

Winners

By Anne Lang

Leland Cook

It would be too easy, as well as inaccurate, to pigeonhole Leland Cook as a wealthy yet woefully naive Texan trying to buy his way into the elite minority of racing's upper ranks.

A relative newcomer to Thoroughbreds, Cook has drawn notice for some generous spending at yearling sales in Texas and Kentucky over the past year. But, far from being the result of impulsive bidding by an uninformed neophyte, those purchases were actually a meticulously calculated step in a multi-faceted grand plan.

As a horseman committed to the development of a model breeding and racing enterprise, Cook is not unique in the basic formula he has already applied toward that goal: acquiring the land, adding the structures and buying some mares, while simultaneously undertaking an intensive self-taught study of bloodlines and industry trends.

What sets Cook apart from his more conservative peers—particularly in Texas, where a major racetrack has yet to be built—is his willingness to take bold leaps of faith in defiance of today's ailing market; indeed, to take whatever action he deems vital to the success of his vision.

To Cook, that might mean shelling out a total of \$66,000 for two well-conformed yearlings with top pedigrees—as he did at the recent Texas Thoroughbred Breeders' Association select yearling sale, where the average on 173 horses sold was \$7,487. Cook's outlay, which ranked him as third-highest buyer (and the first among Texans), included a filly by Tejano who was the \$36,000 sale-topper; and a Spend a Buck colt for \$30,000.

Cook was also one of the leading buyers at last year's TTBA vendue, purchasing three yearlings for \$48,500. And, while only a handful of the numerous Texans who attend the annual fall year-



ANNE LANG PHOTO

ling sales at Keeneland are serious buyers, Cook was among the latter in 1991, bringing home four more choice prospects. All seven horses are now at Louisiana Downs, awaiting their starts later in the fall.

A childhood that included after-school work on ranches near his West Texas home was Cook's introduction to the horse world. After being graduated from Texas A & M University with an agricultural economics degree, Cook took a job as foreman at a cattle ranch in Abilene. Along the way he met Sue, his wife of 39 years and the mother of their five sons—all of whom came to share their father's passion for horses in a racetrack setting.

"When the kids were little, Sue and I used to take them to the races at Ruidoso," recalled Cook, now 58. "We could get the whole family in for a buck. We couldn't afford to bet, but we played like we did."

These days, the Cooks' financial picture has improved considerably. In rural Corsicana, a town 60 miles southeast of Dallas where the family has lived for 25

years, Cook owns and manages a merchandise vending machine company and a company that publishes games for Nintendo computer systems. A third Cook-owned company in San Diego designs software for Nintendo. The booming success of all three businesses has enabled Cook to implement the first phases of his master plan.

In 1987, Cook developed 1,100 acres of bare land into Richland Ranch, which originally functioned as a training center for Sue's Arabian show horses. By then, Cook was already testing the waters of Thoroughbred ownership, teaming up with Louisiana trainer Gerald Romero to buy a \$20,000 claimer.

The Romero/Cook partnership grew during the late 1980's with the purchase of more claimers. One of those horses was Senor Foxfire, a son of Spanish Drums claimed by Cook in 1990 for \$40,000. Now still running at six, Senor Foxfire's four stakes wins and four stakes placings have contributed to career earnings of \$263,325. The horse is Cook's only stakes winner to date, but several more claimers are in training with Eldridge Hebert in Louisiana.

Cook likes to tell the story of a Staunch Avenger filly named Boborina, whom he bought with her dam in 1987. Both horses had been the victims of severe neglect. Cook bred the mare and decided to campaign the filly after watching her tear around the pasture.

"She was my bargain-basement horse," Cook said of Boborina, who won four races and less than \$9,000 in 12 career starts, but whom Cook admired for her gumption. "That's part of the fun of Thoroughbred racing. Everybody's looking for a big horse, but you can have a great time with a horse you didn't expect anything from. And I've yet to see an ugly horse in the winner's circle." ■