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PHOTOS: BENOIT PHOTOS

“L

IKE fine wine...” flowed the words from emcee Ted Bassett at the annual Eclipse Awards Dinner to announce that John Henry had been named 1984 Horse of the Year at the advanced age of nine.

The same words today could describe octogenarian Ron McAnally, John Henry’s Hall of Fame trainer and poster boy for the geriatric set. McAnally, who celebrated his 82nd birthday on July 11, ages gracefully while continuing to pump out Grade 1 stakes winners.

Seated at a Clocker’s Corner table one morning in June near the end of the extended Santa Anita Park meet and looking forward to Del Mar, McAnally made only a few minor concessions to Father Time while continuing his lifelong love affair with his job.

“As long as I’m alive, that’s all I know how to do,” said the soft-spoken trainer of the regimen that keeps him young: showing up at the track early every morning seven days a week. “I don’t play golf, tennis, or cards.”

McAnally admitted that he does not move as smoothly as he did when he was 41, largely the result of partial knee replacement surgery in 2012, but the anticipation of his next stakes win keeps a bounce in his step and a glint in his eye.

“Dan Landers, my assistant since 1995, has been my right arm, especially since the knee surgery,” said McAnally, who conditions 15 horses at Santa Anita and another four at Pomona with Jose Miranda, an employee for 42 years.

Landers walked by and alerted McAnally to the arrival of Miss Serendipity on the track. The six-year-old Argentine-bred mare had given McAnally his most recent Grade 1 score with a 13-to-1 upset in the \$300,000 Gamely Stakes on the Santa Anita turf on May 26.

McAnally has not lost his touch with South American imports, who gave him a series of earlier career highlights and have provided most of his success the past two years.

In addition to Miss Serendipity, the McAnally stable also boasts Quick Casablanca, a six-year-old Chilean-bred horse which two days before the Gamely missed winning the Grade 1



John Henry’s trainer and Hall of Famer Ron McAnally has just turned 82 years old

Ron McAnally: still pumping out Grade 1 winners

Charles Whittingham Stakes on grass by two necks in a three-way photo.

In 2013, McAnally won the Grade 1 Frank Kilroe Mile with Suggestive Boy, a six-year-old Argentine-bred who remains in training, and the Grade II San Juan Capistrano Stakes with Interaction, another Argentine-bred who was retired to stud in his native land.

McAnally said the secret to Miss Serendipity was the same as most of the two dozen other South American imports he has turned into graded stakes winners: patience.

“Miss Serendipity took longer than most,” explained McAnally of the mare who arrived last summer at Del Mar but did not make her U.S. debut until January at Santa Anita. “She



Six-year-old Argentine-bred mare Miss Serendipity (left) scored McAnally his most recent Grade 1 win in the \$300,000 Gamely Stakes

had a skin rash that we used medicated shampoo on to clear up.”

The two most prominent McAnally female stars were two-time Eclipse Award-winning mares Bayakoa and Paseana, both Argentine imports who were given several months to acclimatize before their United States debuts. “They were very different: Bayakoa was strictly speed; Paseana you could rate off the pace,” said McAnally of the 1989-90 and 1992-93 distaff champions, respectively.

McAnally said the pipeline of South American stars that followed was formed by the name their success made for him and the hopes and desires of other South American horsemen that others would follow in their footsteps. Fortifying the McAnally stable with South American imports was more a case of history than serendipity.

McAnally’s name in Argentina became almost as popular as the tango and parilladas. So lofty was his reputation that Argentine thoroughbreds were willing to swim the Amazon and scale the Andes to join his stable if necessary.

For creating the South American link, McAnally thanked Ignacio Pavlovsky, an Argentine veterinarian who he has known for 35 years; and Fernando Fantini, a Chilean bloodstock agent he has known for 40, and more recently Fantini’s son, Fernando Jr.

Pavlosky was the contact who recommended McAnally to the connections of Miss Serendipity, the latest in the vet’s long list that includes Bayakoa, Paseana, and 2003 Pacific Classic winner Candy Ride.

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Fantini, Jr., a top polo player, gave McAnally the thumbs up for Suggestive Boy and Interaction last year and Quick Casablanca – Chilean Horse of the Year in 2012 – this year. “The owner was going to send him back to Chile after he raced in the East last year (winless in five New York starts), but Fantini said he should try here first,” said McAnally. Quick Casablanca won the Grade 3 Last Tycoon Stakes at Santa Anita in April in his debut for McAnally.

McAnally has three other South American imports in his barn: Di Giorgio, Safety Belt, and Briscat.

The McAnally barn also includes Jessica’s Storm, a three-year-old filly who is a half-sister to Sugarinthemorning, a stakes-winning California-bred daughter of Candy Ride, who was retired last year after earning \$560,554.

McAnally was anxious for another season at Del Mar. “I love it down there,” said the trainer. “We have had a nice big house in Rancho Santa Fe for about 17 years with orange groves and avocados.”

McAnally will return for his 55th season at the coastal San Diego County track. He ranks second in both wins and stakes wins and is the only trainer to have won stakes there for each of the past six decades.

A special friendship started at Del Mar also attracted McAnally to the meet. “I’m looking forward to having dinner with Doc (Jack) Robbins, who just turned 93,” said McAnally of the veterinarian retired in Rancho Santa Fe.

“I met Doc Robbins at Del Mar in 1948, when I was starting out as a groom for my uncle, Reggie Cornell,” recalled McAnally of the relationship that has lasted for 66 years. “He took me to dinner that year. That was like Doc. He was always for the groom.

“He became my vet for 40 years,” continued McAnally. “He was not only my vet, but also became a dear friend.”

Robbins played a key role in extending the career of John Henry, who never raced at Del



Candy Ride wins the \$1,000,000 Pacific Classic at Del Mar in 2003

Mar but trained there before three visits to the Arlington Million that resulted in two victories that catapulted him to Horse of the Year honors in 1981 and 1984.

McAnally considered the Del Mar training essential and the action of Robbins critical in John Henry's first victory. "He had a key work at Del Mar a week before Arlington," said McAnally. "Before the work, Doc found a problem with his shin and cleared it up.

"I told Jack that if I was lucky enough to win, I was going to thank him on national television," said McAnally, who kept his promise after John Henry won by a nose. "When I was being interviewed, I said, 'Jack, thank you for this.'"

Before John Henry won the Arlington Million for a second time, McAnally was forced to change the time of his works at Del Mar. "We had to work him between races to keep him fit," said McAnally of the nine-year-old gelding. "He was getting older and smarter. In the mornings, he knew it was just a workout."

McAnally's only regret about the Arlington Million was that John Henry did not win it three times. "The other horse sneaked through on the rail," said McAnally of a neck setback to Tolomeo in 1983.

John Henry won 39 of 83 starts and earned \$6,597,947 for owner Sam Rubin. McAnally visited him regularly at the Kentucky Horse Park until his death at 32 in 2007. "Of all the things he accomplished, to be a Horse of the Year at age nine, I don't think they'll ever match that," said McAnally.

McAnally, who has won every major stake at Del Mar – some several times – reviewed several other highlights.

His first Del Mar stakes winner was Donut King in the 1961 CTBA. "I picked him out of a yearling sale for Verne Winchell," said McAnally. "He was my first real chance and best chance to win the Kentucky Derby, but he came out of his last work before the race with

a bruised foot behind (and was not entered). He had beaten Decidedly (who won the 1962 Kentucky Derby) by five lengths."

McAnally first demonstrated his penchant with Argentine-breds by winning the 1975 Del Mar Handicap with Cruiser II, a horse who won six straight races after he claimed him for \$12,500.

McAnally was involved in one of the most unusual rulings in the careers of both himself and Del Mar after the 1990 Del Mar Derby with Tight Spot.

"I drove down to Del Mar to Sid Craig's office, showed him a tape of Candy Ride winning a race in Argentina, and said, 'If you're ever going to win the Pacific Classic, this is the horse'"

The colt was disqualified from first to tenth by track stewards for alleged interference. Tight Spot's owners, a partnership headed by Winchell, appealed the ruling to the California Horse Racing Board, which appointed a referee who overruled the stewards and reinstated the victory to Tight Spot. An ensuing appeal by the owners of the runner-up was later turned down.

"It took more than a year to settle it," recalled McAnally of the process that involved three meetings. "Laffit (Pincay, Jr.) was on the outside on our horse and was wrongly held responsible for causing a chain-reaction incident," said McAnally. "He just followed the horse to his inside. (Former jockey) Bill

Harmatz was very helpful at the hearings and said he would have ridden Tight Spot the same way." Tight Spot went on to become turf champion in 1991.

McAnally's biggest and most memorable Del Mar victory came with Candy Ride in the \$1 million Pacific Classic in 2003. "I drove down to Del Mar that January to Sid Craig's office, showed him a tape of Candy Ride winning a race in Argentina, and said, 'If you're ever going to win the Pacific Classic, this is the horse.'"

"I put myself out on a limb," said the usually conservative McAnally of the \$900,000 private purchase for his new owner. Luckily, Candy Ride came around faster than most South American imports.

"He started out winning an allowance race at one mile, then a turf race at a mile and an eighth at Hollywood Park (the American Handicap)," said McAnally. "Then came the mile-and-a-quarter race here (the Pacific Classic). It was like clockwork. It doesn't always work that way."

Candy Ride came through with a 3/4-length victory under Julie Krone in track-record time of 1:59.11. "Sid's wife, Jenny, and all their family and business friends were there," said McAnally, with a nostalgic smile. "It was one of the biggest days I've had in racing."

McAnally said all his accomplishments would have been impossible without the support of his wife, Debbie. "My wife has been behind me all the way," said a beaming McAnally. "All it takes is a good woman to let a man do his work, and that's what she did." The couple lives in Tarzana most of the year.

Four of the horses in McAnally's stable are owned by his wife. "She said if I didn't start winning, she was going to give 'em to (Bob) Baffert," said McAnally, trying to keep a straight face.

McAnally, a three-time Eclipse Award winner, was inducted into the Racing Hall of Fame in 1990. "Max Gluck got me in," said McAnally in gratitude to the Elmendorf Farm owner who died in 1984. "John Henry was just icing on the cake.

"Elmendorf would send me 20 good horses each year, mostly stakes and allowance horses," said McAnally of the strong resume he was able to build. "The horse is everything. I'm still in touch with Jim Brady, the Elmendorf farm manager who was instrumental in that operation and well respected in Kentucky."

The Elmendorf presence was apparent at Del Mar, where McAnally won 10 stakes for Gluck between 1975 and 1982. The victories included the 1975 Del Mar Debutante with Queen To Be, the 1978 Ramona Handicap (since renamed the John Mabee) with Drama Critic, and the Bing Crosby Handicap in both 1979 and 1981 with Syncopate. McAnally also conditioned Elmendorf millionaire handicap star Super Moment during that time.

"I never dreamed I would get into the Hall of Fame, but if you keep working, that's the way it is," concluded a fulfilled McAnally. ■