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RAINER Richard Baltas has learned the definition of “macher,” a Yiddish word that roughly means “big shot, achiever, an important person.”

That is because Baltas trains Big Macher, a four-year-old gelding that has become a big shot in the California sprint division with his achievements this year and has elevated his conditioner into a position of growing importance in the trainer ranks.

Baltas, who turns 53 on May 30, has experienced the vicissitudes of the sport manning a wide array of posts during the past three decades and appreciates a major stakes horse heading the 28-horse stable he has built up at Santa Anita Park.

Working in the giant shadows created by current California “machers” with such familiar last names as Baffert, Hollendorfer, Sadler and O'Neill, Baltas garnered some rays of respect when Big Macher won the California Cup Sprint in January and finished a game second in the Grade 2 San Carlos Stakes in March.

Big Macher, a California-bred son of Beau Genius named by a previous owner, has turned into a dream claim, earning nearly \$200,000 in eight starts after being haltered for \$20,000 in his debut at Del Mar last July.

“I was a little skeptical about claiming him,” admitted Baltas from a mezzanine box at Santa Anita recently. “Brendan Bakir (whose Tachycardia Stables owns the horse in partnership with Tom Mansor) asked me to claim a horse for him and asked about his first start at Del Mar.

“He looked okay in the paddock and I won a three-way shake for him,” said Baltas after Big Macher’s inauspicious bow in which he broke slowly and finished a non-threatening seventh.

“The horse did terrible and looked like he had some issues,” said Baltas candidly. “He was very bad in the gate.”

Despite two more lackluster starts at Del Mar, Big Macher showed some glimmers of hope to Baltas, who patiently continued to work with overcoming his gate deficiencies.

“I kept schooling him in the gate, entered



## Baltas' turn to be a big shot with Big Macher

him in a \$40,000 maiden claimer and he won like a thief in the night,” said Baltas of the turnaround race in his fourth start at Santa Anita in October which he won by 4¾ lengths with a big Beyer figure jump.

Big Macher validated the effort with a state-bred allowance score at Hollywood Park in November, earning an even higher Beyer

number and heralding the arrival of a stakes horse.

Following two more good efforts, Big Macher recorded his first added-money victory by 1¾ lengths in the Cal Cup Sprint and ran courageously to finish second in the San Carlos in his first try in graded stakes company.





Big Macher, with Rafael Bejarano up, wins the \$125,000 Donald Valpredo California Cup Sprint

"I was so proud of our horse," said Baltas of his runner-up finish by a half-length to stretch-running Sahara Sky in the seven-furlong San Carlos. "He did most of the work and just got beat by the Met Mile winner last year.

"Now I know I have a graded stakes horse in the barn," said Baltas after Big Macher numbered graded stakes winners Clubhouse Ride, Wild Dude, and Shakin It Up among the starters trailing him across the finish line.

"I see a bright future for him," said Baltas, who would like to keep picking his spots in California sprints this year leading to a possible Breeders' Cup climax at Santa Anita on November 1.

Baltas enjoyed one other fling with stardom. In 2001, Freedom Crest put his name on the map by giving him his first stakes victory in the Grade 2 San Pasqual Handicap and nine months later shocking the racing world with a 39-to-1 upset in the Grade 2 Goodwood Breeders' Cup Handicap, leaving multiple Grade 1 stakes winner Skimming and reigning Horse of the Year Tiznow in his wake.

Much like Big Macher, Baltas claimed Freedom Crest as a three-year-old maiden, this time for \$32,000 at Hollywood Park. "I watched him train for three or four days, he was all over the place, and I gelded him," said Baltas. "It took him a while to break his maiden. When I took his blinkers off and stretched him out, he got really good.

***"To claim a horse and beat the guys with the best horses is a big accomplishment. It gave me a lot of satisfaction"***

"He just kept going up the ladder," said Baltas, so impressed with his improvement that he felt the horse ready for his stakes bow in the San Pasqual, which he won by three lengths over Bosque Redondo.

"He won pretty easy," recalled Baltas of the

milestone victory. "I think I ran the length of the grandstand with the horse. That was my dream. You never expect to live your dream."

While Baltas thought Freedom Crest had a realistic chance of winning the San Pasqual, the Goodwood was a surprise. "We were going to ship out of town, but it was a \$500,000 race, and I thought we could finish third, so why ship?" said Baltas, virtually conceding the first two spots to the handicap stars.

"At the top of the lane, I could see he was full of run (after stalking pacesetter Skimming from second) and Tiznow didn't fire," said Baltas of the unexpected length victory that lit up the toteboard. "I couldn't believe I won the race."

Freedom Crest earned more than \$600,000 during his career, almost half of it in the Goodwood.

"To claim a horse and beat the guys with the best horses is a big accomplishment," said Baltas after playing the role of giant-killer. "It gave me a lot of satisfaction."

Baltas is a prime example of perseverance in

the sport. Born in Gary, Indiana, Baltas grew up in Southern California after his family moved west when he was in third grade. One of six children, he graduated from Marina High School in Huntington Beach.

"My father used to take me to the races as a kid when they had 70,000 people here," said Baltas of his first visits to the track. "I saw The White Tornado, Vigors. I saw Spectacular Bid and The Shoe. I saw Exceller and all the great Whittingham horses. I just liked the sport.

"I used to think a trainer's job was really glamorous," he said with a laugh of experience.

"I saw Charlie saddle three or four horses in a stake and thought 'What a great job!' although I had never touched a horse in my life."

Baltas was determined to change that. He wanted to find work in the Santa Anita stable area, only to learn at the gate that he could not enter without a license or being signed in by a trainer.

Baltas tried to educate himself, enrolling at Orange Coast College and then Cal Poly Pomona to learn more about horses and taking riding lessons at Huntington Beach Equestrian Center.

In 1983, Baltas went to Louisville to see Sunny's Halo win the Kentucky Derby and decided to add to his equine education in the Bluegrass State.

"I went to the Kentucky Equine Institute at the Kentucky Horse Park in 1984 because they guaranteed you a job after six months," said Baltas. "I learned about everything from anatomy to nutrition to foaling.

"At the same time, I started working at the farms, first at Pillar Stud and then Spendthrift Farm when Leslie Combs owned it. I rubbed yearlings when Affirmed, Seattle Slew, Raise A Native and Caro all stood there. I just got chills looking at all those horses."

Baltas then began a long journey on a winding road filled with several potholes across the racetracks of America. He worked briefly as a groom for John Ward at Keeneland before returning to California in 1986 as a groom for Darrell Vienna.

One year later Baltas drove a horse van across the country and serendipitously landed a job with Tom Skiffington in New York. "He later moved me to Lexington where Eddie Kenneally and I were foremen and Niall O'Callaghan was his assistant," said Baltas of the all-star lineup of horsemen at Keeneland.

Baltas moved around to tracks in Florida and Illinois as well as Kentucky and New York under Skiffington before returning to California again.

Baltas took out his trainer's license in 1991 and won with his first starter, Latchburn, at Hollywood Park under Jorge Velasquez. But the owner soon went broke and Baltas was out of a job.

The dark-haired trainer next went to work for future Hall of Famer Richard Mandella. "I wasn't afraid to take a step back," said Baltas. "If you're doing what you love for a first-class outfit, is it really a step back? I don't think so.

"I was hired as a groom, but was sent to Arkansas with Golden Treat and Leger Cat," said Baltas of two stakes horses that were in Mandella's barn. "We also had Bel's Starlet, Likeable Style, Devil's Orchid, and Mama Simba during that time.

*"I think going from Belmont to Santa Anita to Keeneland and working at Spendthrift Farm, you're around the best horsemen and best horses. That helped a lot"*

"Kotashaan was just getting rolling, and Phone Chatter was just coming in," said Baltas of the time in 1993 he left before the pair went on to Breeders' Cup wins, the former earning Horse of the Year honors.

Back on his own, Baltas settled for smaller awards. "One of my favorite horses was Bit of Petrone," said Baltas of the 1996 Claimer of the Meet at Santa Anita. "He had five firsts and two seconds in seven starts that meet. Matt Garcia rode him. I claimed him for \$16,000 for Ron and Susie Anson."

After some more valleys surrounding the Freedom Crest peak, Baltas hooked on as an assistant to Craig Dollase in 2005-2006. Later he took a job with Mike Moreno's Southern Equine Stable and trained a division in Louisiana. He returned as an assistant to Barry Abrams and saddled Burns to victory in the

Grade 2 La Jolla Handicap at Del Mar in 2011 when the trainer was ailing.

Baltas said his wide range of experience prepared him well for today. "You can learn from all different people," he said. "If you're paying attention, and work for people that are successful, you are going to learn to do things the right way.

"Mandella was probably the best teacher I've ever had," continued Baltas, citing lessons learned. "If you do things the right way, the horse will reward you. There are no shortcuts. I learned a lot working for a perfectionist: his day-in, day-out care for the horses, knowing when it's time to back off.

"I think going from Belmont to Santa Anita to Keeneland and working at Spendthrift Farm, you're around the best horsemen and best horses," said Baltas. "That helped a lot."

That lengthy résumé appears to be paying off since he started putting together his current stable two and a half years ago. In addition to Bakir and Mansor, the multiple-owner roster includes Jerry Fialkowski's Riley Racing, Paul Gange's Panic Stable, Jason Tackitt's Jaam Racing, Barbara Kelly, Sonny Pais, Janavar Stables and Valerie Naify.

Baltas also took an important step in his personal life in 2011 by marrying his girlfriend, Debby. The couple recently moved to Los Alamitos.

Baltas credited chief assistant Melissa Saldana and his crew for the stable's rising fortunes and seeks continued improvement. "Last year the stable earned \$750,000," said Baltas. "We're already over \$300,000 before the first quarter this year. Hopefully, we'll hit \$1 million. I just want to keep progressing."

He would love to see Big Macher get a crack at the Breeders' Cup Sprint and try to join three other Cal-bred overachievers--Thor's Echo, Dancing in Silks, and Amazombie--in the winner's circle.

"He just seems to have the will, and he's getting better," said the trainer of his rising stable star.

Baltas hopes for better luck in post position draw if he gets in. His two previous Breeders' Cup starters, Freedom Crest, in the 2001 Classic, and Flashy Ways, in the 2012 Juvenile Fillies Turf, both drew unlucky post 13 and fared poorly.

With better luck this time, horse and trainer can both claim justification for the title "big machers." ■