

# CRAIG LEWIS

Living his dream  
in Santa Anita

Craig Anthony Lewis is a racetrack lifer. And at 67, if genealogy and longevity mean anything, he still has a long way to go as a trainer. His father, Seymour, is 92. His mother, Norma, is 90. They still live together in Seal Beach, California.

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Lewis in conversation with jockey Tyler Baze

**N**O “senior complexes” for them. No depressing assisted living warehouses. “My father still drives,” Craig says.

“He’s sharper than I am.”

That’s a mouthful from Lewis who, while not verbose when he speaks, is all meat and potatoes...as straight as Princess Kate’s teeth. Little wonder he knows his way around the track.

He began his training career in 1978 and got his first taste of racing before it was time for his Bar Mitzvah.

“I used to go to the track when I was a kid with my dad and that’s how I got started,” Lewis said. “I was fascinated by horse racing. I would go to Caliente on weekends with my brother. I was nine and he was 10. We were betting quarters with bookmakers and just kind of got swept up by it all.”

More than half a century later, the broom still has bristles, thanks in small part to Lewis’ affiliation early on with legendary trainer Hirsch Jacobs, whose remarkable achievements have faded into racing’s hinterlands over time. But for the sake of history, mentioning Jacobs is worth more than a footnote here – 44 years after his death on Feb. 13, 1970 at the age of 65.

Jacobs was the leading American trainer in wins 11 times in 12 years from 1933 through 1944, missing only in 1940. He saddled 3,596 winners during his career, among them stalwarts such as Affectionately, Flag Raiser, Hail to Reason, Palestinian and Searching.

But the greatest was Stymie, a chestnut colt claimed by Hirsch in 1943 at Belmont Park for \$1,500 from his third start, in which he finished seventh in a field of 14 maidens at 31-1.

Called by some the greatest claim in racing history, Stymie didn’t break his maiden until his 15th start but would go on to campaign at racing’s highest level and was champion handicap horse of 1945. He was retired at the age of seven in 1949 with earnings of \$918,485 – a world record that stood until Citation won the 1951 Hollywood Gold Cup.

Stymie made 28 starts at two, and overall raced 131 times, winning 35 with 33 seconds and 28 thirds. Today, some horses don’t make 28 starts in a career, and some barns don’t start 131 horses in a year.

Stymie was a son of Equestrian, who earned only \$1,580 in his entire career. Jacobs was inducted into the National Museum of Racing Hall of Fame in 1958, and the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame in 1979.

“I was just a teenager and I asked for a job with Hirsch Jacobs for the summer when he trained in Southern California,” Lewis



recalled. "He'd come here before going East; I didn't go East with him. I can just vaguely remember some of the stories he told about Stymie. My God, it was 50 years ago.

"I learned a lot from him, but I learned mostly on my own, when I had to do it on my own. That's when you learn; when you have to do it, or you're done. That's where the education comes. I had some summer jobs in high school and when I got out, I got a trainer's license and started training. Pretty simple."

Not only did Lewis study law at Pacific Coast College, the Los Angeles native holds a bachelor's degree in history from Cal-Berkeley, where he became a big fan of the San Francisco 49ers. "I spent a lot of time on Cal-Berkeley's Eastern campus," Lewis reflected, tongue firmly planted in cheek. "We called it Golden Gate Fields."

His schooling, on or off the track, paid dividends. He is inching toward 1,000 career wins (939 and counting), some coming at Fairplex Park, where he was a four-time leading trainer at the Pomona track, which ended racing this year due to a restructuring of the Southern California racing calendar. Many more were registered at Hollywood Park (also now kaput).

Lewis captured the spring and summer titles there in 1988 with 25 wins, including

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the Gold Cup and three other stakes with his star at that time, Cutlass Reality. Lewis also numbers Valentine Dancer, Music Merci, Larry the Legend and more recently Clubhouse Ride among his multiple stakes winners.

"They were great horses," Lewis said. "When you make the kind of money they earned, you don't forget them. They named a stakes race after Valentine Dancer and at the time she was the only horse that won back-to-back Sunshine Millions (earning \$275,000 a pop, capturing the Filly & Mare Turf at Santa Anita in 2004 and 2005).

"Cutlass Reality beat back-to-back Kentucky Derby winners Ferdinand and Alysheba in the Hollywood Gold Cup," Lewis said with understandable pride. "He spoiled their party. The track gave away T-shirts



Lewis inspects a horse at Santa Anita Park



Saddling Warren's Veneda in the California Distaff Handicap, Santa Anita Park

showing Alysheba and Ferdinand, calling it the Match Race of the Century. It might have been a match race between them but we had the goods that day.

"Music Merci was a sensational horse at that time, too. He won the Del Mar Futurity and the Illinois Derby. Not only did we win the training title at Hollywood Park in 1988, we were 10th in the nation in money won."

Clubhouse Ride and Larry the Legend were bargains. Clubhouse Ride cost \$22,000 and has earned more than \$1 million. Larry the Legend's tale is the stuff of fiction.

"It's a long story," Lewis said. "I ran a horse in Chicago called What a Spell, and a lady came up to me, asked if I was Craig Lewis; I said yes. She said, 'I'm Photini Jaffe; I've got a lot of horses, and I would like to send some to California. Can I send them to you?'"

"That's how my association with her started. I had some horses with her for several years. One day she called and said she was having financial trouble, and could I carry her for a while? I said yes. Eight months later, she declared bankruptcy.

"The bankruptcy court ordered that all her horses be sold. At the time, she owed me almost \$100,000. The court said I had a line of credit, and I had six horses for her. They went through the (sales) ring at Barretts and we bought them all with our line of credit. Larry the Legend was one of them.

"We bought him for \$2,500 and it worked out all right. Not only did he win the Santa Anita Derby in 1995, he earned close to \$700,000 in his career."

The 1995 Santa Anita Derby perhaps was a precursor of things to come. Afternoon





Lewis inspects horses legs at Santa Anita Park

Deelites, ridden by Kent Desormeaux, appeared on his way to victory in the West Coast's final major stepping stone to the Run for the Roses, but Gary Stevens, riding like Paul Revere, roused Larry the Legend to get up in the final stride to win by a head.

Fast forward to 1998. Stevens, aboard Victory Gallop, overcame Real Quiet's four-length lead in the stretch with Desormeaux up to win the Belmont Stakes by a desperate nose, costing Real Quiet the Triple Crown. It remains the most excruciating beat in racing history.

Says Desormeaux today: "I've watched the replay a thousand times and I still think I'm going to win."

Larry the Legend was named for Lewis' brother, Larry, who managed the Long Beach, California, team to back-to-back international Little League World Series championships in 1992 and 1993, a feat that's never been done before or after.

"Today," Lewis said, "Larry is a very prominent lawyer."

Not that it matters to him, but Craig might be as prominent as well, if humility weren't one of his strong suits. He focuses on claiming and buying horses, but you won't catch him at the sales sitting sheikh to sheikh.

"Craig Lewis has a very good eye for horses," said Tom Knust, a Marine Corps veteran who was wounded in Vietnam and awarded the Purple Heart. A former racing secretary at Santa Anita and Del Mar, Knust is now a jockeys' agent, currently representing 2012 Kentucky Derby winner Mario Gutierrez and Elvis (yes, his mother named him after The King) Trujillo.

"Craig looks at horses for their athletic ability, not at their catalogue black type," Knust said. "He gets horses at a reasonable price, but he does really, really well with them. He'll buy a horse for \$32,000 and make a million with it.

"He does that consistently, year after year. As an agent, I look for positive intangibles before opting to ride for a trainer, and Craig has several. For example, he has had the same help more than 20 years, including his foreman, Apple (Arnolfo 'Apple' Gonzales), and his grooms.

"When your help stays with you that long, it means you're doing something right. You're winning races, they're getting stakes, you're paying them well, you're taking care of business. That's what Craig does.

"Plus, Craig comes to the races every day, whether he has a horse running or not. He watches the horses and looks for a good

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Tom Knust

claim. He studies the game, and he's very astute at it. There aren't many trainers like that nowadays. He's kind of old school. He's very unique in that he's pretty modest. He doesn't beat his own drum, but he consistently comes up with a good horse and doesn't pay a lot of money for it.

"It takes a good horseman to do that."

And a dedicated one, too.

"I'm usually at the barn by 4 a.m., work all morning, try to work out a bit myself, eat, clean up, come back to the races and spend the day," said Lewis, who had 12 head in his care at press time. "That takes me to five or six in the afternoon. At night, I study the next day's card."

As for his training methodology, "Every horse is different," Lewis says, "so we train every one accordingly. They're all individuals and we treat them as individuals. We let the horse tell us. Horses will talk to you if you listen to them. There's a difference between a horse trainer and a horse listener. For me, training is not just a vocation; it's an advocacy."

There's a stereotypical myth that every Jewish mother wants her son to be a doctor or a lawyer. Norma Lewis has the lawyer in son Larry, but the question remains, "What's a nice Jewish boy like Craig Lewis doing in a place like this, schlepping past mud and horse manure?"

"I see Santa Anita as The Great Race Place," Lewis said. "It's named correctly. I've never been to heaven, but I've been to Santa Anita, the best place on earth. That's my opinion."

Mom is proud. ■