



HECTOR PALMA

A Californian training legend

Palma shares his memories of a career stretching back over six decades – from the days with the “Shoe” to running both a racing and breeding business today

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PHOTOS: BG THOROUGHBRED FARM, ECLIPSE SPORTSWIRE

AT Del Mar one summer, Hector Palma became Irish. On a dry-erase board in the press box, an inexperienced intern (is there any other kind?) kept a running tally each day of the meet’s leaders.

There in the middle of the pack among trainers was Hector O’Palma.

Proper grammar be damned, the kid put an apostrophe where should have been a period. Thus, Mexican-born and -raised Hector Olvera Palma became as Irish as Paddy’s pig, Hector O’Palma, sure and begorra.

Everyone makes mistakes, but some are more memorable than others.

Irish or Mexican, Hector Palma is still in the game, shuffling along as fast as his gait will take him at 78, a throwback to an era when leisure suits, flared trousers, and Members Only jackets were all the rage.

He is becoming a fossil of a bygone age.

Fortunately, his horses move faster than he does. And the only thing sharper than his mind is his wit.

He is at the barn each morning at 5 a.m. and can spend half the day at the track. “I

leave the barn between 10 and 11,” Palma said, “and if I have a horse running later in the day, I come back, but usually I’m at the track for the first race anyway.”

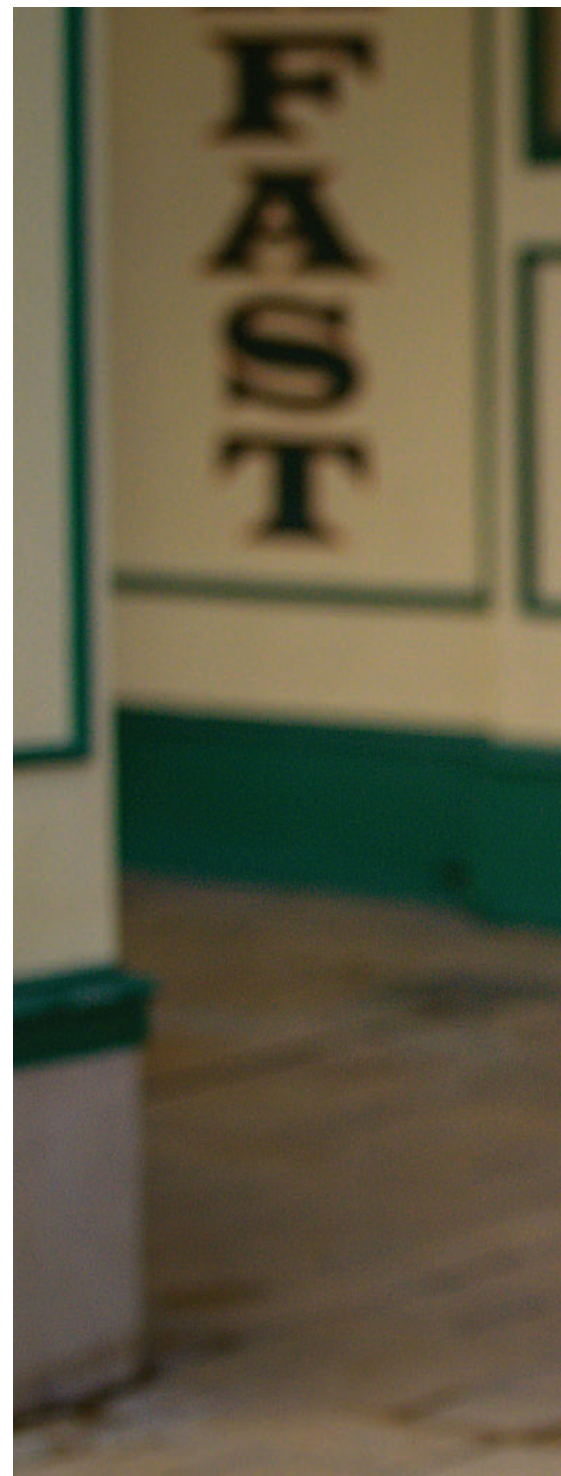
After taking care of early morning business at the barn, he can be found at Santa Anita’s Clockers’ Corner, where he parks himself at the first table, bantering in Spanish with the likes of fellow Mexican Victor Espinoza, Peruvian native Rafael Bejarano, and octogenarian agent Vince DeGregory, whose list of former riders also turned a tilde “n” or two in their day.

Among them are Hall of Fame inductees Angel Cordero Jr., Chris McCarron, Laffit Pincay Jr., Bill Shoemaker, and Alex Solis, in addition to members-in-waiting Espinoza, Darrel McHargue, and Joel Rosario.

Palma came to the United States six decades ago, when Shoemaker was taking baby steps on the trail of legends, where at journey’s end would sit ensconced the likes of Murphy, Woolf, Arcaro, Baeza, and Hartack.

He didn’t start out to become a trainer.

“In 1950, I went to a jockeys’ school in Mexico City,” Palma said. “I was 13 years old, but the teacher told me I was going to be too big and would never be a jockey.



“I told him, ‘I don’t want to be a jockey in Mexico City. I’m going to be a trainer in the United States.’ I was joking, but it turned out to be true.”

Today, Palma stands six feet tall and weighs 190 pounds, Bunyonesque for even a steeplechase rider.

Until now, some of Palma’s tales of the turf were exclusive to him. Fortunately, he remembers most and many are printable.

“Thirty years ago ‘Shoe’ rode a horse for me,” Palma recalled. “I told him it was a super horse. It finished last by 20 lengths.

“After the race, Shoemaker told his agent, Harry Silbert, that he wanted to ride the horse back. ‘This horse can’t lose next time out.’

“The race goes and at the half-mile pole,



Shoe hits the horse with his whip hard in the belly. The horse wins by six lengths. The next day, Bill told me what happened the day he got beat.

“The horse was holding his breath,’ he said, ‘but when I hit him in the belly, he exhaled.’

“Riders today couldn’t tell you a story like that. First of all, they’re not that creative, and second, regulations might prevent that from happening.”

Palma served 12 years as a groom, stable foreman, and assistant to the late Riley Cofer before taking out his trainer’s license in 1971.

He didn’t exactly arrive first class from Tijuana.

“I crossed the border from Caliente in a horse van, bent over at the waist, hiding under one of the horses,” Palma said. “The driver told me to stay low, so I wouldn’t be seen. It was 11 years before I became a legalized citizen. Gas was 17 cents a gallon when I got here.

“I went to Bay Meadows in 1956. Later I worked for Buster Millerick and was the groom for Native Diver.”

The great California-bred gelding won 37 races, 34 of them stakes, including the Grade I Hollywood Gold Cup three straight years, from 1965 through 1967, and earned \$1,026,500 in a pre-inflation career of 81 starts.

A son of Imbros out of the Devil Diver

dam Fleet Diver, Native Diver was owned by Mr. and Mrs. Louis K. Shapiro and was the first Cal-bred to earn a million dollars. He died at the age of eight on September 13, 1967, and later was buried under a monument at Hollywood Park.

His remains and the monument were moved to Del Mar when Hollywood closed in December of 2013.

Nicknamed “The Diver,” “The California Comet,” and “The Black Horse,” Native Diver was inducted into racing’s Hall of Fame in 1978.

“Buster was a tremendous guy and a very good trainer,” Palma said. “Riley was a good horseman too but I think I learned more from Millerick in the two years I was with



him. He was a very, very good horseman.

“I did have a trainer’s license in 1966 as an assistant to Cofer, but went on my own in 1971.

“I won my first race on the 10th of June, 1971, with my very first starter, a 6-1 shot named Ten Grand at Hollywood Park.”

Palma also numbers Charlie Whittingham as an amiable advisor.

“We were very good friends,” Palma said of the legendary “Bald Eagle,” who died at the age of 86 on April 22, 1999. “Anytime I had a problem, he helped me resolve it. He could tell you everything you wanted to learn, and he instilled confidence.

“Whittingham once told me he would only run a horse in the Kentucky Derby if it could win, so when he entered Ferdinand in 1986, I went to Las Vegas and bet \$200 on him at 20-1.”

Call it blind faith.

Finding a gaping hole on the rail but not getting a call until deep stretch in the mile-and-a-quarter classic, Ferdinand won by 2¼ lengths with Shoemaker up and returned a 17-1 win mutuel of \$37.40, but at 20-1 in Vegas, Palma reaped \$4,200.

“I was having a tough time one meet and asked Charlie what I was doing wrong,” Palma remembered. “He listened patiently, then told me, ‘Just keep doing what you’re doing and you’ll be all right.’

“The very next meet at Hollywood Park I was the leading trainer and I beat Whittingham for the title. He was the greatest. Guys like Whittingham, Buster Millerick, Farrell Jones, they would help you.

“They were horsemen. Today we have trainers.”

One who qualifies in both categories is Doug O’Neill, who gleaned what he could during a tour with Palma before going on his own and ascending to racing’s apex.

“After I left Jude Feld, I went to work for Hector,” O’Neill related. “He was a great mentor, like Jude. Hector had a big stable ranging from claiming horses to stakes horses.

“I was the only *gringo* in the barn, so it

was a great experience. I learned a lot of Spanish during that time and got to see the way Hector handled the variety of horses he had, and I’m forever grateful for that.

“My barn does a lot of claiming, but out of respect, Hector would be one of the few guys I would never claim a horse from, that’s for sure. He’s a good businessman

and knowledgeable in the stock market, too.”

Well, not *that* knowledgeable. “I lost a great sum of money ago buying on margin when the market collapsed,” Palma said, quickly dismissing it as being all relative.

“Fortunately, I had other funds to offset it, but I never forgot that I came to the United States with a dollar fifty. I still have that dollar fifty.

“Everything runs in cycles.”

Jockey Fernando Perez, who has ridden several winners for Palma, says the trainer’s experience and knowledge has helped him considerably.

“He’ll give me instructions before a race,” said the 29-year-old Perez, also a native of Mexico, “but if something unexpected happens, he’s OK if I change plans. We work well together, and he always pays for breakfast.”

Among Palma’s most memorable stakes winners was Pen Bal Lady, an English-bred filly who captured the Grade 1 Gamely Breeders’ Cup Handicap at Hollywood Park in 1988.

Palma won the spring/summer training title with 27 wins at Hollywood in 1984, the Fairplex Park crown in 1973, and captured honors at the Orange Country Fair four times in the 1980s.



HECTOR PALMA

He has advanced light years in experience and financially since those days, passing the 1,100 mark in career victories, many at Santa Anita where he has 32 horses in training.

"I earned \$300 a month for 11 years when I was with Cofer," Palma said. "When I went on my own, in the first month I won three races and made \$10,000, and there were no extra expenses except for exercise boys. We only paid them \$2 a horse to gallop back then. Now it costs \$15.

"There have been many changes since I started. The most significant has been satellite wagering. Today people don't have to bet at the track. They can bet from home or at places closer than the track. They don't have to drive that far; they want to bet at the closest place.

"They don't have to fight traffic and the cost of gasoline (approaching \$3 a gallon at press time in Southern California, up a dollar from the previous month, owing to a bureaucratic boondoggle called 'the summer blend.' The EPA: you gotta love it).

"If you live 40 miles from the track, and with the cost of a *Racing Form*, program, parking, admission, you've spent \$60, \$70 already, easily, just to get in. Then you have to eat. People say, 'It's better to stay home and play with TVG and have \$70 more to gamble with.'"



It's remindful of the tale of two men at the track before the first race. One asks to borrow \$20. "You can't be broke already," the friend says. "It's an hour before the first race."

"No," the other guy says. "I've got money to bet. I need money to eat."

Call it a gambler's mentality.

"Horses today don't have the endurance horses had years ago," Palma said, citing another difference from hither to yon. "They didn't get hurt so easily back then. I don't know why. Maybe it's because stallions now are bred to a 100 mares each season. Years ago, it was only 40. That could be one reason.

"Also, owners who used to be dedicated to racing have died off. It's like Ron McAnally (now 84) says, 'I've outlived all my owners.' It's the same with me. I counted my former owners the other day and 20 have died.

"It's difficult to bring new people into racing. They prefer to put their money into other ventures. New owners want to claim a horse and win fast. When they don't and see the game is not easy, they quit right away.

"Years ago there were families of horse people. Now, people don't seem to be interested in racing for the long term. They want a quick return on their investment. I don't know what the future holds."

His optimism is overshadowed by reality.

"I have a son, Rigoberto, 50, who is a title engineer, but he's not interested in horses at all, never has been," Palma said.

"I hope something comes along to improve racing, but not having slots (in California) is a big disadvantage. Tracks with slot machines have good success thanks to increased purses generated from that revenue.

"We struggle in California and could use help from outside. Our purses are mediocre. You run a maiden four and up for a \$20,000 claiming price and the purse is \$19,000. Owners cannot survive on that structure.

"The overhead is high, the hay, the oats; doctors charge more for medication, blacksmiths charge more. Trainers don't make it with what we get for a day rate (how much they're paid per day to train a horse).

"Trainers like Bob Baffert can charge \$120, \$125 a day. Others charge \$80, and at Los Alamitos, there are trainers who go as low as \$60. I don't know how they make it. I charge \$95 and I lose money every month.

Hector Palma and George Yager, co-owners of BG Thoroughbred Farms, watch a workout on their new five-eighths-mile track



BG Thoroughbred Farms in Hemet



“George Yager and I own BG Thoroughbred Farms in Hemet, where we have about 200 horses, and every month we lose money.

BG Thoroughbred Farm is a full service facility offering breeding, boarding, mare and foal care, lay-ups, and breaking and training on its new five-eighths mile track.

“We have six stallions and advertise on television and in the *Racing Form*, but the problem is, California doesn’t have enough horses for breeding.” Palma said.

They are Capital Account, the only son of Grade 2 winner Closing Argument to stand in California; Daddy Nose Best, the only son of the late leading sire Scat Daddy standing in California; Affirmative, whose progeny have earnings of \$3.3 million; Fighting Hussar, the only stakes-performing son of the late Rockport Harbor to stand in California; Montecito Stable’s Unusual Heatwave, a son of the remarkable Unusual Heat, who stands for \$20,000 at Harris Ranch in Coalinga, California, at the grand old age of 26; and Tiz a Minister, a graded stakes winner that entered stud in 2016.

Palma is not exactly painting a picture of the Mona Lisa. He adheres to an old Mexican saying: “Hope dies last.”

“I want to see racing improve but I have no regrets,” he said. “Maybe one day we’ll have slot machines, and if we do, California will be great.

“But I’m very happy. I don’t want to do anything else but train until my last breath. I want to be right here with the horses.”

Despite his unflagging passion, Palma did abandon the game he loves for three years when he dedicated himself to a greater cause.

From 2001 through 2003, he provided sustenance and therapy for his long-time girlfriend and business associate, Becky Rodriguez, after she suffered a paralyzing stroke at the age of 50. She owned Granja Mexico, for whom Palma trained horses with great success until it went out of business in 2000.

He had been separated for 35 years from his wife, Maria, who died in 2013.

“Becky was my right-hand man back then,” Palma said. “She ran my business and took care of the horses for 37 years. She knew her stuff, too, because she worked many years for (equine transporter) Tex Sutton. She was like my wife, but we were never married.

“She’s my sweetheart and I’ll take care of her until the day I die.

“I did have a few horses during the time I was caring for her, one with Ted West, one with Paddy Gallagher, and another with Peter Eurton, so I didn’t drop out completely, but I didn’t want to train horses then.”

Rodriguez, fortunately, is still with Palma

and doing well, relatively speaking. “Her right side is paralyzed and she’ll be disabled the rest of her life,” Palma said.

“She walks with a cane but her mind is very sharp and she still helps me. She picked out Pen Bal Lady in England, the best horse we ever had.”

They live in San Dimas, California, 17 miles east of Santa Anita.

Going on two decades, Palma’s No. One guy at the barn has been Jose Sanchez, the brother of 37-year-old jockey Felipe Sanchez Valdez. “Jose is a real good horseman,” Palma says.

“I’m very comfortable working with Hector,” says Sanchez, who turns 50 in July. “We’re very good friends.”

Winning more than 1,100 races ranks high on Palma’s end game of achievements, but in a career spanning more than half a century, he is most proud that he has been cited for only one medication violation.

“Twenty-five years ago,” he says, “I was fined \$200. I have a very clean record. I don’t administer anything that doesn’t conform with regulations and I don’t exceed the proper dosage.

“Besides, the best medication is a good horse. Nobody can make a horse run good if the horse is not already a good horse.

“If you give medication to a burro, it won’t become a Thoroughbred.”

Turns out, after all these years, maybe that Del Mar intern was on to something, because by any name, Hector O’ Palma or Hector O. Palma, the trainer is his own man.

And by any ethnic background, this eerie fact remains: Hector O. Palma was born on the Fourth of July, the most American of all holidays. ■

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