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A state with unlimited potential

By ANNE LANG

Ah, the magnificent thoroughbred.

Arguably, no other breed of horse conjures up more vivid images of elegance and opulence: images of the sleek animals themselves, and the often urbane lifestyles of the people who influence the industry. People whose stereotypical trappings of everyday life might include high tea served in heirloom silver, summers in Saratoga, or stately pillared mansions surrounded by rolling acres of lush bluegrass.

Providing a striking contrast to those perceptions is the rugged state of Texas, where the leisure-time activity of choice

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may well be attending the nearest chigger fest, armadillo race or rattlesnake-sacking contest, and where boots worn with business suits, five-alarm chili, and the legend of LBJ are sources of state pride. An uninformed outsider would likely doubt the presence of anything so seemingly un-Texas-like as a thoroughbred.

Indeed, the hearty and versatile quarter horse has reigned supreme in the Lone Star State for the past century. Texas has held the No. 1 spot in quarter horse population for decades, with more than 17,000 quarter horse foals registered in 1991. It is home to the American Quarter Horse Association and also the famous King Ranch, which bred the first registered American quarter horse in the 1940's and went on to contribute significantly to the foundation of today's flourishing Texas quarter horse industry.

So it may come as a surprise to many that the thoroughbred, too, is a longtime

Texas commodity—particularly in racing factions—in terms of both numbers and prominence. The most recent census of The Jockey Club indicated there were 2,592 Texas thoroughbred foals produced in 1990, placing the state fourth behind Kentucky, California and Florida. That same year there were also 673 known thoroughbred stallions, ranking Texas second only to California. And the Texas Thoroughbred Breeders' Association estimates there are 6,000 thoroughbred mares and 10,000 "general-use" thoroughbreds currently in Texas.

Earlier in the century, the 829,000-acre King Ranch also made a name for itself in the annals of thoroughbred breeding, when its homebred Assault won the 1946 Triple Crown and subsequent Horse of the Year honors. A son of Bold Venture out of the Equipoise mare, Igual, Assault's six-year career winnings totaled \$674,720, which even today ranks fifth among lifetime Texas-bred earners.

Another King Ranch-bred thoroughbred, Stymie, was the 1945 recipient of an Eclipse Award for leading older male. In six years of racing, Stymie started an astonishing 131 times, with 35 wins, 33 seconds and 28 thirds. The son of Equestrian's earnings of \$918,485 have retained his No.2 standing on the list of lifetime Texas-bred winners.

Heading that list—and the only other Texas-bred in history to receive an Eclipse Award—is 1987 sprint champion Groovy (Norecliffe—Tinnitus, by Restless Wind). Groovy became the first Texas-bred millionaire after earning \$1,346,956 during a career that included wins in the Grade I Vosburgh Stakes, Grade II Tom Fool Stakes (twice) and the Grade II Forego Handicap. He set new six-furlong track records at Belmont and Finger Lakes, finished second

in the 1987 Breeders' Cup Sprint and, of the 12 stakes he won, seven were graded. The various owners of Groovy's first juveniles, which start this year, are hoping for similar success.

Marshall Robinson, who with his wife, Mickey, bred Groovy on the couple's Fort Worth ranch, explained why they switched their breeding specialty from quarter horses to thoroughbreds in 1981, with the purchase of a broodmare at a Keeneland sale. Back then, the future of pari-mutuel wagering in Texas (which, though finally approved in 1987, has been slow to produce any major-league racing) looked uncertain, yet the Robinsons were willing to take the gamble.

"When Mickey and I visited Kentucky 10 years ago, we just fell in love with the whole thoroughbred industry in general," Robinson recalled. "It was the overall atmosphere in Lexington, I guess: the people, their sincerity and the way they handle their horses. There's a feeling of romance associated with the thoroughbred world, and we wanted to experience some of that."

And so the Robinsons brought a little bit of that special Kentucky flavor back to Texas, launching a thoroughbred breeding operation that eventually produced not only Groovy, but graded stakes winner My Prince Charming and stakes horses Kentucky Jazz, Dancitus and Commanders Dusty. To be sure, they've been luckier than most, but Robinson said he thinks the anticipated boom of Texas' pari-mutuel tracks over the next decade or so will greatly increase the chances of other Texas breeders contributing to the nationwide roster of thoroughbred racing stars.

"Thoroughbred people in Kentucky, New York, Florida—they're all talking about Texas these days," Robinson said.

"There's an air of quality in thoroughbred breeding that we all strive hard to achieve. These days you can even see a visible difference in the atmosphere at Texas thoroughbred functions, as compared to five or six years ago. More sophistication, reflected not only in personal style but in breeding practices and even in the way we're all caring for our horses.

"We don't want to lose those characteristics that make Texas unique, though," Robinson added. "Texans' warmth and friendliness will be a great asset to the thoroughbred industry in our nation."

Texas has certainly not been without its luminaries in the thoroughbred world. Among those are former Texas Governor John Connally and oil magnate Nelson Bunker Hunt, who were both active in the Texas thoroughbred market before meeting with respective financial troubles.

Hunt has also numbered among the handful of prominent Texans with the foresight to operate farms in both Texas and Kentucky: Texan Will Farish regularly plays host to the Queen of England at his Lane's End Farm outside Lexington, and to President George Bush at his Huisache Farm near Houston.

Renowned horseman Johnny T. L. Jones maintains Walmac International in Kentucky and Two Creek Ranch in the Houston area. Another owner of an expansive thoroughbred farm in each state is Texan Mike Rutherford. The Clarence Scharbauer family of Midland has also helped put Texas thoroughbreds on the map. Though their claim to fame was not bred in Texas, the Scharbauers are the owners of Alysheba, 1988 Horse

of the Year and top thoroughbred money-earner of all time (\$6,679,242). Alysheba now stands at Will Farish's Kentucky farm.

Newcomers to the Texas thoroughbred industry continue to pour in from other states, anticipating the thriving breeding activity to be spawned from Class I racing in the state's major urban areas. Veterinarian Kenneth Quirk left a flourishing Louisiana-based practice (in which he was associated with Eclipse Award-winning owner and breeder John Franks) three years ago to take over the reins at Summers Mill Farm in central Texas. A commercial breeding and sales preparation facility which currently houses more than 100 thoroughbreds, Summers Mill offers the services of some of Texas' top sires, including Top Avenger, Explosive Wagon and Triple Sec.

"We think, as many people do, that Texas is racing's last frontier in this country," Quirk said of the circumstances which prompted him and his wife, Linda, also a veterinarian, to pull up stakes and move to Texas. "There's been a substantial interest in thoroughbreds in Texas for a number of years, and that's indicated by the fact that many farms and operations in Lexington have significant Texas involvement.

"The horse is a big part of Texas' heritage, and Texans seem to enjoy anything that is associated with Texas," Quirk continued. "I think racing is going to be a prime example of that interest. Obviously Texas has a ways to go in thoroughbred breeding to achieve any degree of national prominence, but with what we see as a prospectively lucrative state-

bred program, and the potential for high-quality racing to develop in Texas, we think that bodes well for the industry as a whole.

"Texas is bound to take off, and we'd like to be a part of that."

Another transplant from a major racing state is breeder Jim Cottrell, a resident of California for nearly 30 years before moving to Texas in 1980. Cottrell, who entered the thoroughbred world in 1976 with a yearling purchase at Del Mar, has bred two graded stakes winners during the past six years. His Grade II Ohio Derby winner, Jim's Orbit, won \$600,720 in a two-year racing career (which included a win in the 1987 Grade III Kentucky Derby Trial) before succumbing to a severe case of colic in 1989.

The Cottrell-bred Darby's Daughter, winner of the Grade II Miss Grillo Stakes in 1988, earned more than \$435,000. Cottrell has also bred and/or owned numerous other stakes horses, in his own name and in partnership. The former cosmetics company executive and his wife, Gloria, operate the 110-acre El Rancho Cottrell in Cleburne, Texas.

Even when the prospect of pari-mutuel passage during the early 1980's looked dim, Cottrell said, "Just the thought of how great the future of Texas racing could be is what has kept us here. I had enough vision to see that Texas

thoroughbreds could become a fantastic market. In earlier years, I'd met numerous Texas owners racing their horses at tracks all over this country, and I knew that if pari-mutuel racing ever returned to Texas, it would be a major racing state.

"Aside from the great enthusiasm Texans have for the horse, Texas thoroughbred racing is destined to be successful, based on the large population alone. I'm real excited about all of it—all that's happened so far, and all that's going to happen soon."



ASSAULT—Triple Crown champion in 1946.