

# The Del Mar Race Track

## 75 Years of Turf and Surf

By Amy Williams

The Del Mar Fairgrounds made headlines in 2010 when California State Senator Christine Kehoe proposed selling the 400-acre site to the City of Del Mar and private investors for \$120 million. The suggestion was intended to address two problems: California's ongoing budget crisis and tensions between the State of California's 22nd District Agricultural



*American Hall of Fame champion thoroughbred racehorse Azeri racing at Del Mar. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

Association (DAA) and the City of Del Mar. The DAA, which has overseen the fairgrounds since 1935, wanted to expand the venue while Del Mar sought to maintain its small town identity.

Since 2012, the proposed sale has expired in the California Legislature and interest in the proposal has waned. Governor Edmund G. "Jerry" Brown, who replaced Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2011, explained, "now is not a good time to sell real estate." For now, the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club (DMTC), which leases the property from the DAA, focuses on being a good neighbor to Del Mar and providing world class racing to its fans. Mac McBride, Director of Media for

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the DMTC, said, "Circumstances have conspired to just keep things as they are right now. You know what? That's not that bad."<sup>2</sup>

This article summarizes the history of Del Mar Racetrack, focusing particularly on its development into one of the most famous horse racing venues in the world. It suggests that the track's success has to do with its reputation for attracting glamorous people, star horses, and jockeys, its commitment to maintaining a high-quality racing venue, its professionalism, and its attention to the needs of fans. The year 2012 marks its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Del Mar.

## **Horseracing in California**

The sport of horseracing began to develop a popular following in the late nineteenth century because of the growing democratization of formerly elite sports. An expanding middle class, enriched by the industrial revolution, saw horseracing as both a sport and a social venue in which they could see and be seen. The growing popularity of the sport led to the formation of the American Jockey Club (1894). Lower down on the social scale, working-class men and women flocked to see an event that had moved out of the countryside and into rapidly expanding urban centers. Major racetracks included Saratoga Race Course, Saratoga Springs, New York (1863); Pimlico Race Course, Baltimore, Maryland (1870); Churchill Downs, Louisville, Kentucky (1875); and Belmont Park, Elmont, New York (1905).

Horseracing attracted a growing audience in the American West, particularly in urbanized areas like San Francisco. At first, California racing was an informal way to gamble. As the popularity of racing increased during the later part of the century, the sport became more organized and commercial. The state's first formal racetrack was San Francisco's Pioneer Course, opened in March 1851. It operated under the rules of the Union Jockey Club and looked much like tracks on the East Coast. Tracks in San Francisco and the Bay Area sprang up in quick succession, including the Centerville Course in Sacramento and Pleasanton Racetrack in Pleasanton, California. By 1894, the leading guide to horse racing, *Goodwin's Guide*, listed over forty-one race meetings throughout California.<sup>3</sup>

In 1909, the Walker-Otis Anti-Race Track Gambling Bill effectively made betting on horse races illegal, though horses could still be raced so long as no money changed hands. This effectively killed both formal and informal race meetings.<sup>4</sup> All tracks in California shut down. Some county fairs even cancelled hog-calling contests for fear that wagering on the event might occur and that the fair management would be held liable.<sup>5</sup> The passage of the Eighteenth Amendment (1919) prohibiting the manufacture, transportation, and sale of



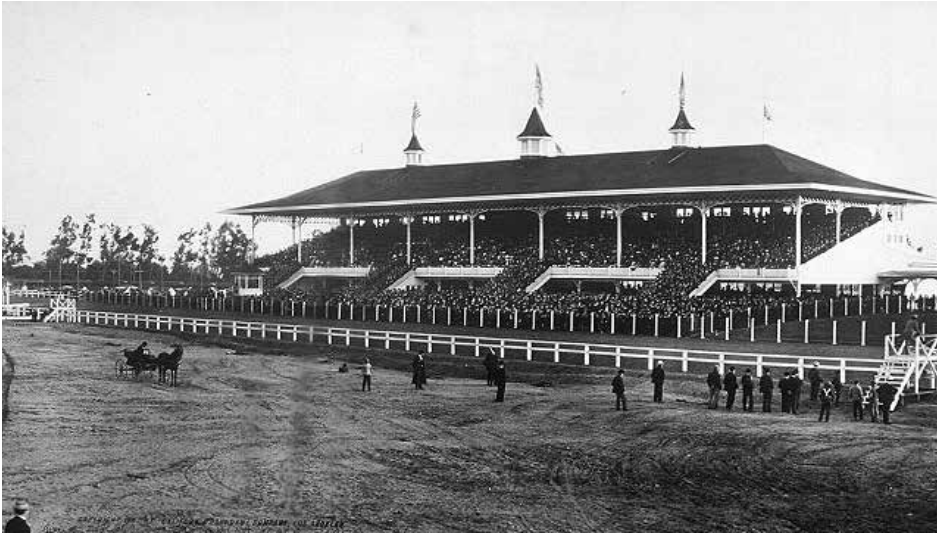
*Agua Caliente Racetrack, Tijuana, Mexico ca. 1938. ©SDHC #UT 6477.*

alcohol discouraged many sporting events. Racing, however, soon made its reappearance just across the border in Mexico.

Before the construction of the Del Mar Racetrack, Southern Californians traveled to the Agua Caliente racetrack in Tijuana, Mexico, for drinking, gambling and having an all-around good time. Los Angelinos, in particular, frequented Agua Caliente in order to circumvent the stranglehold of prohibition. It became a “hot spot” for celebrities and wealthy locals who became accustomed to making the short trip across the border. It also attracted legitimate horse racing fans, star horses like Pharlap (1926-32), and exciting professional races.<sup>6</sup>

In 1935, Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas, in the spirit of reform, closed Agua Caliente. Immediately after coming into office, he evicted foreign companies from Mexico including the railroads and investment companies, and rescinded legalized gambling and drinking. He believed that outside investors “robbed the poor” and that alcohol and gambling undermined the already struggling country of Mexico.<sup>7</sup>

While gambling was outlawed in Mexico, it was welcomed back in many parts of the United States during the mid-1930s. In California, the economic crisis caused by the Great Depression led to a movement to make horseracing a legitimate enterprise. It was thought that the state could gain revenue by legalizing, then taxing, a percentage of the money bet. In this way, it was argued, California would regain the money it had lost to Tijuana.



*The first Santa Anita Racetrack in 1908. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

Promoters thought horseracing would be a way to revitalize county fairs. By the 1930s agriculture had become an important part of California's economy. As the nation's leading supplier of several varieties of fruits and nuts, the state also produced vegetables, cotton, and livestock. County fairs celebrated and promoted agriculture, often appealing to a national audience. If gambling on horses were permitted, then more people would be likely to attend one of California's local fairs to see the races. San Diego's county fair, for example, had been badly hit by the depression and was held only sporadically after the stock market crash of 1929.<sup>8</sup>

In 1933, the California State Legislature legalized on-track, pari-mutuel wagering on horse races at private tracks, district or county fairs, and the state fair. California Proposition 3 provided for the "encouragement of agriculture and breeding of horses," including a commitment "for the continuous funding of the fairs of California with an annual allotment of racing revenues to be used for health, safety and maintenance projects."<sup>9</sup> The state's share of revenue made from betting would go into the Fair & Exhibition Fund to help support the citrus, county, and district fairs.<sup>10</sup>

Proposition 3 passed in the same year that the ratification of the Twenty-First Amendment repealed the Eighteenth Amendment that had prohibited the sale, manufacture, and transportation of alcohol. People had become disillusioned with the "noble experiment," particularly as it had turned otherwise law-abiding citizens into criminals. As a result, they "were more open to experiments in government and business and even in private lives than they had been in earlier years."<sup>11</sup>

After 1933, racetracks began appearing throughout California, among them Santa Anita which opened on Christmas Day, 1934. Considered a preeminent horseracing venue, Santa Anita began advertising purses worth twice as much as what Agua Caliente offered. Fairs and privately operated racetracks sprouted up all over the state, including the Sonoma County Fair hosting Bay Meadows Race Course, the San Mateo Fair hosting the San Mateo Expo Center, and the Humboldt County Fair hosted Ferndale Race Track. Stockton, Emeryville, Fresno, Pomona, and smaller, local off-tracks were usually held seasonally. In Southern California, Santa Anita and Hollywood Park became the largest and most prestigious racing ventures in the state's history.<sup>12</sup>

San Diego was ripe for a county fair with horse racing. The Twenty Second Agricultural District Association found a site in Del Mar to host the fair and, in 1935, applied for Works Progress Administration (WPA) funds to help construct the facilities. The architectural firm of H.L. Jackson and Sam Hamill began drawing plans, estimating labor and costs, and drafting plans that incorporated the necessary requirements for WPA funding. In October 1935, the Agricultural Association first began to consider leasing out fair dates to a private turf association in order to raise the badly needed sponsor's share of the WPA project.<sup>13</sup>

## **The Hollywood Legacy**



*Architect Sam Hamill and brother Joe Hamill looking over building plans for the Del Mar Racetrack, c. 1936. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*



*Del Mar fairgrounds and track, c. 1937-41. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

Hollywood stars like Bing Crosby were also crucial to Del Mar's success. They saw horseracing as "the sport of kings" and found themselves becoming a kind of American royalty. Celebrities like Buster Keaton, Mary Astor, and Rita Hayworth had frequently joined Crosby and friends at Agua Caliente. Many of them had survived the depression and stock market crash and possessed the cash necessary to support construction costs. After Agua Caliente was shut down in 1934, they looked to other racing venues like Hollywood Park, Santa Anita, and Del Mar.

Bing Crosby became a shareholder at Santa Anita Park during its construction in 1933. He bought his first horse, *Zombie*, in 1937 and built a stable and racetrack near his home in Rancho Santa Fe. The horse showed up twice at Santa Anita, sporting his blue and gold silks. Before the year's end, he had twenty-one horses.<sup>14</sup>

Soon afterwards, William A. Quigley—former football player, successful stockbroker and occasional racing official—approached Crosby about starting a race track in Del Mar, not far from the latter's home and stable in Rancho Santa Fe. Crosby agreed to commit his time, money, and energy to the project.

On May 6, 1936, Quigley and Bing filed for articles of incorporation with the California Secretary of State and founded the Del Mar Turf Club. The race track's board was an all-star cast: Bing Crosby as President, his brother Bob as Vice President, Pat O'Brien and Oliver Hardy as officers, and an executive committee comprised of Joe E. Brown, Gary Cooper, and other prominent Hollywood insiders. They negotiated a ten-year lease with the Agricultural Association that required them to build a grandstand, barn, stalls, paddock, jockey quarters, and offices. The following year, they gained a racing license from the California Horse Racing Board (CHRB).<sup>15</sup>

Architects Hamill and Jackson built the Del Mar fairgrounds and track in the Spanish Colonial Revival style. They hoped that visitors, when they entered the Turf Club Courtyard would recall the grandeur of southern Spain, the home of the Arabian and Andalusian horses. Architectural elements from Mission San Gabriel, Mission Dolores in San Francisco, and Mission San Jose in San Antonio, Texas, were used in the design of the main buildings, including the clubhouse, paddock, jockey's quarters, and additional horse stables. California Governor Frank Merriam praised Hamill's design and commended him for avoiding "going in for some fuzzy futuristic stuff. California history and traditions are glorious and worthy of being perpetuated in the architecture of modern public buildings."<sup>16</sup>

In order to promote the track, Crosby convinced NBC to create a half-hour radio show that would be broadcast live from Del Mar on Saturday mornings. He and his announcer Ken Carpenter wandered through the grounds at Del Mar asking patrons humorous questions like, "Who was the only two-time winner of the Preakness?" or "How high is a hand?" The show featured celebrities who told the fans what a wonderful time they were having, and invited them to a day at the races. The program usually ended with Crosby retiring to the jockey lounge to sing a few numbers.<sup>17</sup>

Bing spared no effort to attract stars, inviting them to Del Mar when he saw

them on set or on the Hollywood back lot. Del Mar was a small town with a population of merely 4,000. He and the other investors needed the Los Angeles crowd to push through the turnstiles in order to make the track successful.

The village of Del Mar became the "Playground of the Stars." Celebrities stayed in ocean front vacation cottages, ate in the restaurants, swam in the ocean, played softball and had barbeques at the beach. Trainer Gary Jones, the son of a horseman, remembered being at the beach on 23rd Street one morning during the summer meet. Betty Grable emerged from the water like a mermaid and then began walking toward him soaking wet but with clothes on, "I



*Del Mar Turf Club General Manager Bill Quigley, President Bing Crosby, and Vice President Pat O'Brien, c. 1937. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*



*On opening day, Bing Crosby personally met fans at the gate. The first patron in Del Mar history was Mrs. W.R. Robinson, July 3, 1937. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

don't know what she was doing there, but she had this white blouse on...and it looked like she had been in a wet T-shirt contest, and I am thinking, 'Oh, jeez, look at that.' I was 14! What a way to grow up. Only at Del Mar."<sup>18</sup> For Hollywood stars, Del Mar was close enough to Los Angeles to easily make the trip. In fact, for many it became a summer tradition.

Crosby also made sure that the Del Mar Turf Club had a clubhouse worthy of a movie set. He directly oversaw the design and construction of the venue, knowing that if he wanted to capture the attention and money of other celebrities, he would have to design a clubhouse that was as lavish as their tastes. Patterned after the Iturbide Hotel in Mexico City, the glamorous Clubhouse included a "grand stairway, worm-eaten oak furniture, Spanish chandeliers, mirrors and thick carpets."<sup>19</sup>

Opening Day was like a Hollywood premier with Crosby personally meeting the fans at the gate. Claira Weizenhoffer, who took the train down from Del Mar on opening day and who has occupied the same clubhouse box for thirty years, remembers, "Bing and Pat were standing at the gate...They gave us cotton scarves and shook hands with us." Bing said at the opening ceremony in the infield, "We hope you all enjoy the meeting—and a measure of success at the payoff windows," in his informal style.<sup>20</sup> A passionate horse racing enthusiast, Crosby genuinely

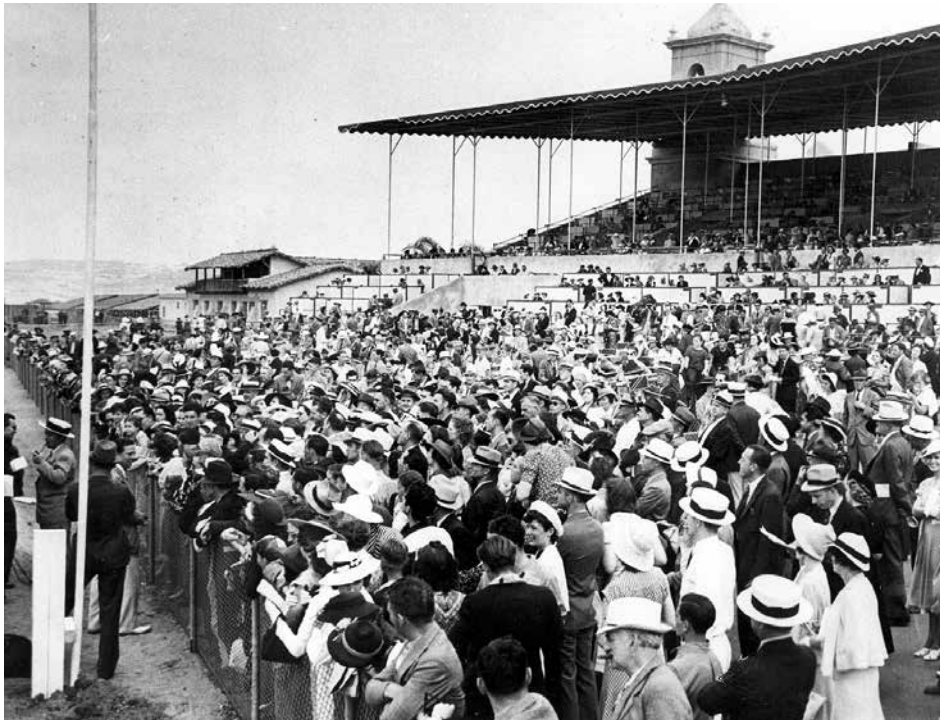


wanted everyone to have a good time—a place where he and his friends could relax, gamble, and enjoy the races.

The Del Mar Turf Club declared August 5, 1938, Motion Picture Day. Each contest was given a different name: The Actors, The Exhibitors, The Producers, The Directors, The Cameramen, The Screen Writers, and The Stars. They held a Motion Picture Handicap that offered a \$3,000 purse for three-year-olds owned by people in the entertainment business. Owners of the horses raced included Robert Risken, Clark Gable, and Joe E. Brown. Over 375 writers and photographers were dropped off at the gates on a special train focused on Motion Picture Day.<sup>21</sup>

Bing Crosby, with the help of Midge Polesie, came up with the catchphrase, “Where the Turf Meets the Surf,” through a song:

Where the turf meets the surf  
Down at Old Del Mar  
Take a plane, take a train, take a car  
There’s a smile on every face  
And a winner in each race  
Where the turf meets the surf at Del Mar.



*A crowd fills the stands on Opening Day, July 3, 1937. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*



*Bing Crosby live on NBC's Kraft Music Hall. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

The song was plugged on NBC's radio show before the 1938 race meeting by Crosby, Pat O'Brien and Oliver Hardy. Today, the song still plays before the first race and the last race every racing day.<sup>22</sup>

Crosby knew how to dazzle reporters and his press parties became legendary. Members of the press were put up at the Del Mar Hotel, and parties would run through the night. Special trains to host the press and celebrities continued until dawn. Entertainers like Pat O'Brien, Joe Frisco, the Ritz Brothers, Al Jolson, Abe Burrows, Lou Holtz and Bob Hope performed, often in impromptu acts. Jimmy Durante had a routine in which the climax act had him dismantling a trick piano. One year, Durante forgot to bring his own trick piano and used an upright piano in the Clubhouse, hurling pieces of the instrument over the Clubhouse railings twenty-five feet below.<sup>23</sup>

During the racetrack's early years—1937 to 1941—stars included Dorothy Lamour, W.C. Fields, Paulette Goddard, Edgar Bergen, June Haver, Ann Miller, Don Ameche, Ava Gardner, Red Skelton, Edward G. Robinson, Joan Bennett, Owen Webster, and Pat O'Brien. Crosby also brought his family—wife Dixie, son Gary, and twins Dennis and Philip.<sup>24</sup> The Hollywood back lot showed up, too. Cameramen, directors, writers, and all types of motion picture industry figures

made their appearance. Bing threw lavish parties for his celebrity friends that began on the train down from Los Angeles.

During World War II, Del Mar was shut down and the track was used to train marines and, later, to build B-17 bombers. In 1945, after President Harry Truman announced the end of the war and declared a national holiday, Del Mar reopened and 20,324 fans entered the gates, setting a new record.<sup>25</sup>

The post-war years ushered in a new era of celebrities. In 1946, Bing sold his shares, but the stars kept coming. The track, during the late 1940s, hosted a sea of new celebrities including W.C. Fields, Barbara Stanwyck, Betty Grable and husband Harry James, Robert Taylor, Ava Gardner, Dorothy Lamour, George Raft, Dick Powell, Joan Blondell, Don Ameche, George Jessel, Elizabeth Taylor, Paulette Goddard, Louis B. Mayer, Cecil B. de Mille (grandfather of Track President Joe Harper), the Ritz Brothers, Marx Brothers, the Flying Karamazov Brothers, Jack Dempsey, Charlie Chaplin, and even Senator Joe McCarthy. The stars presence gave Del Mar a rich history of colorful stories still told today.

Today, Del Mar works hard to maintain an amicable relationship with the film industry. Modern celebrities included Burt Bacharach, a horse racing fan



*World Heavyweight Champion Jack Dempsey posing with jockeys, 1937. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*



*Triple Crown-winner Seabiscuit exiting the train to Del Mar with trainer "Silent" Tom Smith. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

and owner who owns a house in Del Mar and usually performs once a season. Many famous musicians and bands including Ziggy Marley, The Cult, Billy Idol, and Christina Aguilera, also came to the track. Movie and television stars like Kevin Costner, Uma Thurman, Mario Lopez, Sean Astin, and California Horse Racing Board member Bo Derek also appear.<sup>26</sup>

### **Seabiscuit v. Ligaroti**

From the beginning, the racetrack developed a reputation for exciting races between top competitors in the field. In 1938, Del Mar hosted a much-publicized match race between the famous horses, Seabiscuit and Ligaroti, an event that is said to have put Del Mar "on the map."<sup>27</sup> The event came about because of the friendship between Bing Crosby and Lindsay "Lin" Howard, the son of Seabiscuit owner Charles Howard.

Lin Howard followed in his father's footsteps and became a notable owner, breeder and investor in West Coast Racing. He and Crosby were both notable sportsmen who, together, founded Binglin Stables in 1934. Lin had a healthy competition with his father to raise winning horses. His father once gave Lin a

copy of a book entitled, "What You Know About Horses." The pages were blank.<sup>28</sup>

The first inaugural Hollywood Gold Cup at Hollywood Park in Inglewood, California was a family affair. Binglin Stables had up-and-coming, Argentinean-bred Ligaroti while Charles Howard had veteran champion Seabiscuit. Ligaroti had just won the American Handicap, beating the Hollywood Park nine-furlong track record by 3 1/5 seconds. During the race, however, Ligaroti was closing when another horse bumped him out of contention. In the end, Seabiscuit trampled the competition, winning the Hollywood Gold Cup by more than a dozen lengths. Ligaroti ended up finishing fourth.<sup>29</sup>

Lin desperately wanted a rematch with his father. A millionaire, Lin was used to getting things his own way. One night, shortly after the Hollywood Gold Cup, he asked his father, "How about a match race between Seabiscuit and Ligaroti?" Crosby, who was dining with them, loved the idea. He had recently invested \$600,000 in Del Mar and needed such a race to draw the attention of the fans. The racetrack had just begun its second season and track attendance was an unimpressive 6,000 daily average.

Crosby hustled to make arrangements with the Del Mar Board of Directors for the race. Track manager Bill Quigley helped come up with the idea for a non-wagering, \$25,000, winner-takes-all match race to take place on Friday, August 12, 1938. Seabiscuit would carry 130 pounds in the form of the famous jockey George



*Seabiscuit and Ligaroti, head to head, come down the stretch, August 12, 1938. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

“Iceman” Woolf; Ligaroti carried Noel “Spec” Richardson who weighed 115 pounds. Lin Howard bet \$5,000 to his father’s \$15,000 that his horse Ligaroti would overcome the veteran Seabiscuit.

The contentious match race tantalized race fans across the country. Over 20,000 fans flocked to Del Mar to see the West Coast horse Ligaroti face the nation’s leading racehorse, the “People’s Horse,” Seabiscuit. Crosby and Pat O’Brien broadcast their radio show from the roof of the grandstand. Crosby appointed Shirley Temple to serve as director and Dave Butler to act as head cheerleader for the Ligaroti team.<sup>30</sup>

Seabiscuit broke out a half-length ahead of Ligaroti. Ligaroti drew right next to him and remained there



*Hollywood stars Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, regulars at Del Mar, look at past performances in the racing form. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

as they dueled down the racetrack. Ligaroti only got ahead of him a nose during one point down the backstretch. A now-notorious note in horse racing history, jockeys Richardson and Woolf began to hit each other with riding crops as they dueled down the stretch. “They were hitting each other over the head with whips and Richardson had Woolf in a leg lock,” remembered Oscar Otis. Seabiscuit won by a length but both horses beat the track record by 1:49.<sup>31</sup>



*Jockeys Johnny Longden and Bill Shoemaker shake hands after deadlocking for the 1950 Del Mar riding title with sixty wins. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

The 1938 Seabiscuit-Ligaroti match changed everything for the Del Mar Racetrack. From that moment forward, Del Mar became known as a racetrack that could attract renowned horses and thousands of fans. It also highlighted the importance of West Coast horses and tracks, putting all California racing on the map.



*Del Mar's great jockeys, from left, Johnny Longden, Laffit Pincay, Jr., and Bill Shoemaker next to a plaque commemorating their accomplishments. Laffit won a total of 9,530 races before retiring. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

## Winning Jockeys—Winning Ways

After the famous 1938 race, Del Mar began to attract other star horses and the jockeys that made them famous. Among them were John Longden, William “Bill” Shoemaker, and Laffit Pincay, Jr.

John Eric “Johnny” Longden (1907-2003) made an indelible mark on the world of racing. The British-born rider won 6,032 races in his career, making him the world’s all-time winning jockey until Bill Shoemaker broke his record. Longden is remembered as a racing legend, the only jockey to win the Kentucky Derby as both a rider and a trainer. Many of his career achievements came in Southern California, in particular at Del Mar. He was the “winningest” jockey in the United States in the 1938, 1947, and 1948 seasons. After winning the Triple Crown in 1943, he made horse-racing history again while riding at the Del Mar racetrack, winning his 4,871<sup>st</sup> race and breaking the record held by Sir Gordon Richards for the most wins by a jockey ever recorded. By the end of his career, Longden had won 6,032 races with a win percentage of 19 percent. He earned over \$24 million in mounts.<sup>32</sup>



*Del Mar's original paddock area. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

William Lee “Bill” Shoemaker (1931-2003), nicknamed “Willie,” “Soft hands” or “Shoe,” was among the greatest jockeys Del Mar has ever showcased. In 1949, he became the first-ever apprentice jockey to win the leading rider title at Del Mar and he continued to break records there for the next forty years. In 1953, he set a record for 485 wins in a year. His record held for twenty years. Hall of Fame Jockey Chris McCarron said of him, “It’s a puzzlement to me how the guy got runs of horse after horse after horse after horse. His smooth, calm style was deceiving.”<sup>33</sup>

From 1958-1964, Shoemaker was the most money-winner jockey. On six separate occasions, he had six winners in one day. He won 8,833 races, 11 Triple Crown races, 1,009 stakes races and 10 national money titles earning over \$123 million in purses. He also achieved the holy grail of horse racing—a Kentucky Derby win, not just once but four times. Turf writer Red Smith said, “If Bill Shoemaker were six-feet tall and weighed 200 pounds, he could beat anybody in any sport.” He added, “Standing less than five feet and weighing around 100 [pounds], he beats everybody at what he does. Pound for pound, he’s got to be the greatest living athlete.”<sup>34</sup>



Del Mar also had the good fortune to have jockey Laffit Alejandro Pincay, Jr. (1946-) at its starting gate. Pincay Jr. is considered the most famous—and successful—jockey in the world. He measures his success as a jockey and a family man, as well as a leader and mentor for his fellow jockeys. In 1976, he began riding at Del Mar. During his first season, he won six races on Opening Day. That same summer season in 1976, he won a total of 86 races and his first of five Del Mar riding titles in 1976, 1977, 1979, 1982 and 1985. He also won 12 stakes races—a record that still stands in 2012.<sup>35</sup>

## **Owners and Trainers**

Racing owners and trainers are celebrities in their own right, helping Del Mar to attract serious competition and to showcase the best horses in the world. Among the leading owners and trainers in California racing have been Robert B. “Bob” (1924-2006) and Beverly J. Lewis; John C. (1921-2002) and Betty Mabee (1921-2010); and Sid (1932-2008) and Jenny Craig. Trainers include Charles Whittingham (1913-99), Robert J. “Bobby” Frankel (1941-2009), and Robert “Bobby” Baffert. Their commitment to racing helped the racetrack to flourish, even during difficult times.

Long-time racing fans Bob and Beverly Lewis owned and operated the Foothill



*Top owners and breeders, John and Betty Mabee, were inducted into the California Hall of Fame in 2006. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

Beverage Company, one of the largest Anheuser-Busch distributorships in the country. In the late 1980s, they decided to take the plunge into thoroughbred ownership, hiring trainers Wayne Lukas and Bob Baffert. They won two-thirds of the Triple Crown with Silvercharm in 1997 and Charismatic in 1999, both trained by Baffert. Silvercharm also won the 1998 Dubai World Cup. Commendable won the 2000 Belmont, giving the Lewises their own triple crown victory. Serena's Song stood as the richest filly or mare in American history when she retired as the world's most winning filly at the time, winning seventeen grade stakes races. In 1994, the Lewises won the Breeder's Cup Juvenile Cup with Timber Country who returned in 1995 to win the Preakness stakes. In 2002 Orientate the Spirit won the Breeder Cup Sprint. The Lewises have had countless Breeder's Cup wins and, as eight time winners of the Eclipse Award, were recognized at the Eclipse Awards ceremony as Owners of the Year and for their outstanding commitment to Thoroughbred Racing.<sup>36</sup>

John and Betty Mabee were the most successful owners and breeders of horses in California history. Owners of a grocery store chain, they developed Golden Eagle Farm in Ramona, California. John, a founding member of the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club, served on the board of directors for almost twenty-five years; Betty succeeded him when he stepped down in 2001. The couple won Eclipse Awards as the Outstanding Thoroughbred Breeder in North America in 1991, 1997, and 1998. Among the top horses bred and or raced by Golden Eagle Farm were Souvenir Copy, Annual Reunion, Golden Treat, Johnica, Dramatic Gold, Likeable

Style, Jeanne Jones, Beautiful Grass, Fine Spirit, River Special and Fantastic Look. In 2006 the Mabees were inducted into the California Hall of Fame.<sup>37</sup>

According to Joe Harper, President of the Del Mar Racetrack, John Mabee "was the father of modern Del Mar, there's no question about that...He was the power behind all of us."<sup>38</sup> Betty, meanwhile, was considered the "First Lady of Horse Racing." Harper recalled, "She was such an integral part of that duo; they were equal partners."<sup>39</sup> Their legacy lives on through the Grade I \$350,000 John C. Mabee Stakes, run every meet since 1957.

Other owners in the celebrity spotlight at the Del Mar Racetrack include Jenny



*Sid and Jenny Craig at the University of San Diego.  
Photo courtesy of University of San Diego archives.*



*Trainer Bob Baffert speaking to fans at a morning workout. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

Craig and her late husband, Sid, founders of a multi-million-dollar weight loss, weight management, and nutritional company under the name of Jenny Craig, Inc. In 1995, the Craigs purchased a 237-acre thoroughbred racing stable called Rancho Del Rayo, located in the hills of Rancho Santa Fe, renaming it Rancho Paseana, after their first champion racehorse. Trainer Ronald McAnally, who had discovered the mare Paseana, found Argentinean-bred Candy Ride that became the jewel of the Craigs' racing crown. Candy Ride went on to win the \$1 million Pacific Cup Classic and to produce top-ranking horses including the 2009 Kentucky Derby starter Chocolate Candy and the 2010 Kentucky Derby contender Sidney's Candy.<sup>40</sup> When she saw their first Candy Ride-bred horse going to the Kentucky Derby without Sid, who had passed away, Jenny Craig sighed, "It's bittersweet."<sup>41</sup>

Trainers also played an important role in the history of Del Mar, most notably Charles E. "Charlie" Whittingham, considered to be the greatest trainer in American history. He started his career at Agua Caliente, befriended Bing Crosby, and went on to partner with Horatio Loro, who championed Argentina-bred horses. He trained for socialite Mary Elizabeth "Liz" Altemus, gradually developing a large clientele of successful business owners and entrepreneurs that included oil baron Nelson Bunker Hunt, Chicago trader Charles Walker, chemical fortune heir William du Pont, Midwest real estate developer Millard Waldheim, and Superior Oil Company President Howard B. Keck, among others. Inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1974, Whittingham's career achievements include being the oldest trainer (age seventy-six) ever to win a Kentucky Derby, with Ferdinand.



*Horses continue to run at Del Mar. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*



*The eastern half of the original racetrack building and grandstand were demolished in 1992. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*



*Del Mar Racetrack after 1991 renovation. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

The National Racing Museum and Hall of Fame describes him as “one of the greatest Thoroughbred trainers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>42</sup>

Every trainer wants to be remembered as the best, none more so than Robert “Bobby” Frankel, who left an indelible mark on Del Mar history. Frankel won six Pacific Cup Classics, more than any other trainer. Known for dominating Del Mar’s most prestigious races, he spent thirty-seven seasons at the racetrack, starting in 1972. He ranked fourth among the track’s all-time winning trainers with 349 victories. His power clientele of owners included Bert and Diana Firestone, Ed Gann, Jerry Moss, and Prince Khalid Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, owner of Juddmonte Farms.<sup>43</sup> Frankel was particularly admired for his natural affinity with animals. Exercise rider Al Schwizer said, “Bobby’s the best trainer there is.” He tapped his head and added: “He’s got something up here that nobody’s got... He just figures out how to get horses to run for him.”<sup>44</sup>

Another important trainer—and a remarkable success story—is Bob Baffert who grew up on a ranch in Nogales, Arizona. Baffert has won the Del Mar Debutante—which has run every year since 1951, becoming a Grade I race in 1996—eight times. Held in early September, the race is exclusively for two-year-old fillies and has a \$250,000 purse. Baffert also has won the Del Mar Futurity, taking the \$250,000 purse eight times, seven of them consecutively from 1996-2002. One of the most important Kentucky Derby and Triple Crown trainers in the world, Baffert has won three Derbys with Silvercharm, War Emblem, and Real Quiet. He was inducted into the National Museum of the Racing Hall of Fame in 1991.<sup>45</sup>

Baffert’s conspicuous white head of hair can be seen during morning workouts



*Trainer Bobby Frankel, second from right, accepting a trophy for his 2000 Pacific Classic win on Skimming with General Manager Joe Harper, second from left, and jockey Garrett Gomez. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

at Del Mar and in the winners circle. He wears his usual jeans, cowboy boots, polo dress shirt, and dress jacket. He remarked:

Although I always wanted to be the best, I never dreamed of getting to where I am now. I was just some kid from Arizona who couldn't even put on a halter or vet wrap a horse. To dream of attaining what I have would be like someone dreaming of becoming president. Every day, I give thanks for being so lucky. I've loved horses since I was a little boy, and I've gotten to work with them all my life. I want to remain that little boy forever. I don't ever want to grow old.<sup>46</sup>

## **Del Mar Today**

In 1991, the Del Mar Fairgrounds, in conjunction with the Del Mar Fair, began the massive undertaking of redesigning the old grandstand. The original grandstand had been eroded and the wooden pillars and pilings were rotted. Del Mar historian William Murray joked that that "the only thing holding up the receiving barn was the ivy."<sup>47</sup>

At the time of the renovation, Joe Harper served as President, Director,

General Manager, and CEO of the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club. He realized the track needed a major renovation to bring racing at Del Mar to the next level but wanted to keep the charm of the original grounds intact. Fortunately, the club had the support of politicians in Sacramento. “We were kind of the darling of Sacramento,” Harper recalled, “We had a history and were making money, so even the bureaucrats realized the importance of Del Mar.” The Club looked to John Pushia, California state architect, and George Gomes, the chief of the Division of Fairs and Expositions, both fans of Del Mar who knew how to select the right architects and cut through the red tape.<sup>48</sup>

Architect Morio Kow, who had designed Hollywood Racetrack in Los Angeles, was selected to redesign Del Mar. He kept the Mission-style atmosphere and adopted Harper’s innovative idea: a structure that would allow fans to view the horses as they left the barns for the paddock. Centex Golden Construction Company, winner of the Build America award, did the construction. Project manager Fred Hummel was “tremendous,” Harper recalled, “Without him, we’d still be getting this built.”<sup>49</sup> In the end, the project was completed a year ahead of schedule and under budget.

Harper hired Joe Yamada to plan the exterior landscape and Dale Forbes to design the interiors. He wanted the new building to stay true to Crosby’s vision of a Spanish Revival racetrack as style was such an important factor in the atmosphere of Del Mar. “It can’t look like a hotel lobby or a car agency,” Harper emphasized. Forbes hired fourteen artists to furnish and decorate the interior with a primitive Spanish-Indian look. They selected fountains and furniture—much of it imported from Mexico—to create an elegant Spanish motif.<sup>50</sup>

Unfortunately, not all fans appreciated the new facilities. Those who had attended the racetrack for years missed the rickety old grandstand. They had



*Opening Day, Hat Contest Winners. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

fond memories of family and friends in the cozy wooden stands. Harper received hate mail from many people who accused him of tearing down a piece of history.<sup>51</sup> They were also unhappy with the steel beams that supported the grandstands. One letter to Harper read, “Now I know what the call to the post means.” Harper, too, missed the old structure. He remembered



*Opening Day Hats Contest Finalists. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

going to the racetrack with his mother when he was about four or five years old and the old rattan chairs pinched his legs in his summer time shorts. “There were so many old memories that I almost cried,” he said.<sup>52</sup>

The “new” Del Mar accommodates larger crowds and allows more fans to create the same kind of memories. The facility maintains the feel, and many of the touches, of the old racetrack but with over 555,000 square feet of space. Construction added 4,700 additional seats for a total of 14,300 seats; 25 more bars for a total of 41 bars; 20 more concession stands totaling 36 concession stands; and additional 318 pari-mutuel windows to total 750.<sup>53</sup>

In 2006, Del Mar installed polytrack, a synthetic material used in place of natural dirt on the tracks. Made from a mixture of sand, synthetic fibers, and a recycled rubber coated with a microcrystalline wax, polytrack gives the horses a firmer footing than dirt and is considered safer for horses and riders. Del Mar now has two tracks: the outer one made of polytrack and the inner turf course using Bermuda grass that is installed regularly at a one time cost of \$140,000.<sup>54</sup>

The quality of the racetrack keeps horsemen and owners coming back to Del Mar; as do special races such as the Cougar Handicap, Opening Day, and other events for fans. At a time when the attendance at most racetracks is waning, Del Mar remains one of the most popular racing meets in the country with an average daily attendance of 17,181 in 2009. Despite tough economic times, attendance rose 7.4 percent from the previous year.<sup>55</sup>

The racetrack combines the glamour of the 1930s infused with a modern party-like atmosphere. The racetrack’s slogan, “Del Mar, as Cool as Ever,” appeals both to



history and contemporary celebrity and couture style. People bring expensive cars—often the most costly in the world—limos, party buses, and even double-decker buses in an attempt to see and be seen. One of the most anticipated social events of the year, Opening Day reveals glamour, excitement, and beautiful people.<sup>56</sup>

The track also encourages women to wear beautiful, often extravagant hats, in honor of Mrs. W.R. Richardson, the first woman to enter the gates on Opening Day 1937. Wearing an elegant white hat, she was admitted by Bing Crosby himself.<sup>57</sup> “People don’t just go to Del Mar for the betting,” hat contest organizer Julie Sarno said, “There is a beauty and pageantry and tradition to it that people enjoy. And Del Mar is such a beautiful racetrack, being so close to the ocean—it is really a resort experience.” She added, “Opening Day is so special, and so is wearing a hat. They just go together.”<sup>58</sup>

In 2009, Del Mar made a bold move, changing to a five-day rather than a six-day racing meet. Ordinarily, racing is one of the few sports where the athletes—jockeys—compete up to six days a week, working horses in the morning. Del Mar’s officials petitioned the California Horse Racing Board to reduce their number of racing days from a forty-three day meet to a thirty-seven day meet. The change was highly successful, illustrating the motto “less is more.” Harper said:

The key to most everything we did this summer was the change to the five-day week. It was overwhelmingly popular and absolutely successful. From our racing fans, to our horsemen, to our employees, it has been win, win, win. We offered a better show this summer in so many ways and the across-the-board response to it has been gratifying.<sup>59</sup>

Year after year, Opening Day and track attendance records are broken at Del Mar, a fact that surprises many people in an industry suffering from the consequences of off-track betting. In fact, Del Mar has always been under a magnifying glass when it comes to attendance. Other racetracks like Santa Anita and Churchill Downs keep track of its innovative ideas and try to imitate its success. “We’ve always looked at this place as being in the entertainment business,” said Harper, “It sets us apart from other tracks that are seeing a decline.”<sup>60</sup>

Del Mar reacted to the recession of 2007-10 by creating “Free and Easy Wednesday.” Patrons sign up for a free Del Mar Diamond Card and show up on Wednesdays to receive free admission and seats. In 2010, over 20,000 fans signed up for the program. Wednesday’s daily average attendance jumped 18 percent, from 10,790 to 12,732.<sup>61</sup>

Del Mar also creates new races to attract fans. In 2009 Del Mar started the



*Cars fill the parking lot during Del Mar's 1937 opening season. Note the Mission Revival architecture in the background. Photos on the following pages are courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*



*The steward's stand and bandstand, 1937.*



*Trainer Charles Whittingham takes one of his horses to bathe in salt water.*



*Edward G. Robinson and Joan Bennett congratulate jockey Owen Webster, 1937.*



*Mickey Rooney piloted his own plane to Del Mar.*



*Softball game with jockeys and celebrities. From left, jockey John Longden, comedian Joe Frisco, jockey Bill Shoemaker, Gordan Glisson and race caller Joe Hernandez.*

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*W.C. Fields sharing comedic stories with riders 1937.*



*Barbara Stanwyck and Robert Taylor, 1937.*



*Dorothy Lamour poses in the summer of 1940.*



*Best Paul, winner of the inaugural Pacific Classic, returned yearly to the track to lead other horses to the track in the one million dollar race.*



*George Jessel, Harry James, and Betty Grable at Del Mar.*



*White Star Stables' Star Fiddle, winner of the Inaugural Del Mar Futurity 1948.*



*Pat O'Brien (right) with fellow actor Don Ameche.*

“Cougar Handicap.” Named after the famous horse Cougar II, the race played on the popularity of a new cultural phenomenon, the “Cougar,” meaning older women seeking a romantic relationship with younger men. Starting on the Thursday before the race, self-proclaimed cougars submit online pictures of themselves with an explanation of why they should be crowned Miss Cougar Del Mar. The morning of the race the winner is announced and is invited to the Winner’s Circle to receive a trophy in the afternoon. Fans find this race particularly amusing because Del Mar has a reputation for beautiful, mature women “on the prowl.”<sup>62</sup>

Closing day is always a bit of melancholy for the longtime fans. Bing Crosby’s “Where the Surf Meets the Turf” plays after the last race while friends say goodbye to one another. To bring a bit of fun to an otherwise sad day, the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club created the “Party in the Paddock,” a large celebration that attracts hundreds of fans. The paddock, normally an area for saddling and schooling the horses, is transformed for the celebration after the last race. Patrons buy tickets and enjoy a live band, appetizers and drinks. High heels get stuck in the soil but are nevertheless worn by the women because everyone dresses up and has a good time. The proceeds benefit such charities as Children’s Hospital, San Diego Fire Fighters Relief Fund, and Big Brothers Big Sisters of San Diego County. The Party in the Paddock is Del Mar’s last hurrah of the season.<sup>63</sup>

Del Mar’s enduring success results from its skill at attracting top horses, jockeys, and breeders, and its ability to draw in fans of every kind. It also created a bridge



*Bing Crosby on horseback viewing the grounds of Del Mar. Courtesy of Del Mar Thoroughbred Club.*

between its Hollywood past and an entertainment-based future. In the 1930s, Bing Crosby agreed to spearhead the process of constructing, and selling, the racetrack due to his love of the sport. Today, the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club carries out plans for the future with the aim of bringing the excitement and enjoyment of thoroughbred racing to Southern California fans.

In 1977, Bing Crosby told Harper, "My, the track certainly has changed..." and he had not even seen the new grandstand. One would hope that he would be proud to see the tiny racetrack that he helped to build become one of the most successful meets in the world.<sup>64</sup>

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