



WORDS: STEVE SCHUELEIN  
PHOTOS: BENOIT PHOTOS,  
HORSEPHOTOS.COM

T

RAINER Cliff Sise Jr. savored the slow stroll from the paddock to a mezzanine box at Santa Anita Park in January, a walk interrupted several times by quizzical racetrackers asking him where he had been and when he was coming back. He appreciated the attention.

Sise, 62, has returned to a familiar post on the Southern California circuit, reassembling a stable after a hiatus of nearly three years devoted to supervising the Rancho Paseana training center and a brief stint in Saudi Arabia.

"I miss it and I'm excited about coming back," said Sise, who is regrouping at San Luis Rey Downs. "I miss the competition.

"It never goes out of your blood," said Sise of his lifelong passion. "I love training. I love horses. I love trying to do the right things by them. When you get owners that let you do the right thing, that usually works out for the horse."

Sise admitted that reformation of a stable would be challenging. "It's a tough game today," he said. "All my buddies who had 30 or 40 horses a few years ago are down to 10 or 12."

But Sise expressed confidence that he could put together a competitive barn during the next few months. He mentioned owners/breeders Marty and Pam Wygod, Teddy Aroney (Halo Farms), George Krikorian, and Dr. Patrick Sheehy as key figures in replenishing his stock.

Sise is also enthused about his first stay at San Luis Rey Downs, where he hopes to have the 50 stalls allocated to him filled by this summer. "The track surface felt very good; the grab of the track was ideal," he said after early activity on it.

"Santa Anita put some money into San Luis Rey Downs, and it shows," said Sise of the facility in Bonsall, about 18 miles inland from Oceanside. The Stronach Group spent more than \$3 million in improvements to the one-mile track, aquatic pool, and landscaping.

With the closing of Hollywood Park and the Santa Anita stable area full, San Luis Rey Downs has taken on a more significant role on the circuit. The bucolic facility is located about



## Sise ready for a return to former stamping ground

30 miles northeast of Del Mar and 90 miles south of Santa Anita.

"John Sadler, John Shirreffs, Carla Gaines, and Peter Miller are all sending horses down in addition to a lot of the smaller outfits already here," said Sise, expecting the training center to approach its 500 capacity.

Sise felt the time he spent as ranch manager at Rancho Paseana from 2011-2013 was productive. "Marty wanted me to do it," said Sise of Wygod's influence in his decision to accept the job.

"He wanted somebody he could trust to break his babies."

One became a champion last year. "I broke Shared Belief," said Sise of the Wygod-bred gelding, who won an Eclipse Award after an unbeaten 2-year-old campaign climaxed by a facile victory in the Grade 1 CashCall Futurity at Hollywood Park.

"He was a little immature when I broke him, but very athletic and had a nice way of moving," said Sise. "Did I think he was going to be superhorse? I didn't know." Sise listed



Idiot Proof scored Cliff Sise his first Grade 1 victory, in the Ancient Title Stakes at Santa Anita

several other stakes horses that spent time there.

Sise did not regret the experience. “It was a great opportunity, good pay, a great place to be, like living in paradise,” said Sise of the North San Diego County site four miles east of Del Mar. “The richest people in the world live there. Bill Gates was just up the hill.”

Rancho Paseana served several purposes. “We had lay-ups, broodmares, raised babies; no breeding,” explained Sise. “I trained the horses down there. I had to make sure all the fields were good.”

During Sise’s tenure, the 220-acre site reached a capacity of 280 head. “We turned it into an official training center,” he said proudly. “The rails had to be a certain height. We had to pad the starting gate.

“As soon as it became official, she decided to close it down,” said Sise disappointedly of owner Jenny Craig’s decision last year to empty the facility and put it up for sale.

Sise found a job as paddock superintendent during the Del Mar meet last summer before accepting an offer to train privately for Prince Faisal in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in early September.

Sise described the experience as bittersweet. “It was a great racetrack and nice horses,” said Sise. “Mixing in the red sand they have there made for a sound racetrack. In two months there, I never saw a horse come back lame.”

But by the end of October, Sise yearned to return home. “There was just no patience,” he explained. “They think horses are

mechanical. They have no compassion for the horse; they want to run now. I just couldn’t do that.”

That brought Sise back full circle to Santa Anita, where he could see the house in which he grew up in Arcadia from the mezzanine box.

“I can see the patio and fireplace,” said Sise nostalgically of the house on Vista Avenue on the Arcadia highlands.

*“It never goes out of your blood. I love training. I love horses. I love trying to do the right things by them”*

Small wonder that he became interested in racing at a young age, growing up in the shadows of Santa Anita on the same street with trainers Jimmy Jordan and Ray Bell and the three children of the late conditioner Bill Molter.

“Back then, everybody had a horse in their backyard, and there was a riding academy here,” said Sise of his youth. “I just loved horses.

“My mom (Anne) was best friends with Jimmy Jordan’s wife, Sally,” continued Sise. “I used to sneak out and walk hots for him when I was 11.”

Sise’s mostly pleasant recollections also

included one grim one. His life was nearly snuffed out at 12 on Vista Avenue.

“I was in my driveway riding on a flexey, kind of a sled with wheels,” recalled Sise. “It was dark, around 7 p.m., during the winter. I looked down the street and didn’t see anybody coming. The next thing I saw was a Buick Riviera, a tank of a car, with no lights on.

“I tried to jump on the hood, but was dragged underneath the car for two houses,” said Sise of the horrifying ordeal. “I broke my pelvis, hips, sacrum. I was in a coma for three weeks. I was hospitalized for six weeks. I was supposed to die.”

Sise’s brush with death did little to diminish his thirst for racing and desire to become a jockey. After recovering, he visited Del Mar during summer vacation. “During the 1950s and ’60s, there used to be a trailer park in Solana Beach off Highway 101 where all the racetrackers stayed,” said Sise.

It was there that he met trainer Keith Stucki, who taught him how to gallop at 12. “He just put a saddle on an exercise pony behind the barns where everybody parked their cars in the stable area,” said Sise of his first time on horseback. “Keith Stucki was a big influence in teaching me how to ride.”

Another thrill that summer followed through his befriending valet Mel Peterson. “He took me into the old wooden jockeys’ room at Del Mar and we had breakfast with John Longden,” said Sise of a starry-eyed kid meeting a Hall of Fame rider. “I thought I was in seventh heaven.”

## CALIFORNIA THOROUGHBRED TRAINERS

Sise tried his hand at riding from 1967-70, mostly in Arizona and California fairs, with limited fanfare. "Dr. George Shima had my contract as a bug boy," said Sise. "I won a stake at Bay Meadows for him on Smugglin' George.

"They said that Doc used to smuggle liquor out of Tijuana," said Sise, explaining the name. "He was a pretty good horse. He tied the course record down the hill here. A few years later after I got my license, I won my first stakes as a trainer for Doc in the Piedmont at Golden Gate Fields."

Sise readily recognized that size would limit his days as a jockey. "I was five-nine and doing 124 with the bug," he said. "Bobby Jennings was my hero then. He was riding at six-one.

"They told me I was the youngest when I got my trainer's license at 20," said Sise, who worked as an assistant for Lou Glauburg for a couple of years, primarily galloping, while training a few on his own.

"Lou asked me to take a string up north," said Sise. "While I was there, Noble Threewitt was looking to ship a few horses up, and Lou asked if I would take them as well.

"Noble sent something like seven horses up, and we won with like six of them," said Sise, enthused not only with their success, but the generosity Threewitt showed in the percentage of the commission he split with him.

Sise later hooked on as an assistant for four years with Threewitt, a revered trainer who worked until he was 96 and lived to 99. Sise said he learned a great deal from both and was fortunate to work with several major stakes horses during the early and mid 1970s.

"Lou was a very good conditioner, and Noble was very good around the barns: he did everything for the horses from worming to teeth," said Sise.

Sise worked with Glauburg when he won the 1972 Santa Anita Derby with Solar Salute and with Threewitt when he should have won the 1975 Santa Anita Handicap with Out of the East.

"The winner (Stardust Mel) came out in the stretch, almost knocked him down and should have clearly been disqualified," said Sise of the flagrant foul against Out of the East, who finished second by a nose.

"But the winner was owned by Marje Everett," said Sise of the powerful owner of Hollywood Park, suggesting track stewards may have been intimidated in disallowing the claim of foul by jockey Raul Ramirez.

Sise had family ties with Out of the East.

"Noble bought him from Junior Nicholson, my father-in-law," said Sise. Trainer Nicholson's daughter, Lorrie, has been married to Sise for 42 years.

Sise went on his own before leaving the sport for eight years during the 1980s. "A buddy of mine went into the catering business, and I followed him," said Sise. "I got a hot truck and drove it around Maywood and Vernon. I had the biggest business of all the hot trucks."

But Sise's zeal for the racetrack never left him. Owner Randy Welty of Hidden Meadow Farm was a major factor in his return to training. "He had a box next to mine and left me a message to call him," said Sise. A filly Welty turned over to him won five in a row and Sise was back on the map.

*"Winning my first Grade 1 meant a lot to me, but winning it in a race named for a great horse trained by Keith Stucki – who taught me how to gallop – meant even more"*

Welty was also responsible for Sise's first graded stakes winner, Paying Dues. "Randy bought him for \$30,000 as a yearling at the Keeneland sale," said Sise of the gelding who went on to win the Los Angeles Handicap and Vernon Underwood Stakes, both Grade 3, at Hollywood Park and the Oakland Handicap at Golden Gate Fields, as well as finish second in the Breeders' Cup Sprint, all in 1996.

"If Paying Dues didn't win, he would get pissed," said Sise of the fiercely competitive horse who won six of 19 starts and earned \$543,188.

"If he lost, he would come back kicking, mean and unhappy."

Although Paying Dues was relegated to the field and dismissed at 31-to-1 odds in the Breeders' Cup Sprint, Sise was not surprised that he ran well. "He was never really sound and tough to train, but when he went to Woodbine he did a complete 360," said Sise of the horse relishing the cool autumn weather in Toronto.

"I didn't have to ice him; he got really good up there," said Sise. "He looked like a winner in the stretch, but here comes Jenine Sahadi (trainer of fast-closing Lit De Justice, who won by 1¼ lengths)."

Sise would condition an even better sprinter 11 years later and, again, finish second in the Breeders' Cup Sprint. Idiot Proof became Sise's most accomplished horse as his first Grade 1 winner and first millionaire, retired to stud in California with earnings of \$1,294,484.

Idiot Proof, a Wygod homebred, began his career early. "Marty sent him to me for the early two-year-old races because he was small," said Sise. "He could barely see over the top of the webbing, but the second time I worked him here, I thought, 'Wow, he's fast!'"

Idiot Proof sped to a 7¼-length victory in his June, 2006, debut at Hollywood Park before going to the sidelines with a tibia injury. The California-bred son of Benchmark returned the following year and stamped himself as one of the leading sprinters in the nation.

He was shipped to Monmouth Park on July 4 to win the Jersey Shore Breeders' Cup Stakes by 7¼ lengths in track-record time of 1:07.47 for six furlongs, authenticating his credentials for the Breeders' Cup at the same site and capping a dream two days for Sise, whose son Robert – then training at Philadelphia Park – presented him with a granddaughter 24 hours earlier.

Proving the Jersey Shore was no fluke, the three-year-old colt won the Grade 1 Ancient Title Stakes in 1:07.57 at Santa Anita in October, leaving Sise shaken. "Winning my first Grade 1 meant a lot to me, but winning it in a race named for a great horse trained by Keith Stucki – who taught me how to gallop – meant even more," said Sise.

Idiot Proof added a pair of notable seconds, finishing behind champion Midnight Lute on a sloppy Monmouth surface in the 2007 Breeders' Cup and behind 2008 champion Benny the Bull in the Golden Shaheen Stakes the following March in Dubai, both \$2 million races.

Sise and his wife live east of Santa Anita in Glendora, the parents of two and grandparents of four. Son Robert now works as a farrier on the circuit.

Cliff is just happy to be back. "It doesn't make any difference if it's an \$8,000 claimer, I love them all," he concluded. "If they've got heart, you love them more." ■