

# Mike Harrington in Profile

By Steve Schuelein  
Turf Writer



---

Trainer Mike Harrington and his wife, Patty, visit Swiss Yodeler at Pepper Oaks Farm in Santa Ynez, Cal., about three times a year, but the couple has not been overwhelmed by the 14-year-old stallion's response.

"He was never much of a people horse," said Harrington recently in a Hollywood Park stable office lined with photos of stakes victories by Swiss Yodeler in 1996 and his progeny in later years.

Harrington can overlook Swiss Yodeler's indifference to humans since the horse's major accomplishments on the racetrack and breeding shed have vaulted Harrington into a prominent position on the Southern California circuit.

Swiss Yodeler established Harrington as a force with five 1996 stakes victories, including the Grade I Hollywood Futurity, and kept him there with his sons and daughters. Much of the \$12 million he has earned in career purse money can be traced to the chestnut horse.

Swiss Yodeler has emerged as the leading sire of 2-year-olds in the state and stands for \$10,000. His progeny has earned more than \$15 million, headed by Thor's Echo, 2006 Eclipse Award-winning sprinter with earnings of more than \$2.4 million.

Of the 30 horses Harrington currently trains, 21 are by Swiss Yodeler.

"He really stamps most of them," said Harrington in reference to both an athletic conformation and a willing disposition.

Harrington's stable consists of 17 2-year-olds, including Atka, runner-up in the Cinderella Stakes at Hollywood Park in May. Owned by Harrington, she is by Swiss Yodeler out of Artica, one of his first stakes winners in California in the 1995 Providencia at Santa Anita.

"Artica was one of the best fillies I've had," said Harrington. "Atka is kind of a cross between the two of them."

Harrington can trace the opportunity to train Swiss Yodeler to his affiliation with owner Heinz Steinmann after the Harringtons moved to California from the Northwest in 1992.

Steinmann selected Harrington upon the recommendation of a friend after narrowing his choice to three trainers and has never regretted it. Harrington went to the 1995 Keeneland September yearling sale with a \$130,000 budget for Steinmann.

"I had already spent \$70,000 on a filly," recalled Harrington of the purchase of Swiss Yodeler for \$60,000. "If he had gone for \$1,000 higher, I wouldn't have been able to buy him."

Steinmann, a native of Switzerland and captain of an unbeaten UCLA ski team from 1954-56, named the Eastern Echo colt after The Yodeler, a tavern near his home in Wrightwood, Cal.

Harrington rationalized that he was meant to have the well-balanced colt and soon saw something special in him. "When we started working him, he was just playing with the others, he was head and shoulders above them," said Harrington.

Swiss Yodeler won his first five races, three of them stakes, including the Hollywood Juvenile Championship at Hollywood Park. "He made it look so easy," said Harrington. "He just really spoiled us."

Swiss Yodeler rebounded from three defeats in a class that included Silver Charm and Free House to climax his year with a victory in the Hollywood Futurity, the only Grade I triumph of Harrington's career.

"People said he couldn't get a mile and a sixteenth," said Harrington, reflecting on the thrill of a lifetime. "He ran the same fractions for the first six furlongs as he did when he won the Hollywood Juvenile that summer (1:09 3/5)."

Harrington scored another major 2-year-old victory for Steinmann in 1998 when he won the Grade II Norfolk Stakes at Santa Anita with a maiden, Buck Trout. Unfortunately, the colt never realized his potential. He contracted a neurological disease, Equine Protozoal Myeloencephalitis (EPM), and died as a 3-year-old.

Harrington considered Buck Trout the third-best horse he has trained. "Yolo Lady was my second best," said Harrington of a stakes-winning filly in 1998 and currently a broodmare for Steinmann. "She was placed in graded stakes running against the likes of Manistique and Gourmet Girl."

Steinmann rewarded the Harringtons with a 15 percent interest in Swiss Yodeler. They have bred several of their mares to him. A large percentage of the stable is comprised of Swiss Yodeler progeny owned by Steinmann or the Harringtons.

Harrington, who practiced as a veterinarian for 28 years before concentrating on training, has come a long way since clipping poodles for \$5 in Northeastern Washington to supplement his income at the beginning of his vet career.

Harrington, a fourth-generation trainer, and his wife, from a show-horse background, have combined and balanced their training skills since marrying on the Washington circuit in 1980.

"She's a better trainer than I am, so she tells me what to do and I listen," said Harrington, tongue in cheek. "We bounce things off each other."

Patty added, "We corroborate." The couple still uses a teddy bear as the stable logo, dating back to the days when they raced under Bear Stable in Washington because of Patty's hobby of collecting teddy bears during her youth.

The couple has devised several ways to maximize efficiency. Once, Mike trained while maintaining an off-track veterinary practice. Another time, Patty trained while Mike served as a track vet. For many years, they divided their stables at Washington and California tracks.

Currently, they base themselves year-round at Hollywood Park, with Mike training and Patty assisting while training a small division, this year five head, of her own.

Patty launched the career of Thor's Echo. She saddled him to a maiden victory in his second start at Santa Anita in January, 2005, before the 3-year-old gelding was sold and transferred to another stable.

Harrington abided by a California state law prohibiting a trainer with a veterinarian's license from practicing on-track, but feels his experience gives him an advantage over most trainers. Steinmann often said he made a great deal and added value when he hired a trainer who was a former veterinarian married to a second trainer.

"The background doesn't hurt," said Harrington. "One would have to assume most trainers don't have the background I have."

Harrington is the only trainer on this circuit who practiced as a vet and one of the few in the nation. "John Kimmel in New York was a vet, and recently Greg Fox in Kentucky," said Harrington, citing a pair of the other rare ones.

John Cisneros, a former jockey and the stable's chief assistant during the past 15 years, said Harrington has broadened his horizons because of his veterinary background.

"It's interesting to see his point of view on horses," said Cisneros. "It's different than the average trainer. You learn to read the horse the way a veterinarian does."

Harrington, 67, strikes a serious pose on horseback in a cowboy hat most mornings, but Cisneros has often discovered a lighter side to the trainer.

"He can be a lot of fun, too, joking around in the morning," said Cisneros. "I often get to talk to the jockeys after a race, and he gets a kick out of the excuses they make."

Harrington considers Cisneros indispensable to the operation. "He's a good exercise rider and does a real good job with the help," said Harrington. "We couldn't do without him," said Harrington, then adding with his dry sense of humor, "Don't tell him that, or he'll want a raise." Or a breeding to Swiss Yodeler. □