

...and the meek might also prosper

At a time when newcomers to the Thoroughbred world mostly seem to be those with vast disposable incomes, it's hard to imagine that good fortune would smile on someone who leaps into the breeding business with a paltry budget, two acres of land, and not much more than raw determination to carry him along.

For Harlan Harrison, a foray into the breeding business did result in considerable good fortune on the first try. And though he's had his share of disappointments since that initial stroke of luck, the momentum generated by the experience has inspired him to continue—this time with a little more cash in his pocket, and a little more wisdom in his head.

His is a story that echoes the message behind the recent film, "It Could Happen to You." Indeed—while not lottery-related, nor involving multi-million-dollar payoffs—what happened to Harrison could happen to anybody, even folks with similarly modest bankrolls and limited knowledge of the game. Such reasoning is what fuels the element of optimism within Thoroughbred breeders everywhere...particularly the utter unknowns.

By ANNE LANG

Butler Texas is a tiny farming community in the state's eastern region, not much more than a bump in the asphalt on U.S. Highway 84. It's about two miles southwest of Palestine, maybe 50 miles southeast of Corsicana, and if you don't even know where those two towns are, well, Harlan Harrison doesn't much care. Butler is where he's quietly lived for all of his 36 years, and is likely to remain for the rest of his life.

That's not to say that Harrison doesn't appreciate other parts of America, Kentucky in particular—birthplace of world-class Thoroughbreds, including dozens of luminaries whose bloodlines he's committed to memory. A horse-lover since his childhood days on the family farm, Harrison became enthralled by the Sport of Kings during visits to Louisiana Downs a decade ago, which prompted him to buy a race horse in 1989. The colt ran dismally, costing Harrison a bundle in training bills and a hefty dose of reality to swallow. Still, it taught him a lesson.

"After that experience, I decided I'd get my own broodmare and raise my own babies," he explains, "so at least I'd know what I had." Harrison, who lives with his wife and three children and works as a heavy equipment operator at a lignite coal mining company, began studying the leading racing and breeding publication, paying par-

ticular attention to the ads. He was looking for a producer whose Texas-bred foal would bring a least \$10,000 in a regional sale. His outlay could not exceed \$4,500, yet Harrison wanted a blue-chip mare with plenty of black type in her pedigree. Needless to say, his search was a long one.

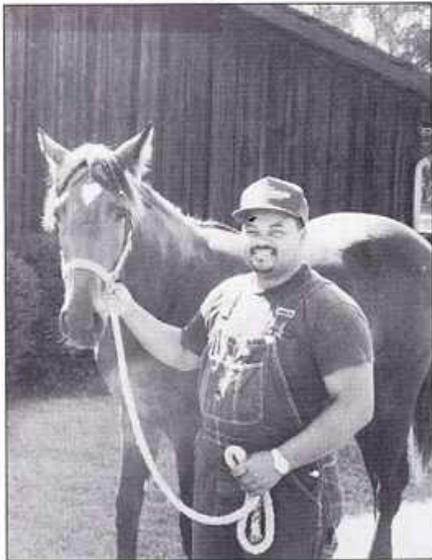
In the summer of 1992, he came across a classified ad for a 16-year-old Upper Case (by Round Table) mare, a stakes producer who then was in foal to Compliance, a son of Northern Dancer. The asking price was out of Harrison's range, but perhaps negotiable—so he decided to consult Cedarcrest Farm owner Dr. Steve Hicks, whom he knew was a well-respected Palestine veterinarian.

Hicks, who had never met Harrison but who's always been willing to lend advice to a newcomer, agreed that at least on paper, the mare (named Casarette) looked like a good prospect. She'd produced a Darby Creek Road colt, Copper Cup, a graded stakes-placed winner of nearly \$200,000 and three other winners; from nine starters.

"I told Harlan to call the owner and ask about her feet, her body condition, et cetera," Hicks says, "because he was wanting to buy this mare through the mail—which in my opinion can be a bit of a pig in a poke."

When Harrison contacted Casarette's owner, Ed Price of Reinholds, Pennsylvania, he learned that the mare had just

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Harlan Harrison and his Casarette yearling

aborted the Compliance foal. This put Harrison in a position to negotiate a reduced price, and the two finally settle on \$2,500. Casarette was shipped directly to Cedarcrest, and Hicks recalls being pleasantly surprised upon her arrival.

"She turned out to be a very good-looking, dark bay mare," Hicks said. "I thought, boy, we may have bought something here with a little class." Hicks told Harrison that if he wanted to breed to a Cedarcrest stallion, Hicks would work out a reasonable payment plan with him, giving him a break on stud fees, board and veterinary fees. They selected Cedarcrest's Native Tactics to be Casarette's first Texas cover, and Harrison took the mare home to Butler to spend the remaining months before breeding season.

Meanwhile, Casarette's 1991 foal, a Compliance filly named Casa Eire, was being readied for a trip to East Coast trainer Leo O'Brien. But first, a bit of background information: For several years during the late 1980's, Casarette was owned by a New Yorker named Michael Spielman. During that time, he bred Casarette three times to Blues Parade, but the resulting runners never won. Spielman then sent her to Compliance, who produced Casa Eire.

Spielman sold Casa Eire as a weanling to Another Episode Farm in Ocala, Fla. The farm sold her as a 2-year-old to one of its frequent

clients, New York City pub owner Bernard Connaughton. Spielman, after breeding Casarette once more to Compliance (which later would result in the aborted foal) consigned the mare to a 1992 Equivest sale in Maryland, where she was acquired by Price. And Price, who says he mostly buys to immediately re-sell, found a willing buyer in Harrison.

As 1993 got underway, Casarette went to Native Tactics as planned, and was pronounced in foal in April. During that same month, Casa Eire ran fourth in her freshman debut at Keeneland. She broke her maiden by four lengths at Belmont June 7 and, and less than a month later, the filly burst into national prominence when she captured the Grade III, \$100,000-added Astoria Breeders' Cup Stakes by 2-3/4 lengths. The rest of that season included a third in the \$100,000-added Adirondack Stakes (gr. II), and runner-up in the Miss Grillo Stakes (gr. IIIT), New York Stallion Stakes and East View Stakes.

Casa Eire was subsequently crowned 1993 New York-bred Champion Juvenile Filly. Last May, she proved worthy of the honor by beating a full field of colts (and carrying equal weight) to win the \$100,000-added Saranac Stakes, a grade III turf contest for 3-year-olds. She covered eight furlongs in 1:34 3/5, edging out British-bred Warn Me by a neck at

the wire.

Thanks to Casa Eire, Harrison's \$ 2,500 broodmare was looking more and more like the bargain of the year. So much for a first-time breeding investment by a conservative-spending, blue-collar rookie. As Hicks put it: "This is one of those scenarios that you always hope for when you advise a novice on buying a mare."

The Family Tree Sprouts More Branches.

Back in July of 1993, at about the same time that Casa Eire emerged as the surprise Astoria winner, Harrison had his hands full taking care of a lively, month-old Native Tactics filly. Despite Hicks' recommendation to allow Casarette to foal in the supervised environment of Cedarcrest, Harrison—a firm believer in letting nature take its course—had opted to keep the mare in the pen erected behind his house. He came out one morning to find a tiny replica of Casarette happily engaged in nursing. As for Hicks, he was simply relieved that all went smoothly.

Harrison obtained Jockey Club approval to name the filly Casseattack. He spent the next year hauling mare and foal back and forth to Palestine, where Hicks performed routine care and loaded Harrison up with as much advice

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When Casa Eire won the Astoria Breeders' Cup Stakes at Belmont Park, the effect was far reaching.

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as he could absorb during each visit.

"Harlan knew only the very basics of horse care, but he was determined to do it all himself," Hicks explains. "His lack of knowledge caused me some concern, because I knew how much that filly could be worth, and how easily something could happen to make her worth nothing."

Hicks laughs good-naturedly about Harrison's no-frills mode of equine transportation: a borrowed cattle trailer.

"The mare had to duck her head to ride in it. After awhile, so did the filly. I teased him, saying he'd have to cut a hole in the roof so they could stick their heads out. It's safe enough vehicle for such a short trip, but it's a little claustrophobic for a mare that's over 16 hands."

Harrison had a few other things to learn from Hicks, as well. When Casarette produced her 1994 foal, a filly by State Dinner, Harrison didn't realize the urgent need to move Casseattack to a separate enclosure. It was during a casual phone conversation that Hicks found out all three horses were together in one pen.

"I told Harlan, 'Get that yearling out of there!' There could have been a catastrophe, because the mare is naturally protective of the foal, and she might well have popped the older filly with a vicious kick if she'd gotten to close." Hicks chuckles about the incident now. "I jumped all over poor Harlan that day. Here he was, thinking they'd all be just one happy family in there."

Harrison quickly assembled a second pen, and a potential crisis was averted.

But for the most part, Harrison's plan to prepare a yearling for the

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Texas Thoroughbred Breeders' Association summer yearling sale was rolling along, if not always by conventional means. By the time sales inspectors Clay Murray and Rick Abbott arrived in early June of 1994, Casseattack had developed into a big, eye-catching, classic looking racing prospect. Murray vividly remembers the day he and Abbott pulled into the yard of Harrison's modest farmhouse by the road.

"Here was this nondescript piece of property that you wouldn't take any notice of if you were just driving by," Murray recalls. "There were just a couple of small wire pens in back, and a galvanized tin barn that was maybe 10 by 15 feet. Harlan disappeared into the barn with a halter, and Rick and I shuffled around kicking toadstools and dirt clods, wondering what we were doing there."

They soon found out. "Suddenly, out into the bright sunshine steps Harlan, leading this dazzling filly who was good-looking enough to take your breath away!" marvels Murray. "To be honest, we were astonished to see a yearling of such obvious quality at such an unassuming location. It was clear that Harlan had spent a lot of time taking care of her, although I'm not sure he realized the magnitude of what he had."

Links to the past

Switch scenes to Florida, and enter Dominick Brennan, manager/trainer at Another Episode

Farm. In the midst of champion Casa Eire's success, Brennan had begun wondering if the filly had any untried siblings somewhere who might be worth buying as racing prospects. He finally traced Casarette to Texas, then discovered that a half-sister to Casa Eire was being offered in the TTBA yearling sale.

Brennan contacted Ocala bloodstock agent Murray Smith, whom he knew was going to Fort Worth for the sale. He asked her to look at the Native Tactics yearling, and to buy it for the farm if she felt the filly checked out. Casseattack won Smith's approval in the barn, but the filly—who came through the ring early as hip #9 in the sale featuring 575 head—didn't fetch her \$12,000 reserve. She was bought back at \$10,000. Smith didn't quit there, however. The next day, she beat to the punch several other interested, private buyers and nabbed Casseattack for \$13,000. "I thought she was real nice, real attractive," Smith states. "I like a horse with a nice eye and a nice head, and she has both. She's very well-balanced, with an athletic, race-type body."

Casseattack was directly vanned to Another Episode Farm. One day in early September, Dominick Brennan reported on her progress. "She made the trip very well. We just turned her out with other horses for the first time this morning, and she's adjusting nicely. She

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***— Clay Murray
TTBA director of sales***

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seems quite happy.

"She's a great-looking filly," he continued, "and strongly resembles her half-sister. We're very delighted to have her, and we're anxious to see how she does." Casseattack will likely go to Leo O'Brien next year, he said, adding that her freshman season might include a shot at the TTBA Sale Futurity. "It's really too soon to say on that one, but it's a distinct possibility."

The saga will have come full circle if Bernard Connaughton follows through on a possible desire to buy Casseattack. "I've got too many horses as it is right now," he laments in a thick Irish brogue, talking by phone from his Mc Menmamin's Pub in Manhattan's South Street Seaport. "but I've had luck with her half-sister, I can't say I've ruled out buying this filly. It would be great fun to race both of them." Fellow Irishman and friend Brennan probably feels confident that Connaughton will eventually come around.

Then there's Casa Eire breeder

Spielman (who also bred stakes winner Seaport Mac, owned by Connaughton—and co-campaigns the Compliance-sired millionaire Fourstardave, 9-year-old hero of Saratoga). Spielman had at one time contacted Harrison with an offer to repurchase Casarette, but Harrison, who by then was enjoying the fruits of his longtime search for the right mare, wasn't selling. However, the two men—one a successful East Coast businessman and accomplished breeder, the other an East Texas laborer and Thoroughbred world neophyte—enjoyed a lengthy, friendly chat.

"I'm really happy for Harlan," Spielman declares. "I'm not one of these people who wastes time regretting what I've sold and what I've kept. In the breeding business, we all like to see the little guy do well. I truly wish him all the best."

Harrison appreciates the encouragement he's received from both Spielman and Connaughton, and has now focused his attention on the State Dinner weanling. With Hicks' continued assistance, and the sale revenue with which to

make improvements on the farm, he'll ready this new filly for next year's TTBA yearling sale. His work will be considerably reduced next year as, sadly, Casarette's 1994 breeding to Orbit Dancer didn't carry. But Harrison's a patient man. He feels the old broodmare's still got a few more productive seasons left in her.

"When I bought this mare, I promised myself I'd sell the first two foals and race the third one," he says. "I'm still gonna stick to that plan. I'd like to breed her to Orbit Dancer again, or maybe to Manzotti." He pauses a moment to reflect. "You know, I started small, but I want to get bigger. And I know that someday I'll get there."



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She currently is an award winning freelance writer and has a monthly breeding column in Daily Racing Form.