



CTBA Member
PROFILE

FRANCIS O'LEARY

BY EMILY SHIELDS

IRISH NATIVE
FINDS HIS
RACING
DREAM IN THE
GOLDEN STATE

Ireland native Francis O'Leary was always interested in racing back home, but a move to California in 2008 made the dream of owning racehorses and broodmares possible. Now O'Leary has expanded his reach to include co-ownership in a stallion, Gig Harbor.

The first horse O'Leary ever claimed was Hava Java, a 4-year-old California-bred daughter of Speed Dial who won on the day by five lengths at Golden Gate Fields. O'Leary, who had been attending the races regularly that season before he made the plunge into ownership, took her for \$5,000 from trainer Jerry Hollendorfer and turned her over to trainer William Morey. Hava Java won three times for her

new connections before she was claimed away just about four months later.

That experience got the ball rolling for O'Leary, who has owned a host of horses either solo or in partnership.

"I got into the breeding side shortly after," he said.

The man who introduced him to the breeding aspect of the sport was Joe Daehling, who owns Daehling Ranch in Elk Grove.

"I have to thank him," O'Leary said.

Several of O'Leary's mares are boarded at Daehling Ranch, with others at Ellen Jackson's Victory Rose Thoroughbreds in Vacaville.

O'Leary owns 15 mares, many of whom visited Gig Harbor this year. An 11-year-old son of City Zip out of the winning St. Jovite mare Miss Blue Grass, Gig Harbor

was a multiple stakes winner at Golden Gate Fields. He broke his maiden there first out in 2011, then added an allowance race shortly thereafter. Third in the Harry Henson Stakes at Hollywood Park, Gig Harbor returned to Golden Gate to win the \$75,000 Alcatraz Stakes going 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ miles on the grass. As a 4-year-old, Gig Harbor added an allowance and the \$53,000 Oakland Stakes before retirement.

Gig Harbor stands at Victory Rose Thoroughbreds for \$2,000. He has nine winners from 13 starters (69%), and 50% of his foals of racing age, which includes nine juveniles, have all raced. His leading earner is two-time winner Kerri's Choice, and he is the sire of a two-time winner in 2019, Shadrack.

"I'm pretty excited about him," O'Leary said of the chestnut stallion, one of only two sons of City Zip standing in the state. "I think he's an up-and-coming sire that is off to a good start. Not too many mares were bred to him in the past, but this year he got close to 40 mares."

On the track O'Leary is currently involved in 10 runners, six of which he owns outright, with the other four in partnership. On Raglan Road, by Sought After—Sparks Flying, by Najran, has made nine starts in 2019, for one win and seven top-three finishes. He has earned \$68,576.

Homebred On Raglan Road broke his maiden at Golden Gate April 27, driving home to win by four lengths under Silvio Amador.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF FRANCIS O'LEARY

Francis O'Leary's move to California made his racing dream come true



COURTESY OF VICTORY ROSE THOROUGHBREDS

O'Leary's stallion Gig Harbor stands at Ellen Jackson's Victory Rose Thoroughbreds

“ [O'Leary] shares his business. He doesn't use just one trainer or one farm; he spreads it around. That's an amazing sentiment. He wants to share the wealth, and he's brought a lot of people into the industry.”

— Ellen Jackson

Isidro Tamayo trains the 4-year-old bay gelding, who finished third in a pair of allowance races and then second at that level Sept. 1. O'Leary has since sold On Raglan Road's dam, Sparks Flying.

Another class runner for the outfit is a second homebred son of Sought After, Autumn Day. The 4-year-old out of the eight-time winning Candi's Gold mare Woodford Princess has won three of 11 lifetime starts, with three second-place efforts. Jamey Thomas trains the bay gelding, who won two races over the summer at Sacramento and Golden Gate. O'Leary co-owns Autumn Day with Thomas, Gregory Garber, Mallory and Stefan Kowalow, James Marsden, and Rob Smolich.

Although he has sold outright via auction—in 2015, an O'Leary-bred son of Idiot Proof topped the Northern California yearling sale at \$72,000—O'Leary prefers to find partners for the horses he breeds.

“I try to stay in on most of them, but it's not always easy,” he said.

Other horses he has been a part of include tough 16-time winner Gilligan, 11-time winner John Paul's Bet, and winning Cal-bred Peppered Forest, by Peppered Cat. One of his favorites was



O'Leary loves his animals and the industry

Thislegendofmine, a homebred son of Thisnearlywasmine who won two of 29 starts with 14 top-three finishes. O'Leary bred and raced the colt in partnership with Patrick Brogan, while Ellen Jackson trained.

Perhaps the best horse O'Leary had a hand in has been Unionize, a Kentucky-bred son of Dixie Union out of the grade 1-winning Cal-bred mare Silent Sighs, by Benchmark. He broke

his maiden at Santa Anita in 2010 for his breeders, Pam and Martin Wygod, and ultimately won five times in 20 starts, with six seconds and two thirds. O'Leary bred many of Unionize's best offspring, including winners Union Leader, Queen Helene, Union Smartie, Union Legend, and Union Wine.

A lengthy partnership with Jackson has led to a solid friendship as well.

“The one thing I find most compelling as far as having him as a partner is that he feels very strongly that in this industry everyone needs to be benefit,” said Jackson. “He shares his business. He doesn't use just one trainer or one farm; he spreads it around. That's an amazing sentiment. He wants to share the wealth, and he's brought a lot of people into the industry.”

She added, “He's really considerate with his animals. If you say something is wrong, he takes you at your word. He really cares about them, loves them, and loves the industry.”

Joe Daehling, the man responsible for O'Leary's leap into the breeding industry, said, “He knows how to select a good stallion and how to find a good mare. He's a very pleasant person to be around, and horses are in his Irish blood.” **CTB**