

Ellis finds success with thoroughbreds

By **ANNE LANG**

Texas correspondent

They're getting harder and harder to find these days, but once in a while you stumble across someone who still breeds primarily to race, rather than to sell. And when that individual's perseverance begets homebred winners, it's a reward more satisfying than a five-figure sales check.

Texas breeder Sam Ellis can attest to that - he's one of those rare individuals. And he also represents a rapidly growing number of Texans who have made the switch from quarter horses to thoroughbreds. Right now the star of Ellis' stable is a 3-year-old homebred filly, out of an Ellis-owned mare and sired by an Ellis-owned stallion.

Multiple stakes winner Current Passion is among the top 10 Texas-bred earners this season, having won \$46,530 in six starts. So far, the highlights of her year include a victory in the \$50,000 Dixie Belle Stakes at Oaklawn last January, a runner-up finish in the \$25,000 Adrian Dawn Handicap at Trinity Meadows in April and an allowance win at Delta Downs.

From 10 career starts, Current Passion has landed in the money six times and bankrolled \$57,620. She is the chief earner of 9-year-old stallion Valioso, whom Ellis acquired in 1990. A son of Conquistador Cielo, Valioso broke down after only four starts (two wins and a third) at 3. Ellis, who gradually has been making the transition to thoroughbreds since having entered the quarter running world in 1980, liked the horse's bloodlines and conformation and decided he'd make a good foundation sire.

To date, Valioso remains the sole thoroughbred stallion at Ellis' Rockin E Ranch in the tiny town of Brookeland, located midway between Beaumont, Texas, and Shreveport, La. Four years ago, Ellis bred Valioso to four of his own mares and one outside mare. The foal from the latter has not placed in three starts, but the four Ellis-owned foals all became winners.

"It's just a nice experience to go to the races when your runners are horses you bred and raised yourself, out of your own mares and sired by your own stallion," the 52-year-old Ellis said.

Of those seven runners (six of whom are owned by Ellis), four have won and two have placed, for cumulative earnings of \$106,210 - ranking



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CURRENT PASSION: Homebred winner of the \$50,000 Dixie Belle Stakes.

Valioso second among second-crop Texas sires.

The downside of Ellis' 1994 season has been the frequent occurrence of racing injuries, none of them career-threatening. Mr. Gold Shocker (out of the Training Table mare Limey Lass), winner of \$34,016, is recovering from ankle surgery. Winners Mr. Fast Way (out of Have Her Way) and Tippy's Class (out of Tippy's Second) both are coming off injuries and will start later this summer.

The 2-year-old Mr. Win Win, who was Tippy's Second's 1992 foal, ran third three times at Sam Houston last spring before chipping a bone. Successful arthroscopic surgery has ensured the colt's return to Sam Houston in October. And Miss Classy Lass, a full sister to Mr. Gold Shocker, has finished third in one of two starts. Ellis said the freshman filly exhibits great potential.

Meanwhile, Current Passion - who was laid up following a shoulder injury in the \$75,000 Prima Donna Stakes in April at Oaklawn - is resting at Rockin E Ranch. Although "she seems to be 100 percent," Ellis said he's given her a long respite to be safe. She will return on Aug. 27 at Trinity in the Ma Ferguson Stakes for sophomore fillies at six furlongs. After that, Ellis

will decide whether Current Passion is ready for longer distances.

Ellis, who has used a number of trainers (Joe Weaver, Randy Allen and others), enjoys breaking his youngsters and giving them early conditioning on the Rockin E's half-mile track. Ellis and his wife of 20 years, Dorothy, have owned the 160-acre ranch for 14 years and have lived there since 1992, when Ellis sold his Houston construction firm.

Not surprisingly, he gets lots of calls about Valioso. He bred 16 mares to the stallion this season - only seven of whom were his.

"Success came pretty suddenly," he said, "and I wasn't really ready for it. It's great and everything, but with all this interest from mare owners, I'm either going to have to hire a stallion manager or send Valioso to a bigger stud farm."

A full brother to Current Passion will be offered in the upcoming Texas Thoroughbred Breeders' Association yearling sale. Current Passion's dam, Nautical Whip (raced by Ellis), has a full sister to Current Passion by her side, and she has been bred back to Valioso.

New though he may be to thoroughbred breeding, Ellis knows when to perpetuate a winning formula.