



BOB HESS Jr.

Following his father's legacy

Bob Hess Jr. followed in the footsteps of his trainer father, Bob Hess Sr., and has become an integral part of the southern California racing scene since 1987.

WORDS: ED GOLDEN PHOTOS: HORSEPHOTOS

PERHAPS Garrett Morris, who portrayed the daffy Dominican Chico Escuela on the old *Saturday Night Live* shows, put it best: "Baseball . . . been berry, berry good to me."

To an extent, ditto for Bob Hess Jr.

Although he played for the proverbial cup of coffee while at Stanford University in 1983-84, Hess, Hollywood handsome, 6-3 and "a skinny 220 pounds" at the time, had professional baseball on his mind as a right-handed pitcher until arm injuries dashed those dreams.

Eventual Major League players Jack McDowell, Mike Aldrete and Ed Sprague are among those who played at Stanford shortly before, during, or after Hess's days on the diamond, not to mention former Phillies' General Manager Ruben Amaro Jr., who would bring a welcome World Series title to the City of Brotherly Love in 2008, seven years before a freefall that saw the franchise plummet into baseball's basement.

Adios, Ruben.

In between those brief sips of java at the prestigious Palo Alto school where he would earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in economics,

Hess honed the values that would serve him well in his life and his career.

He would become a successful Thoroughbred trainer, now approaching his third decade, following in the footsteps of his father, Bob Hess Sr., who is still giving jocks a leg up on winners in the Bay Area at the age of 81.

It was the "Old Man," it should be noted, who in his son's early years, would inculcate a code of ethics, forming the foundation that is Gibraltar-solid today.

"I tease him that he's the top-percentage, over-70 trainer in the world," said Hess, who turned 50 last July and now tips the scales at 245. "Talk about hard work and a routine, my father's up every morning at 5:15 and at the track by 5:45. He really hasn't changed his program since I was a little kid. He's an honest, hard-working guy.

"He started out in the Northwest and migrated down to Caliente. He was training there in the mid-'60s, and the track burned down in 1971. I was the oldest of four kids. The family lived in San Ysidro, a mile north of the Mexican border, but when I was six, we moved to the Castro Valley in Northern California, where we were raised.

"All four kids were born at Chula Vista



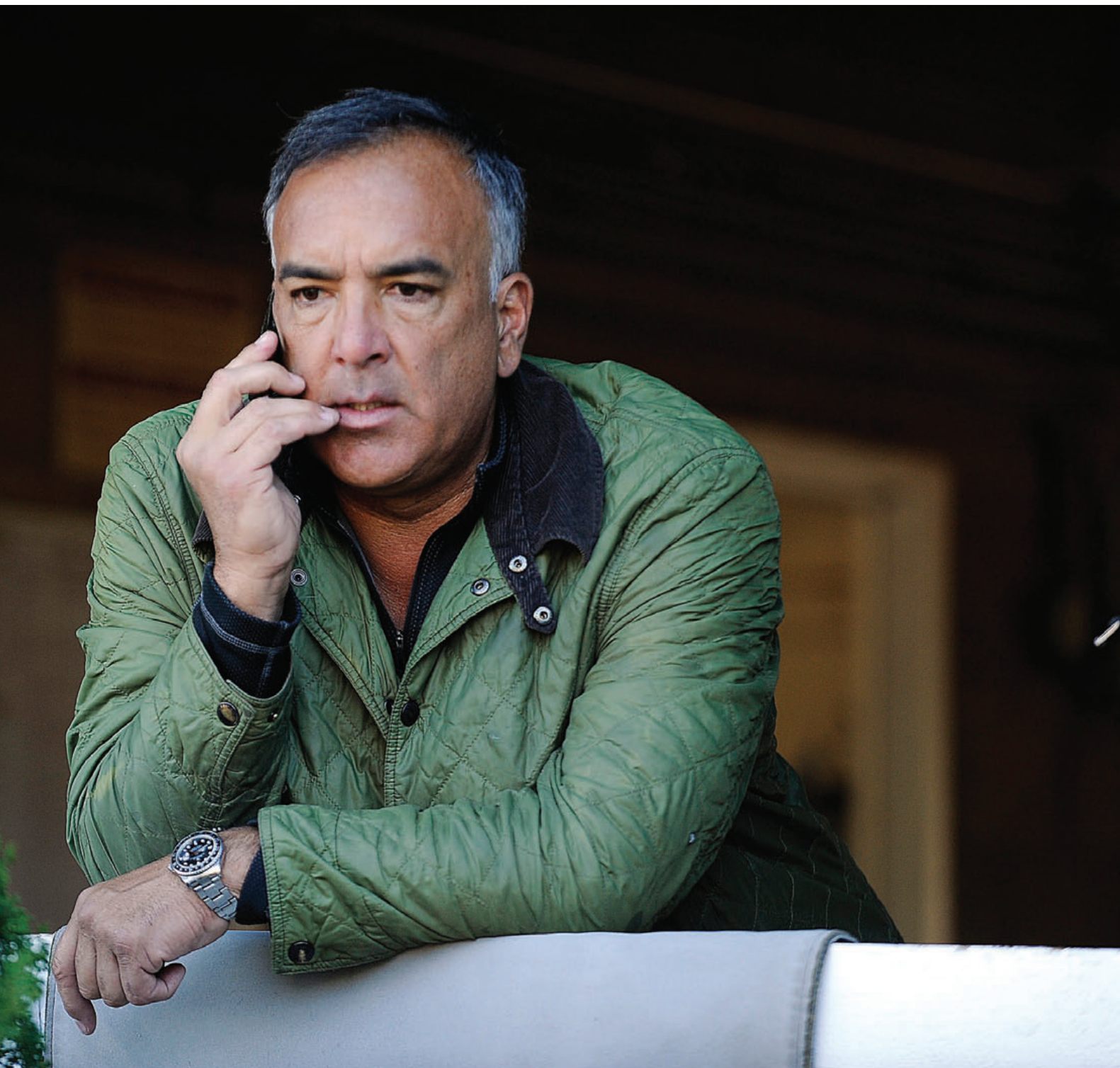
Hospital, the same hospital where Charlie Whittingham was born.

"My father met my mother, Maria Elena, who is Mexican, when she was working at a bowling alley near Caliente. She was a pretty girl and he ended up marrying her. She's 73 now. In April, they will have been married 53 years.

"At one point, my dad had four kids under the age of six, four horses, three employees and my mother, who was a stay-at-home mom, so it was definitely a challenge in those early days, but he's had a great career."

The apple didn't fall far from the tree.

Hess has been a mainstay in Southern



California since 1987, the year he graduated from Stanford. Born a stone's throw from Del Mar, he numbers Grade 1 winners River Special (1992 Hollywood Futurity and 1992 Del Mar Futurity) and D'Wildcat (2002 Frank J. DeFrancis Memorial Dash at Laurel) among his many stakes triumphs. His first victory came on July 31, 1987, with Parlapiano at Del Mar.

One of Hess's favorites was an old war horse named Slerp, who won the Grade 3 Equipoise Mile Handicap at Arlington Park in 1994 by two lengths with Earlie Fires up. "He was awesome; we loved that horse," Hess said of the Kentucky-bred son of Slewpy. "I think the only photo he ever

lost was at Gulfstream the day before the Breeders' Cup in 1992. He got beat maybe a half an inch by a pretty nice horse Rodney Rash trained named Light Of Morn.

"I was always lucky to be around my dad, even as a very young kid," recalled Hess, whose voice, tone and inflection sound just like Pop's. "I was at dinners, I was at the races, I was everywhere with him, so I really got to interact with the clients at a real young age, and that's the beauty of the sport. You're always being introduced to a new and unique horse or a new and unique individual who gambles or owns a racehorse.

"They come from all corners. As California Chrome proved and a lot of

these high rollers have proved, you can't buy the winner's circle with money. A deep pocket isn't going to guarantee success, and I think that's a great thing about racing. It's a humbling game, it's a wonderful game, but it doesn't discriminate.

"If you're a little bit lucky and have some sound judgment, you can hit a grand slam. The people involved are really what makes the sport go, that and obviously the horses. Personally, I've had some great owners like Golden Eagle Farm, Don Dizney, and when I was a little kid, Norm Jansen, who around 1988 was critical in getting me going as a trainer by putting a group together that gave me \$100,000 to claim horses when I



exercise rider for the famous movie mogul, Harry Warner, who told Whitby one of the secrets to success was, ‘Dress British and speak Yiddish,’ and that’s what I tried to impart to Bob. I told him he had to go to college. He should have never been a horse trainer. He’s a brilliant writer. When he was 10 years old, he’d write essays and you couldn’t put them down.

“You have to write an essay to get into Stanford. One of the school’s baseball coaches came to my box at Golden Gate one day with some of the New York Yankees and told me, ‘Your kid’s pretty smart,’ and I said, ‘He’s all right,’ and the coach said, ‘No, I mean really smart. We have to read all the essays, and believe us, we never, ever read one like his.’

“I never saw that essay, although I’ve read a lot of Bob’s works. He told me when he wrote, he never changed even a comma, so I figure anybody can train a horse. There are a whole lot of dummies training horses, and I qualify. But writing is a real gift.”

Bob has two sons, Garrison, 24, and Christian, 22. Garrison graduated with an

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was barely 23 years old.

“That helped get me in with the Las Vegas crowd, primarily Irwin Molasky, who still owns horses trained by Bruce Headley. Molasky and Kenny Sullivan, a first-class guy, gave me my first good horse, Mr. Integrity, who was favored in the 1991 NYRA Mile that Rubiano won.

“I don’t necessarily work for owners with the deepest pockets; however, my clients and I have a mutual respect for one another and similar goals. I try to be extremely forthright and pride myself in being one of the best communicators in the game, because these people have many, many other opportunities to invest their money.

“If they’re going to spend it on a race horse, at the very least I need to be honest, tell them exactly what’s going on and keep them in the loop on workouts, entries, everything involved, including the good and the bad.”

Newcomers with Hess include Paul and Cathy Schroeder, “who have been wonderful friends and supporters of our program. They always put the horse first.

“Also, we’re excited about building on a

relationship with Midwest Thoroughbreds, owned by Rich and Karen Papiese, who are going to increase their West Coast presence in 2016 and beyond.”

Hess was barely out of diapers when he started going to the track. “Bob and his brother, Howie, were three and four when I started taking them to the track with me,” the elder Hess said. “All my kids, including daughters Erica and Anna, helped me at the track, but Bob was more interested than any of them.”

But first, he had to get his priorities in order and abide by his father’s code of aphorisms. Dad was going to make sure his son wasn’t as dumb as the guy who got fired at the 99 Cent Store because he couldn’t memorize the prices.

“Bob said he wanted to work for me at the track when he got out of high school, and I told him, ‘Not if you don’t go to college first, because no one knows or cares if a person can train a horse, but they know where he went to school, how he speaks, how he writes, how he dresses and what kind of wine he orders,’” his father said.

“A friend of mine, Steve Whitby, was head

economics degree in math from Seattle University and lives in Del Mar. Christian is in his fourth and final year at UC Berkeley.

Hess has won more than 1,100 races in his career and if it seems most have been with Kent Desormeaux, it’s not an aberration.

The trainer has enjoyed a magical run with Desormeaux during a 25-year span that began in 1990 and is still going strong today. They go together like ketchup and French fries, mustard and hot dogs, corn on the cob and butter.

Through January 30, 2016, Desormeaux had won 421 races for Hess from 2,155 rides, an eye-catching 20 percent win average, with 354 seconds and 296 thirds. The horses earned \$13,537,874. The 45-year-old Hall of Fame member and three-time Kentucky Derby king has ridden nearly 38 percent of the winners Hess has saddled.

For good measure, Desormeaux even won a race for Bob’s dad, albeit from seven mounts.

“Any relationship, business or personal, requires a huge amount of trust and respect,” Hess said in explaining the wild

ride with Desormeaux. “The beauty is, we don’t get in each other’s way. When I leg him up, it’s his call to do whatever he feels is right in the moment.

“I’ll point out quirks or idiosyncrasies about a horse he doesn’t necessarily know, but as far as race shape, basically I tell Kent to play it by ear, feel free to call an audible or two and do his job. The great thing is I don’t have to tell him how to do his job. He goes out and does it.

“That might be an over-simplification, but the core of the relationship and what we’ve achieved is that we really trust each other.

“A major reason for Kent’s success is his uncanny knack of getting horses that don’t want to switch leads to do so, enabling them to find another gear.”

A perfect example came when he won Del Mar’s Matriarch Stakes by a head at 65-1 aboard Stormy Lucy on November 29 to give Ed Moger his first Grade 1 win in 40 years as a trainer.

“That mare never, ever switches leads,” Hess said. “Not that I’m taking credit for it, but I kind of got wind of it and told Kent, who had never ridden her before. He got her to change leads and she found a gear she probably hadn’t shown in a long time. That’s one of Kent’s talents I can really pinpoint; it can be tangibly seen.”

In 2003, Hess trained a horse named Fort Point for Pete Rose, the greatest player not in the Hall of Fame. Since August 24, 1989, Rose has been banned from baseball and from becoming eligible for the Hall of Fame for betting on baseball. Whether he is enshrined or not remains to be seen, but after more than a quarter-century on hold, it seems Rose has a better chance of using the restroom at a bank or seeing Dick Vitale talk without moving his hands.

“Pete’s a great guy,” Hess said. “I’m a huge supporter and friend. He was great to my kids who love baseball. He gave them signed jerseys and bats. He’s a real approachable guy. The one thing that bothered me, not him, was that being so famous, he had a lot of hangers-on, not that he wanted that. People were always coming after him, trying to hustle him out of something.

“He did love to gamble but he was a very generous guy and paid his bills. He was a lot of fun to listen to and a great guy to hang around with, although I only spent time with him at the track. Now we’ll talk once in a while, but one of his daughters, Cara, rode horses, so at varying times after he had owned racehorses, Pete would seek advice from my wife, Amy, on buying a riding horse for his daughter.”

Hess, who lives in Arcadia, about a mile west of Santa Anita, has some 35 horses in training, all at Santa Anita. He recognizes racing has its ills, but is cautiously and realistically optimistic about its future.

“Racing is going in the right direction. It is aware of its weaknesses, and that changes are needed,” Hess said. “Hollywood



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Jockey Kent Desormeaux has ridden nearly 38 percent of the winners Hess has saddled

Park closing in 2013, while sad in some respects, was a *fait accompli*. We need tracks that people want to go to and enjoy their afternoon.

“Unfortunately, Hollywood was no longer a track where people wanted to spend their time. The current shortage of stalls is another problem, but I think that will get resolved. If (Frank) Stronach (founder and chairman of The Stronach Group, which owns Santa Anita) is permitted to build another 500 or so stalls in the north lot at Santa Anita, rather than horsemen having to work out of Los Alamitos, Del Mar and San Luis Rey, that would be a big help.

“I’d love to see us run another month at Del Mar, extending its fall meet to December 10 or December 15, and then run as usual after Christmas at Santa Anita. I think that would be fine, because people enjoy going to Del Mar.

“Santa Anita is an oldie but goodie. It’s a classic and people enjoy the day there, too. Racing needs to work to promote our sport. In many ways I think we’re the best-kept secret out there, but you can’t blame marketing for all our ills.

“We have to work collectively and get this going, because we do have a beautiful game the whole family can enjoy. Many of my friends have told me they got involved because their grandfathers or dads or moms took them to the races and it was a fun experience. That’s how to cultivate the sport, by having the family unit coming to the track.

“Whether it’s California or the East Coast or the Midwest, the race track experience has to be more appealing to the gambler, the horse owner and the casual or not-so-

casual fan. Laurel being refurbished, which Mr. Stronach is doing now, and with his renovation of Gulfstream, is what’s needed. I know some people criticize Gulfstream, but it appeals to the younger crowd.

“When I took my then-18-year-old son, Christian, there, he was like, ‘Man, this is fun! This is electric! This is loud!’ I think that’s how we get people involved. I don’t know that slots are really the answer. Yeah, they put California at a huge competitive disadvantage, and probably Kentucky as well, because those two states don’t have slots like New York does, but I think slots are generally a band-aid. In any business, you don’t want to be subsidized by another business in order to exist.

“I don’t really have the answer as to how to do that, but I believe we need facilities throughout the country where people want to go and spend the afternoon and bet their money and have fun. Slots are just a temporary fix, nothing that will last forever.

“We have the best stage in the world at

“A major reason for Kent’s success is his uncanny knack of getting horses that don’t want to switch leads to do so, enabling them to find another gear”

Santa Anita and Del Mar: the surfaces, the weather, great purse money, and we should capitalize on that and promote that to the world.

“Unfortunately, we have small fields, so it surprises me that at least in winter, many New York or East Coast outfits go to Florida instead of Southern California. They should consider California rather than Florida, where they have huge fields, subpar money and a lot of rain.

“Florida has plenty of horses; we need to build up our product in California and maybe market ourselves better to the New York owners and trainers. David Jacobson is coming out from New York, so that’s a positive. If he can do well, maybe more trainers will follow.”

Jacobson’s great-uncle was the late, great Hall of Fame trainer Buddy Jacobson.

It took more than a strike from the mound or a hit from the batter’s box for Hess to reach his current plateau.

“Baseball’s been helpful,” Hess said, “but I learned well from the entire Stanford experience. My philosophy started with my parents, but at Stanford it was apparent that I had to work very hard to achieve positive results. Playing baseball while also having to balance my academic schedule was extremely challenging. It taught me to be efficient with my time, whether it was working with the team or balancing my class obligations and my homework assignments.

“It was a heavy burden but it really taught me how to get the most out of every hour and prioritize.

“You have to make some sacrifices if you’re going to succeed in anything, whether it’s work, or sports, or life.” ■