



Mike Connors

Western Style

By Mary Forney

Northern California owner Mike Connors' experience in racing has, well, really run the gamut. His first racehorse was a Harness horse, but he eventually moved to Thoroughbreds, where he began by claiming horses in partnership, then claiming on his own before eventually moving on to purchasing "better quality" horses at auction, in partnerships.

Connors' association with Harness racing began in his youth in Sacramento, where his family has lived for seven generations. His father's family first settled at the Port of Sacramento in the mid-1800's, around the time of the California Gold Rush. It was also about the time that America's oldest one-mile race-track was built in Pleasanton, the city Connors now calls home.

"My father was 40 years old, and my mother 20 when they married, and they had four boys. There's never been a girl born in the entire family line. In fact, my brother just had another baby boy," said Connors, who also has two boys.

"My mom and my aunt used to take me to the State Fair in the sixties, and back then during the summer it was a harness meeting," Connors said. "So my first horse was a Harness horse." After graduating from Sacramento State, Connors moved to the Bay Area and spent 17 years working for semiconductor companies in Silicon Valley. It was during those

years that he became involved in Thoroughbred ownership, purchasing his first Thoroughbred racehorse in 1987.

"I got my first horse with a guy named Jerry Behman. Jerry passed away recently; but during the 80's and 90's he was one of the top claiming owners in the Bay Area. I started claiming horses with Jerry, and that's how I got introduced to owning Thoroughbreds." These days, Connors has eight to ten racehorses, all in partnerships, trained by Brian Koriner in Southern California, Andy Mathis in Northern California, and Chuck Peery in Kentucky.

"I went through about a five-year period where I just was claiming on my own; I didn't want to have to worry about partners," Connors explained. "I had a pretty good run, but at the end of the day it's tough to sustain it. And I wanted to get more expensive horses, and step up to the next category." And step up he did!

In 2007, Connors bought Shore Do from the Barretts March Sale of Selected Two-Year-Olds in Training. Shore Do was picked out of the sale by Peery for Connors and his three partners – Jim Hawkins, Kevin Jacobsen, and Terry Jacobsen – who paid \$100,000 for the son of Include. Shore Do would provide the partnership with the thrill of a Breeders' Cup race.



“We had a lot of offers for that horse,” Connors said. “After he broke his maiden at Del Mar, we were offered \$750,000. And for two of my partners it was their first horse. They’re wealthy guys, and splitting up \$750,000 didn’t sound too great. So we ran in the north,” he contin-

couldn’t even sit in the stands, and the track was a complete mess. Mike Smith just galloped him around the track.” Still, the excitement of going to the Breeders’ Cup was something Connors and his partners will never forget.

Connors’ success with Barretts sale



Shore Do and trainer Chuck Peery.

ued. “We ran pretty good, and we got an offer for \$750,000 for half the horse.”

The partners again decided against selling, and took the horse to Monmouth for the Breeders’ Cup Juvenile. Unfortunately, the 2007 Breeders’ Cup World Thoroughbred Championships at Monmouth Park were contested in cold, rainy conditions.

“The weather at the track was absolutely horrible,” Connors recalled. “You

graduates goes back even further, when he bought Halo Tyra from the May two-year-olds in training sale in 2001.

“She was a Texas-bred, and she worked just super,” he said. “We bought her for \$63,000, won a couple of stakes races with her in Northern California, and then we sold her to a guy in Texas for \$250,000. And that all happened in a year and a half!” Halo Tyra was another of Peery’s selections at the sale.

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“Chuck has picked out all my horses,” said Connors, “And he’s still the guy I rely on. He’s got a great horse eye. And the fun part is bringing new people into racing,” he continued. “For instance, with Shore Do there were two new owners. And this last year at the weanling sale in Kentucky I brought in partners and we bought weanlings.

In the late 1990’s, Connors was tired of “pedaling chips” in Silicon Valley, and decided to make a career change. He now owns and operates Hap’s – an upscale steak and seafood restaurant and local institution in Pleasanton. Hap’s was originally a cowboy bar in the 1940’s, then a restaurant

“You throw your money into the kiddie,” Connors said. “That’s what this business is; you don’t see a lot of paperwork flying around. We don’t use contracts, we shake hands. And I form partnerships with guys I know can afford it.”

Connors also believes racing partnerships are about having fun, and said, “When we have a horse running, we go and make a day of it – or a couple days of it! It’s about entertainment,” he said. “It’s about fun, but you’ve got to turn a buck. I tell people, ‘Don’t expect to get your money back. It’s a high-risk venture.’ The goal is to sustain yourself in the business so you don’t have to keep putting money back in. Then, you run the



Connors and Kevin Jacobsen at the Pleasanton Simulcast Center.

beginning in the 1950’s.

“It was originally a house, and they tacked a storefront on it,” Connors said. “Then they tacked something on to the back. It was three different buildings.” In 1999, John Madden, the former NFL player and head coach of the Oakland Raiders, and well-known football commentator, bought the building, and Connors renovated it and re-opened Hap’s. Connors meets a lot of potential horse owners in his line of work.

“I get asked a lot, ‘How do I get into the horse business?’ – especially at the restaurant. This is an old horse town, and there’s a lot of racing history in Pleasanton.” So Connors has brought several new people into racehorse ownership, Pleasanton style.

Although common advice today is to “get it in writing,” Pleasanton is still a town where horse partnerships are often sealed with a handshake, just as they were in the old west.

horses where you can win, and be aggressive.” In listening to Connors and his partners, it is apparent that it’s mostly about the fun of the sport.

“At the simulcast center, we always sit at the bar on the end corner,” he said. “We call it the hole.” It’s a nickname they came up with years ago when the simulcast center was housed in an old exhibit hall at the Alameda County Fairgrounds.

“They had cut the building in half, and it was cold and dingy, so we started calling it the hole. But it was perfect for us, because we didn’t have to drive all the way to Golden Gate Fields.”

Today’s Pleasanton Simulcast Center, which opened in 1991, is one of the most attractive and comfortable of California’s off-track betting facilities. You can find Connors and one or more of his racing partners there most days, unless they have a horse running – in which case you will find them at the track.