

Jesse Mendoza in Profile

By Steve Schuelein



“Friday Night Lights” has been a successful weekly television series about high school football in Texas, but Southern California trainer Jesse Mendoza has been starring in his own version.

“They used to call me ‘Friday Night Jesse’,” Mendoza said with a laugh recently of his ability to shine under the lights on Friday night at Hollywood Park, where he is stabled.

On a Friday night in 2007, Mendoza scored his first stakes victory in the Harry Henson with Hurry Home Warren when the 3-year-old hurried home in stakes-record time of 1:08.60 for six furlongs on turf.

“A week later, Valid’s Valid won the Tuzla Stakes on turf,” said Mendoza of another conquest for Mr. Friday Night with the filly. If Santa Anita or Del Mar were interested in installing lights, Mendoza would no doubt be willing to help with construction.

“Flying Bearcat, another horse that I trained, broke his maiden on a Friday night,” said Mendoza. “The owner wanted to scratch because the race was the last on the card and he didn’t want to be up until midnight. He didn’t come, but the horse won going away.”

Valid’s Valid and Hurry Home Warren both earned close to \$200,000 before retirement. Mendoza was particularly proud of Valid’s Valid, purchased out of a Barretts sale for \$4,700.



Jesse Mendoza wins the Harry Henson Stakes in 2007 with Hurry Home Warren
Oak Tree Vice President Sherwood Chillingworth presenting

Barretts bargains are nothing new to Mendoza, who considers Golden General as good a horse as he has conditioned since he went on his own 13 years ago. "We paid \$2,700 for him at Barretts, and he earned close to a quarter million," said Mendoza. "He never won a stake, but earned the most of any horse I trained. It seemed like every time he won, Kent Desormeaux rode. They had some sort of communication."

Mendoza will be excitedly watching the Breeders' Cup World Championships at Santa Anita this year, hoping to send out his first starter in the near future.

The closest he came was in 2006 when he pre-entered Adoradora in the Juvenile Fillies for Joseph Guy Vachon, who also owned Flying Bearcat. The race overfilled, and Adoradora--a maiden with two starts--did not draw in. "The owner was offered \$500,000 for her, but he wanted a million," said Mendoza.

Mendoza was close to several Breeders' Cup starters as assistant to trainer Gary Jones for 21 years before the latter's retirement in 1996. "The one I remember best was Best Pal," said Mendoza. "They supplemented him for \$365,000 to the Classic, but he didn't fire." Best Pal finished 10th as the second choice in the 1993 Classic at Santa Anita.

Mendoza was an assistant during all 11 of Jones's Breeders' Cup starters, and although none of them won, a few were close. Turkoman finished second in the 1986 Classic after a third-place finish in 1985. The filly Meafara finished second in the 1993 Sprint, a neck behind Cardmania. Lakeway finished third in the 1995 Distaff.



Hurry Home Warren (rail) won nearly \$175,000 for Mendoza

Mendoza, who turns 46 on October 28, spent nearly half his life working for the Jones family. He first worked at the track for Farrell Jones, Gary's father, and worked for a few months for Marty Jones, Gary's son, after Gary's retirement.

"Jesse was smart-minded and went from groom to assistant kind of quick," recalled Gary Jones of the precocious aide from his home in Del Mar. "Most of my help came from two Mexican families: Jesse--who was my assistant at Hollywood Park--came from one, and Rafael Becerra--my guy at Santa Anita--came from the other.

"I never had to get tough with any of the help because they policed themselves," added Jones. "One time a horse came out without the bandages properly wrapped, and when I was leaving the barn, I could hear Jesse getting all over the groom."

Jones nowadays derives the most pleasure in racing following the accomplishments of his son and former assistants. "One day I went to Hollywood Park, and Marty, Jesse, and Rafael each won a race," said Jones of a particularly rewarding trip.

Mendoza said he learned a great deal in the Jones barn. "I learned how to maintain a horse and look for all the vital signs," said Mendoza. "The most important thing is common sense--that doesn't apply to the owners a lot of times."

Mendoza mentioned one deviation from a Jones training principle. "Gary worked his horses every five days religiously," said Mendoza. "It was too much for some horses."

The job with Jones enabled Mendoza to see New York. "I went with him one time to Belmont when Rose Cream ran in the Coaching Club American Oaks," said Mendoza of a memorable 1985 trip. "I went as the groom, and Gary went as the trainer and hot walker."

Born in Guadalajara, Mexico, Mendoza moved to this country with his parents when he was five and has been on the track ever since. "This is the only job I have had and know," said Mendoza. "I do it for the love of the horses."

Mendoza also assisted trainer Ben Cecil for four years during the late 1990's while first going on his own after Jones retired.

Mendoza credited veteran owner Terry Quinn as the most positive influence on his life and career. "He helped me when I was struggling with just a couple of horses and gave me moral support to achieve my goals in life," said Mendoza of the 77-year-old owner.

Mendoza lives in Bell Gardens with his wife Lorena. They have three children: Cristal, Jesse Jr., and Ruby. Society may soon be losing a good assistant trainer and gaining a good police officer in Jesse Jr., 21, who is about to graduate from the police academy after assisting his father in recent years.

Candy Pull has emerged as the current star of Mendoza's 10-horse stable. "He's a Cinderella story," said Mendoza of the 4-year-old California-bred gelding. "We claimed him last year for \$20,000 at Golden Gate Fields, and he has won five races and earned more than \$100,000. He's a little money-making machine."

Candy Pull since finished second in the Pirate's Bounty Stakes at Del Mar in September 2009. □