

David Bernstein: rising above adversity



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DAVID Bernstein has suffered two tragedies: one a game changer, the other a life changer.

When a horse he trained, The Wicked North, was disqualified from first to fourth in the 1994 Santa Anita Handicap, he lost almost half a million dollars. When his son, Bobby, died at 27 on July 10, 2006, he lost much more: a piece of himself.

The wound has healed, but the scar will never go away. Only his devotion to training, which has been his vocation for 45 years, has helped ease the infinite grief of losing not one loved one, but two.

The day after Bobby died, his mother, Victoria, understandably traumatized and distraught, took her own life.

“Training helped me get through all that,” said Bernstein, who turned 75 on Jan. 6 and now lives on a two-acre spread in San Jacinto. His girlfriend of many years, Elizabeth Philippian, is a welcome provider of aid and comfort. “She’s a staunch supporter of racing,” Bernstein said, “and that helps me because she has a dynamic interest in it. It has really made a big difference because neither of my prior two wives liked racing at all.

“In fact, they were scared of horses. That made my life a little tough. One of them wanted me to be a mailman. Horses are a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week job, so the attention they need does keep you very busy and helps keep your mind occupied.

“After Bobby died, his mother died the next morning. We had been divorced for a long time, but it was still a shock.”

It’s 15 years and counting since Bernstein’s bio has appeared in a media guide, but there it is, Hollywood Park

2000, page 280: David Bernstein, born, January 6, 1940, in South Pasadena, raised in Downey—the same Southern California town where The Carpenters, Karen and Richard, earned their musical spurs.

It goes on to list names of horses he trained that have passed on with nary a memory to that Great Race Track in the Sky: Dancing Liz, Stalcreek, Grey Gauntlet, Prince Bobby B, Houston Sunrise, Regal Rhythm and, of course, The Wicked North—Bernstein's most accomplished and celebrated runner who forever in racing annals will be remembered for his controversial disqualification in the Santa Anita Handicap after crossing the wire a length and a half in front under Kent Desormeaux.

Most who saw the mile and a quarter race maintain to this day that The Wicked North, the 9-5 favorite, got a raw deal, citing the alleged interference in the stretch did not warrant his number being taken down. The stewards ruled otherwise, however, costing Bernstein and his owners nearly half a million dollars, the difference between first money and fourth.

Daily Racing Form's comments read in part: "THE WICKED NORTH drifted out on a short lead in the initial stages, duelled outside HILL PASS to the second turn, put a head in front on that turn, began to inch away into the stretch, came in despite left handed urging in upper stretch and held off STUKA under urging. Following a stewards' inquiry, THE WICKED NORTH was disqualified and placed fourth for interference in upper stretch."

The revised order of finish: Stuka, Bien Bien, Myrakalu, The Wicked North.

Initially, Bernstein accepted the decision forthrightly, with no qualms or tantrums. As soon as Trevor Denman announced the change, Bernstein, tarrying in the Winner's Circle, walked to Stuka's trainer, Gary Jones, shook his hand, and offered his congratulations.

But The Wicked North's team hadn't even left the track that afternoon before litigation proceedings were being formulated against the California Horse Racing Board over the DQ.

"(Owner) Mr. (Philip) Hersh objected to the disqualification, so he went ahead and had the track and the film analyzed," Bernstein related. "He spent about \$30,000 trying to overturn the disqualification, and as I recall, the judge presiding over the hearing said if the stewards had had the information we showed him before they made their decision, the DQ probably wouldn't have happened.

"Of course, the stewards made their decision on what they had in front of them, and it wasn't what we showed them, which was that (Chris) McCarron (aboard pacesetter 16-1 shot Hill Pass inside of The Wicked North) came out to tighten things up because he didn't want (Alex) Solis (on 31-1 outsider Myrakalu, who would finish fourth, nearly three lengths behind The

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Wicked North) to get through. When Chris did that, Alex was making a move on the inside and he stood up.

"They blamed Wicked for it because he came in a few inches and the other horse came out 18 inches. Stuka was out in the middle of the track and he just lumbered along, but he benefitted from the DQ by finishing second and being moved into first.

"I remember Gary Jones saying, 'Boy, I'm sorry.' He was really classy about it. It's one of those things. It happened. The stewards made a decision, and I remember before he died, Pete Pedersen said it was one of the toughest decisions he ever made, for whatever that's worth.

"We got \$75,000 for fourth, from \$550,000 to the winner, so it cost me a bundle (\$475,000—a nice piece of change even two decades of inflation later).

There was one relatively insignificant upside to the episode. "We went to the Derby Restaurant that night and management felt so badly over what happened, it picked up the bill for our entire party," Bernstein said.

The Wicked North would go on to win an Eclipse Award as outstanding older male of 1994 on the strength of victories in the San Antonio Handicap, the Oaklawn Park Handicap and The Californian. In 17 career starts, the Kentucky-bred chestnut son of the Northern Dancer stallion Far North won eight times, with four seconds and one third, earning \$1,180,750.

"Wicked was a lovely horse to be around," Bernstein said. "He went to stud but he turned out to be less than stellar as a stallion. He had one stakes winner that I was aware of, Red's Lady, but the rest of them

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were just racehorses. I inherited one of her daughters, Hello Ruffie, who won first time out."

The loss of money, even the princely sum of \$475,000, can never compare to Bernstein's loss of his son, Bobby.

"He was born with a single ventricle heart," Bernstein said. "When he was 12 days old, he had his first surgery. They put on a pulmonary band. Then when he was eight, he had open heart surgery to accommodate a larger band.

"In that first surgery at 12 days old, he suffered some seizures, which left him with cerebral palsy, so he had a really tough road to go, but he loved racing. He had a big parrot that he carried around Del Mar several years in a row when he was younger.

"He lived to be 27. They thought he might only live to be 15 or 16 with that single ventricle heart, but he had a great sense of humor and was a great guy. He was the apple of my eye, of course.

"I have two other marvelous sons from a previous marriage, Darryl, and David Jr. He's in Wenatchee, Washington, on the radio. He's got my voice. And Darryl owns a couple of photography studios, one in Kansas City, Missouri, and one in Seattle. Bobby was cremated, and I have him on a book case in my home.

"Prince Bobby B was named after Bobby and ran second in the 1986 Del Mar Derby. But he did set a mile track record on the grass there that lasted 10 years. I remember when they asked Bobby on the Felix Taverna show what he would do if the horse didn't run well in the Derby, and he said, "I'm going to fire my dad."

Bernstein graduated from Downey High School in 1957 and later attended Cal Poly Pomona. "I was a big fan of The Carpenters, but on the other hand, really and truly, I only thought about horses," he said. "My grandparents took me to the races when I was nine years old, and I got hooked on it then.

"In fact, it was a day that Milo Valenzuela won six of the eight races at Hollywood Park. My grandparents lived by Hollywood Park. I was named after my grandfather, who also was named David Bernstein. He was a typesetter for the *Los Angeles Herald Express* (later the *Herald Examiner*) and wrote a column on Saturdays called "Señor Bernie's Picks". I named a horse Señor Bernie after him. He won a few races."

Before he became a trainer, Bernstein worked with his father who built store fixtures for Vons Markets, and after that was in the industrial catering business.

Bernstein at one time was "The Birdman of Santa Anita." He had tweets at Barn 59 before anyone ever heard the words "social media."

"I always liked parakeets and enjoyed raising and breeding them to introduce different colors," Bernstein said. "I gave them to people at the track. The birds live for three or four years and make good pets. It was a hobby that I had and it was fun."



Bernstein's The Wicked North was controversially disqualified and placed fourth after finishing first in the Santa Anita Handicap in 1994

Victories have been few and far between for Bernstein in recent years, understandable when you're down to six horses, which he was at press time. Still, he maintains a positive outlook, caring diligently for his chosen half-dozen like they were Secretariat reincarnate, sending them through their daily regimen while adhering to a placating ancient credo: "Inner peace is beyond victory or defeat."

Leandro Mora knows the goodness of Bernstein's soul.

"I was there when little Bobby was born," said Mora, a native of Mexico who now is a valued assistant with Kentucky Derby-winning trainer Doug O'Neill. "I stayed with David Bernstein for eight years, starting in 1978. Finally, I wanted an assistant trainer's license and he helped me get it.

"I learned more than English from him. I learned 'gentleman's English,' because he is a gentleman."

Bobby Frankel, Simon Bray, Lewis Cenicola, James Chapman, Wally Dollase, Leonard Duncan, Paco Gonzalez, Walter Greenman, Eddie Gregson, Alex Hassinger Jr., Ian Jory, Robert Marshall, Mike Mitchell, Doug Peterson, Jay Robbins, Jenine Sahadi, Sanford Shulman, Mel Stute, Warren Stute and Noble Threewitt are

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those with bios in that 2000 Hollywood Park Media Guide who, for one reason or another, are no longer training.

But David Bernstein soldiers on each morning with a ready smile and a warm greeting, always looking you in the eye when he speaks. At the race track, not only is it gratifying to see him, but to hear him as well, what with his rich, mellifluous voice, his words fully and properly pronounced, not clipped, no "dese, dose, deres or dems." His vocabulary is expansive, not limited to that of an LAUSD dropout: "um, like, dude, you know, basically, cool and awesome."

Says Bernstein in explaining how he

might have come by his golden tones: "My grandfather was a singer."

Be that as it may, Bernstein, like most devoted trainers, is in horse racing for the duration, warts and all. "It's tough," he says, "but fortunately I have some great owners who pay their bills religiously . . . Everybody's real supportive and you just do the best you can. It's just worked out."

"I think the most horses I ever had in training was 31. Mr. Hersh was a client who kept supplying me with horses, and we also claimed a few. In fact, the first one I claimed went right up the ladder. I claimed him for \$6,250 and he won for eight, twelve-five, 16 and 20.

"He got claimed that day for 20 and it was the last time he ever won a race . . . We've had a lot of luck. I can't complain. We've had a pretty good run, but now it's gotten a little thin."

His persistent optimism brings to mind this appropriate Chinese proverb: "Distance tests the endurance of a horse; time reveals a man's character."

And so it comes to pass that this giant of a David, 6-1 and 240 pounds, has endured the slings and arrows life has hurled at him, but still stands, emotionally undiminished, marching onward to a finish line that may yet yield a pot of gold. ■