

Luck o'the Irish

Owner Profile: Ted and Danny O'Neill *By Mary Forney*

On a crisp and clear December morning, the O'Neills – Ted and Noreen, and Ted's younger brother Danny – were out at Golden Gate Fields checking on their horses, in O.J. Jaregui's and Steve Specht's barns. The three petted and fed peppermints to their favorites, and found some time to walk a horse or two out into the bright sunshine.

"People ask me where I came up with the name 'I'monmywayhome,'" said Danny as he dodged an attempted nip from the strapping gelding. "I tell them, 'That's what I was always sayin' to my wife!'" This statement was followed by the infectious lilt of Irish laughter. That, along with their beaming personalities, over the years has made the O'Neills well-known and popular fixtures at both Bay Meadows and Golden Gate Fields. And, then there's the Irish brogue, still so thick one would think they were in the middle of County Wicklow!

The O'Neill brothers left their home in Ireland in their early twenties and made their way to the United States, by way of

Canada. Ted and Danny are from a family of six boys and seven girls, and nine of the siblings eventually settled in and around San Francisco.

Ted left Ireland in 1949, stopped first in Halifax, then literally worked his way west across Canada and eventually to San Francisco. As he traversed North America, he held a variety of jobs. At Ford Motor Co. he worked in the parts department because, "I was a farmer back home and knew all the parts for farm equipment!" He worked in the lead, zinc, and aluminum mines, drove big rigs hauling snow, and eventually as a member of the steel workers' union. By 1964, Ted had found his way to San Francisco, where he started a building construction company with his brother John.

Danny followed in 1956, also by way of Canada, where he labored as a plumber, iron worker, and plasterer before eventually getting his general contractor's license and joining his brothers in the construction business. Although the brothers started out together, they went their separate ways in business after a few





Danny O'Neill with I'monmywayhome and trainer Steve Specht.

The brothers are equally effusive about Northern California racing. "I think it's going to get better now, with this particular track," said Ted about the Tapeta surface. "You're more comfortable now that if you send a horse out in a race, you're going to get him back in the same condition you sent him out."

ing. "I think it's going to get better now, with this particular track," said Ted about the Tapeta surface. "You're more comfortable now that if you send a horse out in a race, you're going to get him back in the same condition you sent him out."

The O'Neill's have been around horses all their lives. They grew up with horses at their family home, Old Court Farm in County Wicklow, which was just a stone's throw from two racecourses – the Curragh, home of Irish Flat racing and the largest horse training center in the country, and Punchestown, a national hunt and flat racing venue. "We went to the races whenever we had the money," said Ted, adding, "And that was pretty seldom, believe me!"

Of the nine O'Neill siblings who came to California, only three brothers got involved in racehorse ownership. The third was John, who owned and raced the great Wickerr, for whom a stakes race at Del Mar is named, until he was claimed by Bobby Frankel for owner Edmund Gann. Sadly, John passed away a year ago November – one month after the death of their eldest brother, Michael. Michael was a hugely successful rancher and builder, but shied away from racehorse ownership. "We tried to get Michael into the racehorses two or three times," said Danny. "But he said he had enough of the horses in the old country!"

Ted's introduction into racehorse ownership was at Hastings Park in Vancouver, Canada, where he recalled taking his young wife to the races for the first time. "It was pouring rain," he said, "and Noreen liked a horse named Joey Mack. Well, she bet on Joey Mack and he paid about \$60 or \$70. Ever since then, I can't keep her away from the races!"

Noreen, on the other hand, insists, "I'm not as interested in the races; I like the breeding." And she's good at it. Among the horses Ted and Noreen have bred and raced is Kilgowan, winner of the Grade 3 El Camino Real Derby. Kilgowan is out of Port Roberto, whom the O'Neills purchased as a broodmare from the Keeneland January Sale in 1999. Port Roberto produced three other winners

years. Ted, now retired, explained, "There were too many fingers in the pie – and the pie didn't taste that good!" Danny still runs his own company, Hibernian Construction.

"I love San Francisco," proclaims Danny, who has a picturesque 180 degree view of the bay from his office windows. "Absolutely love it. You couldn't kick me out!" He continued, "Where could you find opportunities like you have in San Francisco? It's probably one of the best places in the United States, besides New York maybe, to be in the business that we're in."

"When we first started building in San Francisco," he explained, "all the builders that started at that time quit, because they couldn't make a go of it. And we just persevered, for some reason, without making any money. We weren't even making decent wages for a time. Then things started to pick up, in the early 70's. Property started increasing in value at that time. Then we could see a future in it."

"And then into the 90's everything just mushroomed," Danny continued. "Property tripled in value. And the more important thing was holding on to the property. It has quadrupled time and again since. We held on to a lot of property. Unfortunately we didn't hold on to enough! But the real estate business has been absolutely fantastic in San Francisco, partly because it's such a tiny place," he concluded.

The brothers are equally effusive about Northern California rac-



Ted and Noreen O'Neill with their filly North Beach and trainer O.J. Jaregui.

Ted and Noreen exclusively race horses they have bred, although Ted admits it's not for everyone. "You can go claim a two-year-old and race it in two weeks. When you breed your own, you have to wait at least two and a half years. And it's costing you money to feed those things," he said. "But we've got lots of patience!"



for them, including North Beach, winner of the Miss America Stakes at Golden Gate, before they sold her for \$200,000 at the Keeneland November Breeding Stock Sale.

Ted and Noreen exclusively race horses they have bred, although Ted admits it's not for everyone. "You can go claim a two-year-old and race it in two weeks. When you breed your own, you have to wait at least two and a half years. And it's costing you money to feed those things," he said. "But we've got lots of patience! And if you go down to the farm and see all those little babies running around with their mothers, you'll know what I mean – it's great!" Ted and Noreen purchased Ann Marie Farm in Paris, Kentucky, about five years ago. It's a small, private operation where they currently have 13 mares, about eight or nine yearlings, and some weanlings. They also have three two-year-olds that they plan to sell at Barretts' May Sale of Two-Year-Olds in Training. "I could have gotten two of them into the March Sale, but I didn't want to rush them," said Ted. "And, [bloodstock agent] Andy Havens told me they would be a standout in the May sale!"

Ted and Danny each maintain racing stables with about a dozen runners. Danny owns about half of his in partnership with his trainer, Steve Specht. Ted prefers to go it alone, racing in the name of Ann Marie Farm.

One of Danny's most successful runners was I'madrifter, who won the Grade 3 Berkeley Handicap and back-to-back runnings of the Lafayette Handicap at Golden Gate Fields, and earned more than \$290,000. With a twinkle in his eye, Danny recalled an inci-

dent involving I'madrifter: "Drifter was a little unfortunate," he said. "He was running in a \$100,000 race at Bay Meadows, had only about 20 yards to go, and he jumped the rail when the jockey hit him right-handed. He was two to three lengths in front. I was going down to get my picture taken when he jumped the rail!"

"Those things happen in racing," Danny said, adding, "When I first gave trainer John Canty a horse down south, he said, 'Don't ever come around here with a handkerchief?' And I never did."

"One in particular that I absolutely loved," Danny recalled, "was a mare called County Kildare. She ran 19 times and won eight. And every time that you would go to the paddock, if she started popping her lip, that's all you needed – you could go to the window!" She retired in 1985, and as evidence of her special place in his heart, Danny has named a 2006 I'madrifter filly County Kildare.

"I took care of her for 28 years after she finished racing," Danny said. "I used to bring her carrots at the ranch in Stockton. Then, when she passed away last year I figured I would like to go back for another one! She gave me a lot of glory."

Here's hoping for a continued glorious run for the boys from County Wicklow!