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**PROFILE**

A RACING  
LIFE WELL  
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# LENNIE RECABAREN

BY EMILY SHIELDS

Lennie Recabaren was honored in the winner's circle at Del Mar Nov. 30, with the ceremony balanced between festive birthday party—Recabaren had just turned 98—and lifetime achievement award. He has been a member of the Del Mar Turf Club for 57 years and was even present on the track's opening day in 1937. In the interim Recabaren has owned Thoroughbreds, loved deeply, and helped shape San Diego as it is known today.

"My whole family was in

racing," Recabaren explained, noting that his Peruvian grandfather used to have Arabian racehorses. "My mother got me interested in racing when I was quite small."

Recabaren was working as a laborer for Paramount Pictures when he and some other workers heard about a new track opening down south, and that they could take the train. He remembers the experience like it was yesterday.

"On opening day Betty Grable was there," he said. "The stars all came down. And after the races, the party

kept going. They would bring in a band and swing dance out on the patio."

Wife Valerie added, "It makes today's opening days look like child's play."

Recabaren has lived a life of vast experiences. He was a Master Mariner, certified to handle any tonnage of ship on any ocean. He served in World War II, the Korean war, and the Vietnam war, then later opened a bar. He had a fleet of tuna clipper ships and would ultimately build a major golf course.

In his early years at the University of Southern California, Paramount wanted



Valerie and Lennie Recabaren, center, celebrate Lennie's 98th birthday and his life achievement award in the Del Mar winner's circle

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to groom Recabaren from the ground up, meaning that he steam-hosed porta potties and worked as a grip and electrician before he landed some parts in feature films.

“They called him Clark Gilbert,” said Valerie, “because he sounded like Clark Gable but looked like Gilbert Roland.”

During his time with Paramount, Recabaren met his first wife of 38 years, Joanne. Shortly thereafter, he became best friends with trainer Farrell Jones.

“We were born one day apart, Sept. 29 and Sept. 30,” Recabaren said, although Jones was three years his senior.

“That’s how the racing ball got started,” Valerie said.

“Lennie and Joanne were best friends with Farrell Jones and his wife, Helen. They had some wild times.”

Recabaren owned the stallion Tahitian King, a 10-time winner who stood in California. Jones encouraged Recabaren to breed some mares to the stakes-winning stallion, which kick-started a medium-sized breeding operation.

At one point Recabaren had 31 mares, keeping them at a ranch in Julian, Calif., and breeding to some of John and Betty Mabee’s best stallions, such as Habitony. Tahitian King sired 24 winners from 41 starters; most were bred by Recabaren. The filly Tahitian Tease won 11 times while Tahiti Double won three starts in his lone season on the track before an untimely death.

Joanne Recabaren died of cancer, leaving her husband heartbroken. Four years later Valerie was having dinner with a cousin when a man—Recabaren—approached her and told her to “forget the other man I was going to marry.” He called me three times and I turned him down each time,” Valerie said. “But the more he spoke about horses, the more I was intrigued. It grew from there.”

Valerie knew something about horses because she had grown up on a Quarter Horse farm in San Diego. She still rides three times a week and won events at major shows just last season with her recently retired Quarter Horse. She and Recabaren have been married and living in Rancho Santa Fe for the last 31 years.

Valerie loved to name the horses. The California-bred filly Flying Heart, by Wekiva Springs, was a winner at Del Mar. Homebred Sailor Erin, a gelding by Star of Erin, was claimed away by

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— Valerie Recabaren

movie star Mickey Rooney when he tried his luck at racing. Another filly, Happy Honey, won under the tutelage of Jones’ grandson Marty, who became the third generation of Jones trainers to handle the Recabaren horses after his father, Gary, retired.

The Recabarens joke about their “Wall of Shame,” what they call the wall where they have hung numerous 8x10 win photos from the California racetracks.

“We could have put four kids through Harvard with what we spent,” Valerie said.

Racing is ultimately how Recabaren made his biggest contribution to his community. Friend and longtime horseman Frank Vessels, who had a golf course next door to his Vessels Stallion Farm, encouraged Recabaren to develop one as well.

“Frank was making more money off of the golf course than the horses,”

Valerie said.

Recabaren Ranch Development Company, which amounted to Lennie in a rented Caterpillar tractor, built one of the first public golf courses in San Diego.

“A lot more people can afford to go to McDonald’s than the Four Seasons,” Valerie said. “And everyday people can’t afford to be a country club member. The public golf course was so successful that he added lit tennis courts so that people could play tennis after work. He lit the golf course as well. Lennie was kind of a visionary in that regard.”

A Motel 6 and a restaurant are adjacent to the River Valley Golf Course; Valerie says the whole corner is, “Lennie’s baby. He had the presence of mind to make it public, and it was always full. It was already up and running when we started courting.”

The ceremony at Del Mar in the fall celebrated the long, outstanding life of Lennie Recabaren.

“It was a wonderful party that Jenine Sahadi was instrumental in throwing,” said Valerie. Sahadi, a former trainer, conditioned Flying Heart for the couple. “The employees of the Turf Club and (Del Mar’s president) Joe Harper helped pull it off. We had the best time.”

The 2017 Breeders’ Cup at Del Mar was a delight for the couple, who had been anticipating the day for years. The only opening day—summer or fall—that Recabaren has missed was during his time in the Vietnam War.

“We look around now and see a lot of the folks—employees or patrons—are gone,” Valerie said. “Lennie is the last man standing; he’s even outliving presidents. He is 98 and feeling great. I’m darn sure I’m going to get him to 100.” **CTB**