



Peter Miller in Profile

By Steve Schuelein

Few trainers look forward to the Del Mar meet more than Peter Miller. And with good reason.

In 2006, Miller sent out Fast Parade to victory in the Green Flash Handicap in course-record time of 54.75 seconds for five furlongs on turf.

In 2007, Miller recorded his first Grade 1 stakes victory in the \$250,000 Del Mar Debutante with longshot Set Play.

The track where the turf meets the surf is also Pete's retreat, where Miller turns killer for seven weeks. Based at nearby San Luis Rey Downs, Miller has developed into a leading trainer at Del Mar in recent years.

Although the two aforementioned wins rank high on Miller's list of achievements, the Pacific coastal track also has deeper and more emotional meanings for the trainer.

During the meet last year, Miller married his wife, Lani, during a ceremony in Del Mar, a few furlongs from the track. "August 23," said Miller of an anniversary date he will never forget. "It was a big shindig. 150 people. We had it at the L'Auberge Hotel and Seagrove Park on 15th Street."

Before Miller fell in love with Lani, he fell head over heels for Del Mar. "Del Mar is the most special place in the world for me," he said. "That's where I fell in love with horse racing. As a kid, I remember horses like Bad 'n Big and Ancient Title winning stakes (during the late 1970's).

"This is where I live," said Miller, who moved to San Diego County from Los Angeles in 1992 and currently resides in Carlsbad. "Del Mar's my big meet. We do focus on it."

Miller, 43, was born in Santa Monica, grew up in Beverly Hills, and became a racing fan at a young age through his family, which owned Winning Ways Stable.

The diminutive Miller first dreamed of becoming a jockey. "When I was 10, I went to a jockey school in Castaic that was run by Jim Fresquez for a year," said Miller. "He taught me how to ride.

"I spent every summer since I was 11 on the track," continued Miller. "I walked hots for Joe Manzi, Mike Mitchell, and Hal King, in that order, when they had horses for my family."

When he was 14, Miller was told by a doctor that he would probably grow too heavy to be a jockey. Although disappointed, he made a career adjustment and vowed to become a trainer.

“The first day after I graduated from Beverly Hills High School in 1984, I went to work for Charlie Whittingham,” said Miller. “I knew that was the barn I wanted. I walked in at 4:30. Rodney Rash, his assistant, was there. One of the guys didn’t show up and he put me to work.”

A memorable three years would follow as Miller earned his degree as a groom in the Whittingham School of Higher Equine Knowledge. “I wanted to learn from the ground up; I wanted to learn about legs and feeding,” said Miller, who learned much more.

“Charlie could be intimidating, and I didn’t say two words to him for the first six months,” recalled Miller. “But I got to rub Palace Music, who got beat a head in the 1986 Breeders’ Cup Mile and became the sire of Cigar,” continued Miller.

“In 1985, Charlie sent Alex Hassinger, Janet Johnson, and me with eight horses to New York for the fall meet at Belmont Park, and we stayed on for the Breeders’ Cup, when Greinton ran at Aqueduct (finishing seventh in the Turf).”

The legendary Hall of Fame trainer was known as a tough guy. “One day with Palace Music, I put the feed tub in, and he grabbed a mouthful of feed and a mouthful of my chest,” recalled Miller with a wince.

“I was writhing in pain, and Charlie came over, looked at what had happened and said, ‘Get up, son, it’s a long way from your heart.’ I got up. I wasn’t going to be a wimp in front of ‘The Man.’”

Whittingham was also known for his dry wit. “You can’t work for Charlie three years and not walk away with 100 one-liners,” said Miller.

“One morning at Del Mar, we were going out with the first set at 5:30, and it was misting,” said Miller, who asked Whittingham about the wet conditions.

“Charlie said, ‘son, tracks are like scotch. They’re better with a little water in them.’”

Miller earned further respect for Whittingham’s horsemanship during the New York trip. “By nature, I’m not as patient as I’d like to be,” said Miller. “In New York, a horse named Val Danseur hurt a suspensory. The vet there told Charlie the horse was done.

“Charlie said to me, ‘We’re sending him to California, son. He’ll be fine.’ We tack-walked him for 90 days and he came back to win three more stakes.

“That stuck with me. He had his convictions. He knew the horse could make it. He knew more than the vet.”

Miller often thinks about Whittingham, who died in 1999. “He taught me a lot of lessons in life: your responsibility to the barn and to the animal,” said Miller. “If you weren’t there at 4:30 every morning, you didn’t have a job. He was always there first. He didn’t ask you to do anything he didn’t do.

“That really instilled a work ethic that I like to think I have today,” continued Miller. “Putting the horse first and outworking the competition. I can’t control the luck and circumstances, but I can control the effort I put into training.”

Miller smiled about his bald head. “It’s in honor of Charlie and in honor of my family heritage,” he chuckled. In deference to Whittingham’s lofty nickname as “The Bald Eagle,” Miller good-naturedly settled for a friend’s more grounded suggestion of “The Bald Beagle.”

Miller worked briefly as an assistant to Don Warren at Old English Rancho before going on his own in 1987. His first win came with Dynashield at Santa Anita on April 25, 1988. “Gary Stevens rode him,” recalled Miller. “Rafael Meza was named but took off his mounts that day. Luckily, Gary was open.”

Miller recorded his first stakes victory with Winning Ways Stable’s Spirited Susan in the 1991 CTBA Marian Stakes at Fairplex Park before relocating at San Luis Rey Downs in Bonsall in 1992. Miller struggled for several years while establishing a public stable.

“I never left the track, but for five years I also had a jewelry store in Oceanside,” said Miller of the mid 1990’s. “But the store became too much, and my heart and passion were always in this business.

“Walter Greenman called one day and asked if I had room for his second string,” said Miller of the late trainer. “In two weeks, I had 20 prep horses for Walter. I picked up a lot of other prep business and grew to 75 horses, including the young stock from Golden Eagle Farm.

"Then I started with a couple of owners who asked me to run their horses," continued Miller. "I started winning, and business shifted to training and racing for myself."

Miller's first major stakes winner was Fast Parade, who gave him his first \$100,000 win in the 2006 Baldwin Stakes at Santa Anita before he captured the Green Flash.

"I first trained him for James McIngvale--'Mattress Mac'--and won the Baldwin for him," said Miller. "We had a falling out over running Fast Parade long and went our separate ways that spring, but he agreed to sell the horse to Gary and Cecil Barber, the first horse I trained for them."

Fast Parade vindicated Miller's faith in him as a sprinter by setting the Del Mar mark that still stands in the Green Flash. Pete's pistol was then shipped to Canada, where he fired again and won the \$500,000 Nearctic Stakes at Woodbine under Patrick Valenzuela.

"My biggest money race," said Miller. "I flew back home in Gary's private jet, the first time I had flown in a private jet. When he asked me if I wanted to fly home with him, I told him, 'I'll let you know after the race. I don't want you to throw me off over Kansas if we lose.'"

Fast Parade brought back fond memories. "He was the fastest horse I've ever had," said Miller of the gelding. "He just had bad knees. He's retired as a pet at Bonnie Acres in Hemet."

Miller made even bigger noise the following summer at Del Mar with Set Play in 2007. "I bought her for \$105,000 at the OBS March 2-year-old sale in Ocala--where I've bought most of my good horses--for Gerson Racing," said Miller.

The chestnut filly showed early promise but had anxiety issues. "We had trouble getting her to relax," explained Miller, who shopped for a jockey who could remedy the problem.

"Brice Blanc has a reputation for getting horses to relax," added Miller. "We put him on her for the Debutante, and the rest is history."

Dismissed at 14.70-to-1 odds, Set Play stalked in fourth down the backside under Blanc before responding in the stretch for a two-length victory in the seven-furlong race.

Miller's most accomplished stakes horse the past couple of years has been Backbackbackgone, a multiple stakes-winning sprinter in 2008 and 2009.

"He won his first three starts and five of his first seven, and all five wins were on different types of surfaces," pointed out Miller, curious if that feat had ever been accomplished.

"He won his first start on dirt at Bay Meadows, his second on Cushion Track in the Willard Proctor Stakes at Hollywood Park, his third on Pro-Ride at Santa Anita in the Goodman Stakes, his fourth on Tapeta in the Golden Bear Stakes at Golden Gate, and his fifth on turf at Hollywood Park in the Harry Henson Stakes."

Miller conditions about 40 horses at San Luis Rey, where Heather Contreras serves as his assistant and Martin Espinoza is his foreman, and shipped another 10-horse division to Monmouth Park in New Jersey.

"About 20 of them are 2-year-olds," said Miller of his stable, pointing out filly Stealthy and colts Offlee Wild Boys and Joburg's Star as leading hopes for another summer of winning ways at Del Mar. □