in Barn 61 South, where Barba conditions six horses. Brown tack trunks and lockers with the white initials EJD were inherited by Barba when she went on her own in 2000 following Gregson's suicide.

"Eddie was easy to work for if he liked you," said Barba of the tall erudite Stanford graduate who was one of the most respected horsemen on the circuit. "He was very articulate but he mostly left you alone to learn by observation."

Barba was as stunned as the rest of the racing world when Gregson mysteriously took his own life with a self-inflicted gunshot wound at age 61.

"I had an assistant trainer's license, but I had never thought about going on my own," said Barba. "I galloped and ran Eddie's second string, and later became assistant with his main string.

"I was in survival mode," continued Barba. "I had a son to raise. Eddie died--and everybody was in shock the way he died. I was made offers by a lot of the owners.

"Obviously, I trained sort of like Eddie with the work schedule," added Barba. "It's pretty basic for everyone. It's just when you're thrown curves, how you deal with them."

Barba thanked Gail Gregson, Eddie's widow, for helping her through that challenging time and owner Jacqueline Peralta-Ramos for supporting her through another difficult period when her supply of horses nearly dried up.

Luckily, she retained contact with Teresa McWilliams, a long-time owner-breeder from Montecito, Cal., who was an old friend of Gregson. Through McWilliams, Barba also met Peter and Ellen Johnson, a Wisconsin couple who spent part of the year in Montecito and entered racing six years ago.

The Johnsons first became involved in the sport when they bought a half interest in Miss Alphie, a filly that McWilliams owned and bred and named after Ellen's mother.

Barba trained Miss Alphie, who was retired after seven maiden starts in 2005. "She fractured a foot on a sealed Santa Anita main track when she finished second in her last race," said Barba with a wince.

Miss Alphie, a daughter of another Gregson-trained star, Candi's Gold, was bred to the Storm Cat stallion Tribal Rule in California to produce Alphie's Bet, who races for McWilliams and the Johnsons.

The Johnsons also campaign Music For Me, a Kentucky-bred son of Bernstein who was purchased for them by Barba at the 2009 Barretts March Sale for \$95,000.

"Sometimes you get lucky," said Barba. "We got 'Music' for the price we were willing to go. He had a great way of previewing, a big stride and an early auction number."

Barba said the two colts are equally talented but very different. "Alphie's Bet came in last summer," said Barba. "He was a big awkward baby, but he went through the paces non-stop. He's got a quieter easy demeanor and is easy to be around.

"'Music' is a little smaller and a little more on the hot side," said Barba. "He's a little more on the muscle."

Both colts showed promise as 2-year-olds, although neither broke his maiden until early in their 3-year-old campaigns.

Make Music for Me may have been the most accomplished maiden in the country last year, three times placing in graded stakes behind 2-year-old champion Lookin at Lucky.

He rallied to finish second at Del Mar in both the Grade 2 Best Pal Stakes and Grade 1 Del Mar Futurity and third in the Grade 1 CashCall Futurity at Hollywood Park.



Make Music For Me broke his maiden in his seventh start and first on turf.



Alphie's Bet won the Grade 3 Sham Stakes to become a Kentucky Derby Prospect, and, ultimately, placed fourth in the Running Of The Roses on May 1, 2010.

Alphie's Bet also demonstrated his future promise by closing from far back to finish second as a maiden in his third start in the California Breeders Champion Stakes at Santa Anita in December behind the highly regarded Caracortado.

Barba enjoyed the day she always dreamed about on March 6 at Santa Anita when she starred in the Santa Anita Handicap undercard by recording her first stakes wins in consecutive races.

Just beating the rain under threatening clouds, Barba stole the thunder from Hall of Fame trainers Bob Baffert and Richard Mandella and would have made Gregson proud.

Make Music for Me broke his maiden in his seventh start and first on turf, rallying under Mike Smith to defeat Baffert-trained favorite Macias by one length in 1:35.30 for one mile in the \$68,710 Pasadena Stakes.

Thirty minutes later, Barba returned to the winner's circle to clutch the winning bouquet in the \$150,000 Grade 3 Sham Stakes after Alphonse's Bet rallied to overtake Mandella-trained favorite Setsuko for a 2 1/4-length victory in 1:48.72 for 1 1/8 miles on synthetic Pro-Ride.

"He reminds me a lot of Candi's Gold," jockey Alex Solis told Barba after the race of the colt's grandfather that Gregson trained to an eighth-place finish in the 1987 Kentucky Derby won by Alysheba. "He's big, strong and can run any distance."

Barba thought she was on the Derby trail once before with Victory Pete after he finished an encouraging third behind winner Colonel John and El Gato Malo in the Sham two years ago.

"He was named for Peter (owner Johnson), who was relatively new in the game," said Barba, who thought the Arkansas Derby at Oaklawn Park would be the best fit for his final prep before Louisville.

"He got hurt the day before the race," said the brunette trainer, recounting the agony in Arkansas. "ESPN had just interviewed us that morning. Andy Durnin, his exercise rider, led him out of the stall, he took one deep step, and we both went white."

"I don't smoke, but I had a cigarette that day," said Barba of her reaction to the badly bruised foot that kept Victory Pete out until the end of that year. He was turned out again last summer after Del Mar and is nearing another return.

Barba is using Durnin to exercise both her 3-year-olds in hopes that he can supply the same magic that he used in helping Fusaichi Pegasus to victory in the 2000 Kentucky Derby. "He seems to know how to handle the naughty ones," said Barba in reference to Durnin's skill with the strong-willed and mischievous Fusaichi Pegasus.



Alexis Barba as a teenager with Oakland A's baseball team mascot Charlie-O.



Barba in her days as an exercise rider.

Barba, born Alexis Paras, knew from a young age growing up in the Oakland hills that her life would be around horses. "When I was a little girl, I was a horse nut and drove my family crazy," said Barba with a laugh. "Nobody else was involved with horses. My father was in the camera business."

"Oakland at that time was a big equestrian area, and I started showing horses during my teen years," said Barba.

"During that time, I took care of Charlie-O, the mascot of the Oakland A's, who was in our stable, for five years," said Barba of the mule named for Charlie Finley, the colorful owner of the baseball team that won the World Series three times during that period from 1972-74. Charlie-O was paraded around the outfield, into cocktail parties and hotel lobbies, and into the press box after a large feeding to annoy reporters.

Barba moved from Charlie-O to Jack Utley when she started working in the stable area at Golden Gate Fields for the veteran trainer in 1977.

"I always had a broodmare and got interested in pedigrees; that's what motivated me to see the racetrack," explained Barba. "The mare was named French Dish. I named her first foal Lepta--Greek for money--and she won her first start at Caliente. The mare had several nice horses, including Ondarty, who finished third in the 1986 Bing Crosby Handicap at Del Mar."

Barba credited Utley for teaching her the fundamentals. "Jack taught me how to hold a pitchfork in the stall," said Barba of the old-timer. "He was the one who really taught me how to groom a racehorse."

Barba then worked for Jerry Dutton and Charlie Friday in Northern California before moving to Southern California and hooking on with Bill Spawr and Tommy Doyle before her long stay with Gregson.

Barba was married for a time to trainer Trino Barba and had a son, George, now 21. Barba also has two sisters, who live in the Northern California town of Clayton. "They weren't in racing, but they're all excited about this," said Barba about the Derby fever generated by the two colts.

The 57-year-old trainer knows there will never be another Barbaro in the Derby winner's circle but she hopes there will be a Barba. "I've been to Churchill before, but just as a tourist and have never seen the races," said Barba, hoping the Derby will provide the first of many memorable visits. □

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