



# DAVID HOFMANS

## How a positive approach has led to enduring success

David Hofmans marches to his own drummer, and the beat is always double time. On any given morning at Santa Anita, the 73-year-old Hofmans and his 34-year-old nephew, Brent Fabbri, his assistant for 15 years, are in lockstep, David at 5-11 and Brent at 6-2, bald pates gleaming in the Southern California sun, as they march to a lookout point on the grandstand steps to watch their horses work.

**WORDS: ED GOLDEN**

**PHOTOS: ECLIPSE SPORTSWIRE, HORSEPHOTOS**

**T**HIS is a routine that began for Hofmans more than four decades ago, when he saddled his first winner, Nu Kali, at Santa Anita in 1974. He since has gone on to establish a résumé some Hall of Fame members might envy, considering his achievements.

They include three eyebrow-raising Breeders' Cup upsets: with Adoration, at 40-1 the longest shot on the board in the 2003 Distaff under Patrick Valenzuela; the 2008 Turf Sprint at 36-1 with Desert Code, ridden by Richard Migliore; and Hofmans' signature Breeders' Cup triumph, the \$4 million Classic in 1996 when Alphabet Soup, ridden by Chris McCarron, toppled two-time Horse of the Year Cigar at Woodbine, paying \$41.70 to win.

Hofmans hasn't lost his touch. On March 12, 2016, he saddled 16-1 outsider Melatonin to win the storied Santa Anita Handicap, leading all the way under Joe Talamo. It was Hofmans' sixth victory in a race worth at least a million dollars.

But by far his favorite horse is an otherwise nondescript California-bred, a salty old campaigner named His Legacy who captured the Cal Cup Starter Handicap three times, in 1991, 1992, and 1994, and ran second in 1993.

His Legacy ran his first race on December 5, 1987, when he was two, winning a six-furlong sprint on a sloppy Bay Meadows track at 14-1 by eight lengths under Tim Doocy. The grand gelding's final race came on December 29, 1994, at nine, when he won the Cal Cup Starter Handicap at a



David Hofmans with granddaughter Sally, and assistant trainer, Brent at Del Mar



mile-and-a-half by two lengths with Paul Atkinson in the saddle. The odds were 7-2. In 47 career starts, he was favored only nine times.

“He had a winning personality,” Hofmans said of the bay son of Pocketful in Vail bred by Mr. and Mrs. Laurie Kahn and owned by Legacy Ranch. “All he ever wanted to do was try. Whenever he ran a poor race it was because we had him in the wrong spot. If you look at his record, it’s unbelievable.

“He started 47 times and won 14, with 11 seconds and six thirds, earning \$420,925. He was at the barn all our lives. He was like a member of our family.

“I remember his final race, the Cal Cup at Santa Anita. My son and I were standing as he came down the stretch, both crying we were so emotional. His Legacy would be 31 years old now, but I don’t know if he’s still alive.”

His Legacy, who is not still alive – he died in the autumn of 2011 – could have been claimed for \$10,000 at Del Mar in August of 1989, but there were no takers.

David’s son, Grant, soon to be 46, maintains a small stable at HighPointe Farm and Training Center in La Grange, Kentucky, near Louisville.

“He trained on his own in Southern California for a number of years but decided to move to Kentucky,” Hofmans said. “He wanted to live there. He liked the slower way of life. He really never cared for the city life, even as a young kid.”

David Hofmans has two daughters: Amy, who resides in San Diego, and Jill, who lives in Columbus, Ohio. He is married to Linda Murray, widow of the late, great Los Angeles Times sports columnist, Jim Murray.

June 25, 2016, the day Melatonin won

the Grade 1 Gold Cup at Santa Anita, marked their fourth wedding anniversary.

Hofmans also is the proud grandfather of Cody and Aspen (Grant’s children); Sam and Sally (Jill’s); and Audrey and Claire (Amy’s).

Born in Los Angeles and a resident of Arcadia, home of Santa Anita, Hofmans attributes his success and longevity in large part to a steady hand gleaned through experience, said to be the best teacher.

He and Gary Jones, son of Farrell Jones, worked side by side with the Hall of Fame trainer on their way up. Gary – a Hall of Fame trainer in his own right – and David were classmates at Pasadena College. David was introduced to racing by his father, Eugene, an avid fan.

Training racehorses is an all-consuming marathon, fraught with speed bumps and land mines at every turn. Hofmans handles the hurdles with deftness and aplomb. Rarely does he raise his voice.

He smiles easily, is polite to a point, but being human, not perfect.

“Sure, I get angry,” he said. “In this

business there are so many intangibles, things you can’t control, but I’ve learned through the years not to get upset, tense, or angry at things that might push you to your breaking point.

“When there are things I can control but don’t, that makes me mad. That’s why one of my priorities has always been to pay attention to details. It helps eliminate some of that anger.

“Bad luck occasionally happens in racing and some people act like they’re having a heart attack when it does, but in this business you’re going to lose more than you win so you have to enjoy the good things when they come along. When bad things happen you have to accept it. You can’t let it upset you.”

Hofmans has developed many long-standing relationships with owners thanks to his grace under pressure.

“Bill Gould and Dick Colvin have been with me for 40 years,” Hofmans said. “They’re wonderful people who understand the game. I’m very fortunate to have owners who understand the business.”

Other notable owners he has trained for include celebrity chef Bobby Flay; Frank Stronach; Spendthrift Farm; Golden Eagle; John Amerman; Pete Parrella, who campaigns as Legacy Ranch; Ben and Georgia Ridder; Karen and Mickey Taylor of Seattle Slew fame; and Susan Osborne, who races as Tarabilla Farms.

Osborne owns Melatonin, who proved his Santa Anita Handicap victory at 16-1 on March 12 was no aberration by winning the Grade 1 Gold Cup at Santa Anita as the 9-5 favorite on June 25. Not only was it an anniversary gift for David and Linda Hofmans, it gave Melatonin a fees-

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Melatonin, with Joe Talamo up, after winning the G1 Gold Cup at Santa Anita



Touch Gold and Chris McCarron win the 1997 Belmont Stakes

paid berth, saving \$150,000 in entry fees, to the \$6 million Breeders' Cup Classic on November 5 at Santa Anita, where Melatonin is unbeaten in four starts.

Hofmans nursed the five-year-old son of Kodiak Kowboy through a bout with equine encephalitis before the gelding resumed his racing career. "It helped that he's a very smart horse, too," Hofmans said.

Anyone who doubts Hofmans is a caring man didn't see him usher Mrs. Osborne briskly to the winner's circle in her wheelchair after Melatonin won the Santa Anita Handicap, and it wasn't because it was a million-dollar race.

He was just as conscientious after one of

her horses finished out of the money in a low-end claiming race during a humdrum weekday card, wheeling the septuagenarian with purpose to a vehicle that would take her home.

"Susan's been with me pretty close to 17 years," Hofmans said. "She had a stroke about 20 years ago and it affected her left side. She's not confined to a wheelchair, but she walks very slowly. I put her in the wheelchair at the track so we can move faster."

There's that double time mindset again.

"Racing is a business," Hofmans continued. "You try to get along and recognize where your owners are coming

from. I own horses, too, so I know what owners go through. It can be very frustrating, especially for people who run big companies.

"They're dealing with a different kind of creature in racing, something you can't control, and they're used to controlling their business. That's difficult in racing and it gets frustrating. I understand that."

Chris McCarron bonded with Hofmans through a long and successful reign that bordered on a father-son relationship during a career that ended in June of 2002 after 28 years, resulting in 7,141 victories.

Boston-born McCarron was a polished rider from day one, and along with Jerry Bailey, one of the best positional jockeys ever, seemingly always having his horse in the best spot to win.

Now 61 and living in Kentucky, McCarron had milestone victories on horses trained by Hofmans, winning No. 3,000 aboard Aggrandizement in 1982 and No. 6,000 in 1994 on Andestine in the Grade I Milady Handicap at Hollywood Park.

"He's a very, very good horseman," McCarron said. "He's an excellent caretaker and a very good person, as evidenced by the number of people who have worked

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Chris McCarron

for him 25, 30 years. He's got grooms who have worked for him a long time. That's a testimony to David's character and how much he cares for people and appreciates their work. He compensates them well.

"His caretaking ability is unquestioned. His horses stand the test of time and he runs them in the right spots. I always enjoyed riding for Dave because he had confidence in me. He would very, very seldom give me instructions, which demonstrated complete confidence.

"The only time he would give me instructions was if he wanted to try something different. For instance, if a horse had been going to the front and stopping, he might ask me to take it back and come with a run. It was a lot of fun riding for him through the years."

Perhaps it was Hofmans sweating the small stuff that enabled him to win the 1997 Belmont Stakes with Touch Gold, denying Silver Charm the Triple Crown.

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“Mr. Stronach sent him to me along with other horses, including Awesome Again,” Hofmans said of Touch Gold. “Awesome Again had never started, but Touch Gold had run once or twice. He really liked Southern California and was a good horse to train. Right from the beginning he acted like he was something special.

“In the Preakness, he stumbled at the start and grabbed his left front foot, pulling part of it off. He still finished fourth in a great effort. Had it not been for that, he may have won that day.

“We patched up the foot and got him ready for the Belmont, which he won under McCarron.”

Not to be overlooked, Hofmans saddled Awesome Again to win Canada’s premier three-year-old race, the Queen’s Plate at Woodbine, and the Jim Dandy at Saratoga, but it’s Touch Gold’s dramatic story that still resonates today.

McCarron, a member of the Hall of Fame since 1989, remembered Touch Gold’s nightmare Preakness like he had just dismounted from the son of Deputy Minister.

“He went on his head coming out of the gate,” McCarron said. “There was a great photograph in the Daily Racing Form days after the race showing his nose down in the dirt with his forehead in front of his nose. He went so far into the dirt, his head was pointed forward.

“I don’t know how I stayed on his back. I was just lucky to keep my balance and not come off. But it got worse. We got to the five-sixteenths pole and (Kent) Desormeaux was out off the fence on Free House. I started to move up on the inside and Kent looks back. I yelled to him, ‘Don’t do it Mo!’ and sure enough he moved over and brushed me up against the fence.

“Touch Gold showed a tremendous

amount of courage staying in there. He was a speed horse and had expended a lot of energy going down the backside. He came out of the gate last and I was trying to hold him, but he was so full of run he made a huge move from the five-eighths pole to the three-eighths pole, and that kind of cost him his energy in the end.

“He was very courageous when he won the Belmont. He broke slowly, came out of the gate last, and Jerry Bailey stayed off the fence on Wild Rush, but because Touch Gold was a speed horse, he just pulled me to the lead.

“By the time we got to the first turn, I’m in front. Once he got about a length on top he pricked his ears and slowed right down. He relaxed very well. Gary Stevens (going for the Triple Crown aboard Silver Charm) and Desormeaux (on Free House) both sensed the pace was slowing down and they didn’t want to ‘walk the dog,’ as we

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David Hofmans feels the legs of a horse before a gallop at Del Mar



say, being on the lead.

“They sort of picked up the pace, and some people thought I took Touch Gold back at that time, but that wasn’t the case. I just didn’t allow him to quicken like the other three horses did. Wild Rush, Silver Charm, and Free House all accelerated from the mile pole to the seven-furlong pole.

“I didn’t do that with Touch Gold because it was way too early.”

McCarron was represented during Touch Gold’s run by Scotty McClellan, an agent for 44 years, 21 with McCarron, but today still boyish-looking at 62. He currently calls the shots for the 26-year-old Talamo, Melatonin’s regular rider.

“David is a great trainer,” McClellan said. “He was brought up the right way. He knows what he’s doing. He knows where to put a horse to win, how to develop young horses, and he’s an easy guy to deal with.

“We may not ride every horse he runs but we always seem to win at a high percentage together. He put me on a lot of good horses with every rider I ever had—McCarron, Darrel McHargue, Alex Solis, Talamo. He’s a friend.”

Brent Fabbri considers Hofmans more than a relative. He’s a teacher, too.

“I used to come to the races when I was young because of David,” Fabbri said. “I didn’t want to miss seeing any of his horses run, so my dad (Fabrizio) used to bring me.

“The most important thing I’ve learned from David is to be patient with horses, be gentle with them and handle them correctly. When I took my test for an assistant trainer’s license, some of the negative issues it asked about were strange to me because we never

had to deal with them at David’s barn.

“He taught me everything.”

A man once said training is much more than a job. He was right. It’s an insatiable master feeding off passion and dedication, adhering to unyielding principles.

And it is not a one-person show. Far from it.

“Training is not a solitary profession,” Hofmans said. “Without the dedication of barn help (grooms, hot walkers, exercise riders), we would not be successful. This is a total team effort. You’re only as good as your weakest link.

“The mornings and the day-to-day training are the most important time of the business, and fortunately for us, it’s usually the cooler time of the day. The afternoons—that’s when you really get stressed out.

“You put so much into this, so many hours, and it’s a roller coaster business, full of ups and downs. It’s hard. You have to force yourself to take vacations.

“You get a few days off here and a few days off there. Some of the bigger barns have a good assistant trainer, and I have one in my nephew, Brent, so that gives me time

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to get away for a little bit, clear my head and get refreshed.”

Hofmans is hopeful about the future of racing, especially in California, but he’s not about to send out his laundry.

“At the moment, there’s a gaming bill (Assembly Bill 2863) with an attachment for horseracing in the California Senate that would really infuse money in the game,” Hofmans said. “We’d get \$60 million in purses; it’s similar to what they did in New York.”

(The bill, which must pass the Assembly and Senate, would require the signature of Governor Jerry Brown. It would call for \$60 million to be collected each fiscal year and deposited in the California Horse Racing Internet Poker Account, to be dispersed by the California Horse Racing Board. The annual subsidy would be divided between racetracks and horsemen in purse money).

“That would provide a big shot in the arm, because owners have left California to go to New York for the big purses there, thanks to the gaming, and there are more tracks to race at, too, so it’s understandable,” Hofmans went on.

“But if we could get passage of this bill, which the Indian lobby is fighting, it would really help the future of our sport.

“Other than that, I see it remaining the same as it is now. It’s difficult to compete with all the other options available for the entertainment dollar in a metropolitan city like Los Angeles.”

But whatever the outcome, he is not about to give up.

Like time, David Hofmans marches on. ■