

Eoin Harty in Profile

By ED GOLDEN
Turf Writer



There was always an air of levity at Bob Baffert's barn when Eoin Harty worked there. Not that the game they played wasn't serious. It was. Preparing 1,000-pound equine athletes with spindly legs to perform at their peak on the world's stage is not a job for anyone in short pants.

During the seven years Harty was Baffert's assistant, they won the Kentucky Derby twice—with Silver Charm in 1997 and Real Quiet in 1998—and missed by a heart-breaking nose with Cavonnier in 1996. But in between the regimented tedium, there was always time for a good hoot. Fact is, it was and still is part of Baffert's DNA.

"He's got a sense of humor," Baffert said of Harty. "He has a good disposition and we liked to have a lot of fun, so he fit in well."

But work came first, and Harty had his priorities in order. His foundation was ingrained. Lean and sinewy with chiseled features, Harty hails from a family of Irish horsemen that extends back at least five generations. His grandfather, great grandfather, and great-great grandfather were trainers in their native Ireland. Eoin (pronounced Owen) began to hone his craft under the learned wing of the late John Russell before joining with Baffert, who saw a master in the making.

"Eoin showed up every day," Baffert recalled. "He works hard and he's passionate about what he does, and I like that in all my assistants. He made sacrifices that have to be made in this business. He loves what he does."

Not that Harty doesn't have a touch of rebel in him. In fact, it was his streak of independence and his flair for adventure that brought him to America, not loyalty to convention. His sense of humor, indigenous to the Irish, helped, too. Asked how his clan developed their wit, Harty said it was "a case of poverty and deprivation." Still, it was not mandated that he follow in his forbearers' footsteps.

"No, it was not pre-ordained that I would train horses," Harty said. "I left high school and came over here. I can't say I graduated; my time in high school was up, so that's why I ended up here. There was nothing going on in Ireland. Jobs were really hard to find. It was pretty much a third-world economy at the time, and America's the land of opportunity."

Following one year working for the Irish National Stud, Harty came to the United States at the age of 17.

"I had always worked around horses as a kid, so when I came here in 1981, I got a job at the track and worked for John Russell for a long time," Harty said. "He was winding down and Bob was starting up and I was lucky enough to get a job."

"I learned common horsemanship and basic training methods. Both were very good trainers, just different. John trained a lot of European grass horses and was kind of old school. Bob was more into developing 2-year-olds and 3-year-olds. They had different philosophies."

Harty struck out on his own in 2000 and was hired by Godolphin to take over the Darley Stud Management arm of Sheikh Mohammed al Maktoum's racing empire, with emphasis on developing young runners, an undertaking termed Godolphin's "American project."



Harty with trainer Bob Baffert and jockey Corey Nakatani

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In his second full season, he saddled *Tempera* to win the 2001 Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies. She earned an Eclipse Award for her achievement, but in 2002 was euthanized due to colitis and laminitis. Training her was a challenge.

"We tried to work together on *Tempera*," recalled David Flores, who rode her in the Juvenile Fillies. "She was not an easy filly and Eoin did a great job getting her to settle down, because she was one that wanted to run off. She was kind of flighty, but he got her to relax. I was so pleased when she was ready to go to the Breeders' Cup, and it was mainly due to Eoin's perseverance."

Now, if the fates allow, the clock of destiny will click Harty towards the Kentucky Derby on May 3, thanks to a robust 3-year-old named Colonel John, one of 25 horses Harty has in training at Santa Anita. A bay son of two-time Horse of the Year Tiznow owned by the Versailles, Kentucky-based WinStar Farm of Kenny Troutt and Bill Casner, Colonel John was preparing for the Santa Anita Derby at press time and was a leading Kentucky Derby contender. The colt looked like a million bucks in the post parade for the Sham Stakes on March 1 before winning that race, handing El Gato Malo his first defeat in the process.

In measured terms, Harty discussed the possibility of Colonel John capturing the Run for the Roses, a race in which Harty has never flown solo.

"I think Colonel John is good enough to run well, but I don't know if he's good enough to win," Harty said. "He's certainly good enough to show up and I feel pretty confident that he's a contender."

Winning the Derby would be a crowning achievement, of course, but not necessarily one that would perpetuate the Harty family custom to the next generation. Eddie, the 15-year-old son of Eoin and his wife, Kathleen, is not destined to be a horseman.

"Racing is a 24-7 business, with no days off, no vacations and no benefits," Harty said. "You have to love it and I wouldn't want him to do it unless he wanted to. I wouldn't push him. It's a tough life. There's got to be a better way to make a living."

Not that Eoin Harty is looking for one, especially if he wins the Kentucky Derby.

Then he can laugh all the way to the winner's circle.