



# BARRY ABRAMS

## Winning against adversity

Barry Abrams was struck by throat cancer ten years ago, and despite the devastating effect the illness has had on his life, he's still training and enjoying success through the remarkable stallion he co-owns, Unusual Heat.

**WORDS: ED GOLDEN PHOTOS: HORSEPHOTOS**



**A**N old man goes to a doctor. “What’s the problem?” the doctor says. “I can’t pee,” the old man says. “How old are you?” the doctor says. “Eighty-four,” the old man says.

“You peed enough,” the doctor says.

Life is relative. People die of old age if they’re lucky. Youth, however, is indestructible. Kids smoke even though every pack of cigarettes says it will kill them.

Barry Abrams never smoked. He got cancer anyway.

A bear of a man at 6’ 4”, 315 pounds when he was 51, Abrams was stricken with inoperable throat cancer. Ten years later and 60 pounds lighter, some of it weight from the throat cancer doctors ultimately had no choice but to remove, Abrams is still doing what he loves best, coming to the racetrack and training Thoroughbreds. He may be diminished in physical stature, but his outlook on life is bright and his sense of humor remains Bunyanesque.

At Santa Anita, he is a fixture at Clockers’ Corner, always at the same table, sitting in a chair facing a racetrack in front of a backdrop borne idyllically by nature after eons of

gestation, a verdant mountainous landscape Monet, to art’s misfortune, missed by a century.

Occasionally, Abrams peers up from his social media toys to watch the horses and chat with cronies. It’s a wonder he can chat at all, given he barely speaks above a whisper.

Half his voice box is gone. Jagged red scar tissue is visible on the left side of his neck. You can feel the hardness of the bone flush against his skin.

Frankenstein looks good by comparison. If there’s a sequel to “The Godfather,” Abrams would be a prime candidate to play Don Corleone.

Abrams doesn’t bitch or sulk about his fate. He has accepted it, battled through the nightmare that is cancer, and faces each day with a gladiator’s courage and a positive outlook that would gratify Norman Vincent Peale.

“An experience like this puts everything in perspective,” Abrams said after the first siege 10 years ago. “Ordinarily, you talk about things like saving for the future and making plans for this and that, but facing this, you realize that there could be no future. You realize this could happen to anyone at any time.”

For Abrams, it happened overnight.

“One day I felt a little lump the size of a marble right in my throat when I was shaving,” he said. “I went to the doctor and he said, ‘Well, it could be a lymph node,’ and he wasn’t really that worried, but he advised me to see an ear, nose, and throat doctor.

“I did and he checked it out and saw one of my tonsils was real red, like I smoked a lot of cigarettes, but I told him I never smoked. He did a biopsy just to make sure it was nothing serious but the biopsy came back showing it was cancer.

“Then they took a scan and it showed there was a tumor in my throat but the doctor couldn’t operate on it because all the muscles that move your lips and your tongue were attached to that tumor. If they operated, I wouldn’t have been able to move my tongue or my mouth because they would have had to cut all the muscles out with the tumor.”

Fast forward to 2015. Abrams is still here, having endured cancer treatment’s primary demons, radiation and chemotherapy, in addition to immeasurable personal and familial anguish. But the side effects are devastating.

“I’m hoping that I never catch any kind of cancer again,” he said, “because my body can’t withstand anymore chemotherapy or radiation. Basically, I’m cancer-free at the moment, but I’ve got all kinds of other problems from the damage that chemotherapy and radiation did over a 10-year period, and I’ve got to live with that.

“I’ve got no taste buds, I can’t swallow, I use a feeding tube, I can’t eat, I can’t run, I can’t go in the ocean or the swimming pool. I’m just functioning and I’m happy to be alive.

“I can’t eat because I can’t swallow normal-sized bits of food. The radiation

shrunk my throat so much I can only get down something the size of a pea. I can swallow liquids, and I can eat cookies as long as they’re liquefied by dipping them in coffee and made pudding-like.

“I can’t swallow anything else because I have no salivary glands that create saliva. No one can swallow without salivary glands. Chewing releases saliva and helps food pass through the throat.

“I see eight doctors regularly, some of them every two months: an ear, nose, and throat doctor; a radiation doctor; a cancer doctor; a urologist; a pulmonary doctor; a cardiovascular doctor; a psychiatrist; my family doctor--a regular M.D.; and my dentist.

“Luckily, I have Blue Shield and it’s been really good until this Obama Care went into effect and the coverage slacked off, like everybody else’s. I pay a little more now, but at least I have insurance. Without it, my treatment probably cost over \$3 million.”

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If you think Abrams has been to hell and back, there’s more.

“If you are cancer-free after five years, you are considered not to have cancer,” he said. “After my initial throat cancer, six years later cancer came back on my jugular and carotid arteries, and I had to go through surgery with only a 10 percent chance of survival. No doctor wanted to touch me, because one wrong move operating on the jugular and it’s over.

“I found one brave cancer surgeon, Dr. Poomima Rao of Huntington Memorial Hospital, who agreed to perform the surgery. After a five-hour operation, she was able to scrape the cancer off the carotid and jugular. I then had to undergo chemo and radiation in the throat area twice a day for 40 days. It was a miracle that I survived.

“My radiologist, Dr. Helen Cham of City of Hope, was very worried that the carotid and jugular could be burned off from the massive doses of radiation I absorbed. That was four years ago, on July 1, 2011.”

Abrams missed five months at the track during that time.

Abrams never could have envisioned the dastardly deed fate had in store for him when he was born in Minsk, Russia, on March 4, 1954, the son of Lev, a butcher. Barry came to America from Israel in 1963 and in 1972 began his career as a stablehand for a family friend’s Standardbred stable at Hollywood Park while attending business and



accounting classes at Cal State Los Angeles.

He began training Standardbreds in 1978 at The Meadowlands, and in 1984, one of his horses, the prophetically named Guts, won nearly \$2 million. He returned to Southern California in 1987 working for trainer Roger Stein and began training Thoroughbreds on his own in 1993. His first winner was Cheyenne Gold at Del Mar in 1993.

He enjoyed his most productive season in 2008 when his stable earned a career-high \$2.9 million, and he saddled seven horses to win 12 stakes. He never did, however, shake the Standardbred modus operandi of running horses as often as every week, considered verboten in elite Thoroughbred circles.

“It wasn’t like I had a plan to run horses back in a week or 10 days,” Abrams said. “I just had a theory that if the horses are sound, and in the right class, they could come back in a week, as long as they weren’t going head-and-head on the front end. I used to train them to make one run, to come from behind. If a horse only has to run the last quarter of a mile, why can’t it come back in a week?”

“I was in New York when Oscar Barrera was running his horses once or twice a week and winning, and the horses didn’t break down. I tried it and it worked out, so I just kept doing it, and it’s still working out.”

In 1994 Abrams sent out Bengal Bay to run fourth in the 5½-furlong El Conejo Handicap, then two days later ran him in the San Luis Obispo Handicap at a mile and a half where he finished sixth.

“I raced a filly named Rising Mist three times in 13 days at Pomona, and she won all three races,” he said.

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If Abrams is a medical miracle, his equine counterpart in a non-life threatening sense is Unusual Heat. The remarkable stallion, still in service at the grand old age of 25, is owned by California owner/breeder Madeline Auerbach in conjunction with Abrams. Auerbach’s son, Harris, manages the syndicate. Madeline also is a member of the California Horse Racing Board.

It was Madeline who handled payroll and other business matters, aided by Harris, for five months in 2011 while Barry was recovering from additional cancer surgery.

On the racetrack, Unusual Heat won six races and earned \$143,707, but at stud he’s been an equine Lothario. The champion sire of California stands for \$20,000 at Harris Farms in Coalinga, on the vast estate of owner/breeder John Harris.

Abrams was one of three trainers of Unusual Heat, who is the son of Nureyev and the grandson of one of the world’s greatest sires, 1964 Kentucky Derby winner Northern

Dancer. Dermot Weld and Richard Mandella also trained Unusual Heat.

Unusual Heat was the champion sire of California based on overall foal earnings six straight years, from 2008 through 2013, and the champion sire of foals based on turf earnings 11 straight years, from 2004 through 2014.

Out of the Glacial mare Rossard, Unusual Heat was retired from racing in 1996 and has been at stud since 1998. He holds the California breeding record for progeny earnings in a single year with \$5,827,513 in 2008. He has produced 47 stakes winners, among them 2011 Eclipse Award Older Male Acclamation; The Usual Q.T., Unusual Suspect; Lethal Heat; Golden Doc A; Gervinho; Tucked Away; Burns; Pretty Unusual; Lightmyfirebaby; Betty’s Bambino; Unusual Heatwave; Lennyfromalibu; Add Heat; Starspangled Heat; and Lakerville.

“Unusual Heat is the last of the Golden Era of California sires,” said Harris Auerbach. “Benchmark and Cee’s Tizzy remain [as pensioners], but Tribal Rule, Bertrando, and In Excess are gone. John Harris recently told me that of the eight stallions standing at his farm, including Lucky Pulpit (sire of 2014 Horse of the Year California Chrome) and Smiling Tiger, Unusual Heat is still the most fertile.

“He was bred to 46 mares this season; 40 are in foal and three are pending. I think the reason he’s still going strong is because he wasn’t overbred as a young stallion. His highest year was 2009 when he served 83 mares. For him being sexually active and fertile at 25 equates to a man of 90 doing the same thing.”

Abrams sees no quick cure for California



Abrams with Lethal Heat, one of Unusual Heat’s 47 stakes winners



Lakerville, with Corey Nakatani up, wins the Clockers Corner Stakes at Santa Anita

racing's current ills, but he does hold a trace of cyclical optimism.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I have a very negative view of the immediate future. It's a matter of time before we go to three days of racing and eventually weekend racing only. But I believe it will slowly come back to three, four, five days a week, because people will start breeding more horses, the economy will improve, and more people will get into horseracing.

"We'll hit bottom before we rise up again. History repeats itself, and this business is no different."

Nor is life. In the end, few people remember you, unless you're Elvis or Lincoln. It comes down to health, family and having a purpose, a goal, an objective. For Barry Abrams, two out of three ain't bad.

"If I didn't have the racetrack to come to, I don't know what I would have done," said the 61-year-old Abrams, who resides in Arcadia, a mile from Santa Anita. "Now, when I wake up in the middle of the night, whether it's two in the morning, three in the morning, or four in the morning, I put my clothes on, take a drink, put something in my stomach and come to the track.

"I get there four in the morning sometimes and people are there already, and it makes me feel good. Once I see people, my mind just forgets everything else. I have Tony Garcia handling things at my barn where we have 16 horses in training. He's been with me 12 years and he's my right-hand man. He does everything.

"I come by the barn in the evenings when there's nobody around, when there's no dust, and I write down on a chart what I want done the next day. I look over the horses and Tony does everything I want him to do. We communicate all morning by telephone."

Abrams might not have made it this far had it not been for family, friends, and racing.

"The first time you know you have cancer, it wakes you up," Abrams said. "You realize life is not about money or material things. It's about having friends, having something to do, and having a good mind with a positive

outlook, because all thoughts stem from your brain. If you're scared and think you're not going to make it, you're not, and vice-versa."

And Abrams has friends, although they don't go shouting it from the highest mountain. One is Richard Baltas, who has recently established himself as a training presence on the Southern California circuit.

"Barry is a very nice person," said Baltas, who assisted in the barn operation during Abrams' five-month recovery in 2011. "He's very kind with a good heart. Years ago I wanted to leave Louisiana and come home to California, but I needed a job. Barry didn't quibble. He simply asked me, 'How much do you want to make?'" and that was it.

"He came to my wedding on February 26, 2011, when he was sick with cancer. He's done many kind and generous things for me. He took me and my wife (Debby) to Las Vegas, bought the plane tickets, even bought us tickets to shows. We saw 'Jersey Boys.'"

Abrams relies on escapism to help alleviate thought balloons on cancer.

"I don't even think about my illness or what I've gone through," he said. "I do what I can to keep my mind off it. I always liked to bet, but I never bet on every race. Now I do, because it keeps my mind active on the present and not the past or the future. You don't feel the pain and you don't think about the problems.

"When you're at the track every day and betting, time goes faster. Your mind is like a computer and your brain is the fastest

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computer in the world. When you come to a red light, and it turns green, you've calculated how much pressure to put on the accelerator and if anyone is coming on either side of you, all in one second. No computer can do that.

"If you think you can do something, you can do it, but the family comes first in providing support. My two daughters, Anna Marie and Natalie; my brother, David; my wife, Dyan – anything I needed, 24 hours a day, they're always there."

Natalie is a writer for *Entertainment Weekly*. She is married to a writer for the *Hollywood Reporter*. Anna Marie is a revenue manager for Intercontinental Hotels. Together with Dyan they form Barry's Gibraltar-solid foundation.

"Being positive through all this was the main thing," said Dyan, 58, an adopted child from New York who celebrated her 33rd wedding anniversary with Barry on July 24. "Whenever we went into the hospital, we always were smiling and told happy stories. We spent many hours there, but for Barry, the important thing was being able to bet on horses. He had his laptop, so betting helped keep his mind off other things.

"Also, the progeny of Unusual Heat were just turning two and getting ready to race during Barry's hospital visits, so having a stallion that we had never bred before kept his mind occupied. He felt this was no time to die; he had something to live for. Being positive is a primary philosophy in our lives."

Abrams' innate goodness also was beneficial. "Barry is so kind and helpful," Dyan said. "If you needed the shirt off his back, he'd give it to you. Some people don't know him that well, and if he doesn't know you, he's kind of shy, but once you get to know him," she said, laughing, "of course, he doesn't shut up.

"He's one of the good ones. He's got a good heart and a good soul. He's helpful to people. We took care of his parents and then my parents as they got older. My grandparents always lived with us, and that's what you did; you took care of family.

"Barry knows six people who have throat cancer, and he talks with each of them based on his experience, to try and ease their mind, to help. I can't say enough good things about Barry."

Family support has provided Barry with great comfort. "That kind of caring," he said, "gave me peace of mind. If you don't have friends or family, being alone is a frightening experience."

Having loyal subsistence, in great part, is why Abrams has made it this far. Negativity has been vanquished through the comfort of loved ones.

"There is no loneliness greater than the loneliness of a failure," someone once said.

Abrams has not failed. And assuredly, he is not lonely. His name might not be found on a list of great trainers, but in the fight for life, it'll be right up there.

When his final verse is written, this would do:

"Barry Abrams: His family was his life, and his life was racing." ■