



Anne Lang

a Tale of Two Survivors

HOW A GELDED EX-RACEHORSE AND A FORMERLY ILL
EQUESTRIAN ARE SHARING A NEW LEASE ON LIFE

by Anne Lang

The year was 1995. Thanksgiving season was approaching, but Nicole Harding didn't have much on her plate to be thankful for. Having just been diagnosed with cancer, the married mother of two was teetering on an emotional fine line between passive acceptance of a potentially terminal fate — or fighting back with all her might.

Wisely, she chose the latter.

Part of Harding's self-designed survival strategy was to carry out a dream that had lain dormant for years: the dream of once again owning a Thoroughbred. A former equestrian who

had spent her youth competing on some of the Midwest's and East Coast's most elite hunter/jumper circuits, Harding instinctively felt that by recapturing some of the joy and fulfillment of that long-ago bonding time with her horse, she might somehow find her way back to good health. At the very least, she figured, it would keep her spirits lifted, her body in shape and her mind engaged.

"At that point, my philosophy was 'life is short,'" Harding now recalls. "And if it was going to be even shorter than I'd planned, then I was determined to grant myself a wish."

Brittany and Emily and son William — put down their own San Antonio roots last summer, settling on nearly three acres where they presently keep several Thoroughbred lay-ups for Michelle's sister. Even though Brown frankly admits that actually riding horses himself is something he's never quite taken to ("they used to scare me to death!"), his wife's hunter/jumper and barrel-racing background has prompted similar equestrian involvement by Brittany. A passion for snow skiing is shared by all the Browns, and they frequently escape to out-of-state slopes on vacations.

With pivotal positions in both Retama and Call Now, Brown divides his daily schedule between the two. "What I'm most involved in are the marketing aspects of Retama's programs, and getting those in place," he explains. "I'm somewhat involved in the financial realm as well. But [General Manager] Bob Pollock handles most of the operational side."

By eating lunch every day in the track kitchen, Brown is able to interact with horsemen and keep a finger on the pulse of Retama's backside. He stresses the "people" element in a variety of ways, both behind the scenes and up front. And it seems to be paying off.

"One of the most special things about Retama, I believe, is the friendliness of our staff," Brown states. "Even people who are here for the first time are made to feel very comfortable. Our employees will shake their hand, pat them on the back and say 'Welcome to Retama Park.' Many times, I've heard people who've visited a lot of other racetracks say that this is the friendliest track they've been to. I think that sets us apart."

That's not to say that Brown or anyone else is resting on their laurels. There are daily challenges, which in Brown's case involves "the marketing side of things, like trying to figure out not only how to get more people here, but more people who are apt to wager. We're trying out a lot of new ideas right now, but we want to be sure we're spending money that will eventually come back to us in terms of profits. We're trying to adopt programs that work in order to improve our bottom line."

"But," he adds, "while marketing is the most challenging aspect of my job, it's also the most fun."

With fun as an inherent part of the entertainment realm, one of Brown's primary goals is "to put Retama Park on the San Antonio entertainment map. I want more people in this market to think

Retama when they're trying to decide where to go on a particular evening. I want more people to understand what simulcasting is, and the fact that racing is a product they can enjoy here every day of the year except Christmas."

Some of Brown's goals include future joint promotions with local attractions such as Sea World, Fiesta Texas, Schlitterbahn Water Park and other select San Antonio businesses.

Brown has a primary goal that may seem unattainable to many people, but not for this positive-minded individual. "If there was a survey conducted among a sampling of San Antonio residents asking what Retama Park is and where it is, I'd like 100 percent of the respondees to be able to answer both questions," he declares. "That's a major challenge that we have because, quite frankly, there's still a

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large portion of people in this marketplace who think that no horse racing exists in San Antonio; or who may vaguely know that racing exists, but certainly don't know what a beautiful sport it is and how much fun a day at the races or a day of simulcasting can be."

"I think that the rest of this year and all next year will offer the first real opportunity for achieving that goal," Brown continues. "The most recent year when a lot was spent on marketing was 1995; after that, most extra revenue had to go toward helping to save the track."

While Brown will always be setting the aspiration bar higher as he goes along, he also pauses occasionally to savor past progress.

"Actually, we're way ahead of where I thought we'd be at this point," he reveals. "In the fall of 1996, when Call Now first acquired the bond debt, we really thought that 1997 would be a year of significant

losses, that 1998 would be a year of losses as well, and that maybe things would get going by 1999.

"Instead, in 1997 we minimized the amount of money that was lost and had a fairly decent year; in 1998, we're going to do pretty well on the bottom line; and 1999 already looks wonderful. So the revenue side has been outstanding, we've been able to hold down expenses, and it all seems to be coming together."

Brown credits Texas' other two major tracks for helping boost the general health of the state industry. "With us and with Sam Houston, it was a case of new management and restructuring of our respective debts," he observes. "Bob Bork at Sam Houston has done an outstanding job. Meanwhile, Lone Star Park started out by doing all the right things with all the right management, and probably rates now among the top three or four markets in the country." At the same time, Brown was quick to point out that his job has also been made easier because of the good job done by Retama's previous management.

"Simulcasting has been a great thing for all three tracks," Brown goes on. "Our simulcast customers love to bet on Sam Houston and Lone Star, and vice versa with their customers. A lot of Texas racing fans love to follow certain horses from track to track, and the more they become familiar with those horses, the more they're willing to wager on them."

But even though Brown, like any racetrack administrator, is grateful for the serious players, he gets a kick out of watching newcomers win their first race. "It's a highlight of my day to hear comments like, 'Gee, I didn't know racing was so much fun; I won eight dollars!' and seeing the excited looks on their faces. The next best part is seeing how our employees react to that enthusiasm, and how they're motivated by it."

Motivating Brown right now is (among other things) the realization that he truly loves his job.

"When I first took over here, I didn't think I'd enjoy it as much as I have," he confesses. "But I've become hooked on racing! I love watching and wagering on the races; I love being around the horses and I love being around the people who share my attraction to the sport — owners, trainers, employees and fans."

"I didn't think this line of work was something I was aspiring to do, but it's turned into a great passion. And it's something I plan to do for a long, long time." 🐾

Harding soon found a Thoroughbred for sale at a hunter/jumper barn in her hometown of Austin. She instantly fell in love with the 16-hand dark bay whose intelligent eye, handsome looks and graceful way of going captivated her on the spot. The gelding, whose barn name was Billy Rey (rough TexMex translation: King William), was far from perfect, however. He came with no Jockey Club papers or documentation of any kind, although his partially legible lip tattoo and evidence of freeze-firing on his forelegs revealed a past racing life. Billy Rey's then-owner, a recent law school graduate, told Harding that she thought Billy Rey had raced previously at Louisiana Downs, and that he'd also been used as a polo pony in San Antonio.

As is common with ex-race horses, Billy Rey did not pass the pre-purchase examination. Bone chips were discovered under x-rays, and there was previous trauma to a pastern. The veterinar-

ian was frank with Harding, telling her that while the horse (estimated to be 12 or 13 years old at that time) seemed more or less fit enough to continue indefinitely as a hunter, he certainly couldn't proclaim him as "sound." Harding didn't care. She had found her equine soul mate, and although she ended up paying only \$1,000 for him, she felt that the void he would fill in her frighteningly uncertain future was priceless.

GETTING IN SYNC

And so the mutual acclimation process began. Harding, who opted to keep the horse at the same boarding stable where she had bought him, soon learned that the same boundless energy that had attracted her to Billy Rey in the first place could occasionally get out of hand — particularly if the horse hadn't been ridden in a couple of days.

"He's still got a lot of race horse in him. Even today, he'll come off a line

of jumps and just want to flat-out run," Harding laughs. "But he has a heart, too. One time he felt me starting to slip sideways as he was galloping along, and he immediately slowed down and stopped so I wouldn't fall off. There are plenty of Thoroughbreds who don't have it in them to be that kind."

She adds that perhaps that trait was what made someone in Billy Rey's racing past take the extra effort to find a new home and career for the no-longer-raceable gelding — instead of sending him off to an unknown and possibly grim future.

Indeed, Billy Rey quickly became something of a Harding family pet, in that he would patiently allow Harding's two children (Jake, 9, and Jenni, 8) to brush him, pick out his hooves, lead him in from the pasture and feed him endless carrots. Whatever racing-oriented hardships Billy Rey might have endured were fading into the past under the gentle care of

c o n t i n u e d



Above: Lang



Harding and the stable's managers. The horse was healing.

And so, it turned out, was Harding. Conducted just one week after she acquired Billy Rey, Harding's cancer surgery was followed by a lengthy phase of radiation therapy. At a mid-1996 examination, doctors discovered that Harding's cancer had gone into remission — and it is remained at bay ever since.

Does Harding see any correlation between both her and Billy Rey's second chance at life?

"Oh, definitely," says the now 40-year-old. "In fact, that's one of the reasons I bought him. I was terribly crushed when the vet found those bone chips, because I'd always subscribed to the notion that you just don't buy horses who don't have clean legs. The vet did warn me about the gamble I'd be taking, and that it probably wasn't worth putting Billy Rey through arthroscopic surgery. But then, when I saw this horse moving so beautifully...well, I just felt like he was entitled as much as anyone to at least try to live a full life."

So while Billy Rey escaped the scalpel, Harding succumbed to it. Ultimately, both have triumphed.

"When I bought him, his owner told me he would be too unruly to ever take to a show," Harding explains. "But I worked with him, and so did trainer Stephanie Ward, who used a lot of John Lyons' techniques. Between the polo and the racing Billy had done, he really didn't know how to be ridden in a calm and controlled manner. But eventually he settled down. He still has a strong flight instinct, and he's always just a bit on edge. But he truly loves to jump, especially if it's over three feet, because then he really starts to use his body."

Harding's busy schedule as a technical writer, wife and mother — not to mention the ongoing

process of regaining her strength — have made it difficult for her to train regularly enough to show Billy Rey herself. So from the outset, a succession of skilled junior riders have taken him to numerous ribbons, reserve



championships and championships at local hunter/jumper events. In between, Harding keeps the horse legged up by schooling him several times a week. And daughter Jenni, an aspiring equestrienne, is even able to get on and jog the horse after he's been worked down. Someday, Harding hopes, Billy Rey will become Jenni's own.

A CLOSURE OF SORTS

As for Billy Rey's racing past, there are times when Harding gets mildly curious about who her horse was, and what he did, in his previous life. She even went so far as to submit his tattoo number to The Jockey Club — but when the race record came back matched with 1988 Breeders' Cup Turf winner Great Communicator (a multiple graded stakes winner of nearly \$3 million), she realized that the faded, somewhat illegible tattoo was not a clear enough indicator for identification. Great Communicator, although eerily identical to Billy Rey in appearance and age, was euthanized immediately following a 1990 breakdown at Santa Anita.

That the origins of Harding's horse may forever remain a mystery is not something that bothers the owner, however — even though no other sequences of tattoo numbers close to Great Communicator's match that of a bay gelding with Billy Rey's markings. In fact, after the brief flurry of Dick Francis-like intrigue that coincided with the erroneous tattoo match, Harding admits to feeling relieved that Billy Rey could return to anonymity.

"You know, thinking that he might have been a race horse who won a Breeders' Cup race and earned a ton of money was pretty exciting, at first," Harding muses. "But when it was all said and done, I was grateful that he turned out to be nobody famous after all. Billy Rey will always be my special guy, whether he won \$3, \$30 or \$3 million.

"He's a winner in my eyes, no matter what — which I think makes me a winner, too. Because he's mine. And he's got a home with me for life."

Austin-based freelancer Anne Lang is a regular contributor to numerous national equine publications and People Magazine. She is a former editor of The Texas Thoroughbred.