



TRAINER
PETER MILLER
RIDES RACING'S
ROLLER-COASTER

Thrills and Agony

BY TRACY GANTZ

Thirty-three days. That's the time it took Peter Miller to go from the highest high to the lowest low of his training career.

On Nov. 4, Miller won two Breeders' Cup events, the first World Championships victories of his career. Rockingham Ranch's Stormy Liberal captured the Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint (G1T), and three races later Rockingham and David Bernsen's Roy H took the TwinSpires Breeders' Cup Sprint (G1) in a performance that could well garner him an Eclipse Award.

On Dec. 7, the Lilac fire broke out and devastated the San Luis Rey training center in Bonsall, Calif., where Miller headquarters most of his stable. Several days later, after combing Del Mar and area farms for his horses, Miller knew the tragic truth—

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CHAD B. HARRON

Roy H edges past Imperial Hint to win the Breeders' Cup Sprint

Amalfi Drive, California Diamond, Doc Raj, Lizmeister, and Los Borrachos had perished in the fire.

That morning Miller had trained his horses at San Luis Rey as usual and then headed for Los Alamitos to saddle four horses during the afternoon program. Those four—Moon Kitty, Dissension, Donworth, and Got Even—had been stabled at San Luis Rey prior to shipping up for their races. Had they not competed at Los Alamitos, they would likely have joined the hundreds of horses that trainers and grooms had to let loose in an effort to save the animals' lives.

Roy H and Stormy Liberal weren't threatened because Roy H is stabled at Santa Anita with assistant trainer Ruben Alvarado, and Stormy Liberal was in Hong Kong for an eventual unplaced effort in the Dec. 10 Longines Hong Kong Sprint (G1).

"I left San Luis Rey about 11:30 that day," said Miller. "You could see some smoke, but it looked 10 to 15 miles away, so I wasn't too worried. But the winds were 50 miles an hour, and the fire moved quickly in the wrong direction."

By the time Moon Kitty, the first of Miller's four, won her race at Los Alamitos, Miller had heard that the training center was threatened. He drove back as fast as he could to try to help his crew.

It was an afternoon and evening Miller wishes he could forget. Several weeks later he still had five horses recuperating at the San Luis Rey Equine Hospital and employees recovering from everything ranging from bad coughs to a heart attack

and episodes of post-traumatic stress disorder.

"I haven't been sleeping all that well myself," said Miller, who by the end of December was getting his crew back to some semblance of normalcy.

Miller and his stable rose way above the norm at Del Mar on Breeders' Cup weekend. In addition to the two victories, the Miller-trained and Rockingham Ranch-owned Richard's Boy finished second in the Turf Sprint just a head behind Stormy Liberal.

"For me personally the Breeders' Cup was a great achievement," Miller noted. "I've been doing this since I was a kid, and to win a Breeders' Cup race—let alone two—and to run one-two is beyond a dream come true. It meant a lot for the whole crew. We're not doing this for money. We do it for the love of the game and the love of the horses. Those results really picked up everyone's head around the barn and raised our spirits, and I think that helped us get through the fire. If we weren't on such a high, I

think the fire would have hit us even harder mentally. So that helped everyone rebound and gave us perspective."

Miller and his team were among the heroes who joined together to help save the San Luis Rey victims. They jumped in because they love their charges, as a TVG video a couple of days later demonstrated. Assistant trainer Jehobany Alvarez tearfully reunited with unraced 2-year-old colt Worthy Turk, one of the many initially unidentified horses that ended up



ANNE EBERHARDT

Stormy Liberal, Richard's Boy run 1-2 in the Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint

rescued at Del Mar.

That love of horses attracted the 51-year-old Miller to racing: as a fan, a prospective jockey, and ultimately a trainer. He grew up in the greater Los Angeles area and summered in Del Mar because his mother and stepfather, Susan and Gary Hallman, owned racehorses.

"I was 8 years old the first time I came to the track," Miller said.

Gary Hallman, who died in 2013, worked in real estate and was a professional gambler. The latter avocation led to his stable name, Winning Ways Stable. Hallman's horses included multiple stakes winner Spirited Susan (a homebred), La Jolla Mile Stakes (G3T) winner Stone Point, and stakes winner Prince Worthy.

Young Peter enjoyed the atmosphere of the racetrack so much that by age 10 he attended a jockey school in Castaic, Calif.

"Quickly thereafter doctors told me I was going to be too big to be a jockey," said Miller. "I decided being a trainer was the next best thing."

Miller's success at training demonstrates that he likely made the right career choice. He has won fall training titles at Del Mar in 2014, 2016, and 2017, as well as summer titles in 2012 and 2014 (the latter tying with Jerry Hollendorfer). Miller tied with Richard Baltas as the leader during the fall 2017 Santa Anita meeting and won it outright in 2016. He also took the spring 2017 Santa Anita training title.

When Miller was in high school, he worked during the summers for Hallman's trainers, who included Joe Manzi, Hal King, and Mike Mitchell. The day after graduating from high school, in the summer of 1984, Miller headed to Hollywood Park in search of a full-time job.

"The first barn I went to was Charlie Whittingham's," Miller said. "My good fortune was that one of the grooms didn't show up, and they put me in a stall rubbing horses."

Miller spent three years working for Whittingham. As a swing groom, Miller

said he had the opportunity to handle just about every horse in the barn. In those years, Whittingham had the likes of back-to-back Santa Anita Handicap (G1) winners Lord At War and Greinton, champion turf female Estrapade, and multiple grade 1 stakes winner Prince True.

"It was great—every day I'd get to rub a different grade 1 winner," said Miller.



Miller in the paddock with major owner Gary Barber

Later, Miller regularly cared for Whittingham trainee Palace Music, a grade 1 winner who finished second by a head to Last Tycoon in the 1986 Breeders' Cup Mile (G1T).

Palace Music could be a handful and once bit Miller hard in the chest. Miller recalls writhing in pain on the ground, only for Whittingham to tell him, "It's a long way from your heart, son."

Miller got up and returned to work. Years later Palace Music sired two-time Horse of the Year Cigar.

Whittingham sent Miller, fellow groom Alex Hassinger, and exercise rider Janet Johnson to New York with a string of horses for several weeks in 1985 prior to the second Breeders' Cup at Aqueduct.

"We spent about two months in New York," Miller said. "That was quite an experience for an 18-year-old kid, to be living on the backstretch of Belmont Park."

The time with Whittingham taught Miller about "horses, life, responsibility, discipline—something I really needed at that time."

Miller moved on to become an assistant trainer for Jude Feld and then for

Don Warren, the private trainer for Old English Rancho.

"That's when I started to gallop horses," said Miller. "You had to do everything over there. You were an assistant trainer, a pony boy, hot walker, helping the vet. That was a good learning experience."

Miller went out on his own in the late 1980s as Hallman claimed a couple of horses to get him started. Miller noted that Dynashield became his first winner, with Gary Stevens aboard at Santa Anita. Miller also trained Spirited Susan through part of her career, saddling her to capture the 1991 CTBA Marian Stakes at Fairplex Park.

The Southern California training

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Miller and his wife, Lani, watch a race at Santa Anita



Miller with owner Sean Gerson in 2007

ranks proved tough to break into on a large scale during those years. Miller in 1992 decided to move to the San Diego area and step away for several years.

“I just galloped horses, dabbled in jewelry manufacturing, and learned to be a goldsmith,” Miller said. “I can make rings and set stones. I’d gallop in the morning and work as a goldsmith in the afternoon.”

Miller had grown up with Dean Greenman, whose father, Walter, was a major trainer at the time. The Greenmans asked him to take their second string at San Luis Rey Downs, which positioned the training center into becoming a major influence in Miller’s training career.

What role San Luis Rey will play in the Southern California stabling picture post-fire hasn’t yet been determined; its importance has ebbed and flowed over the years. Before Hollywood Park closed, the industry didn’t need the stall space at San Luis Rey, a facility about 100 miles south of Santa Anita. But San Luis Rey

became critical after Hollywood’s closure in late 2013.

Most trainers use San Luis Rey as an auxiliary location for second strings and young horses. Miller is one of the few who has based his operation there. He has proved that horses can successfully ship in from San Luis Rey, and he feels that the quieter surroundings benefit them.

The trainer also likes living in San Diego County. He and his wife, Lani, are raising their two sons, 5-year-old Jacob and 3-year-old Seth, in Encinitas, a picturesque beach town just north of Del Mar and southwest of San Luis Rey.

Since returning to training, Miller has been based at San Luis Rey almost exclusively, except for one period when the Southern California fund that pays for stabling and vanning didn’t include San Luis Rey. Miller had to move his stable to Hollywood Park temporarily.

San Luis Rey gave Miller the opportunity to demonstrate his ability with young stock, and he built that into a

business of about 80 horses. He said he readied many of Golden Eagle Farm’s runners, including Yearly Report and Western Hemisphere, both of whom went on to win stakes while trained by Bob Baffert.

“I became kind of the ‘second-string guy,’” Miller said.

Miller credits owner Sean Gerson for bringing the second-string guy up to a first-string basis. Gerson switched from Mitchell to Miller, who won his first grade 1 race when Set Play triumphed in the 2007 Del Mar Debutante Stakes (G1) for Gerson Racing and Charleville Stables.

Miller’s brother Billy introduced Peter to owner Gary Barber, now chairman and CEO of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Peter trains some of Barber’s horses to this day and did well with Comma to the Top, a horse Barber owned with fellow movie executives Roger Birnbaum and Kevin Tsujihara.

Comma to the Top earned \$1,349,406. The gelded son of Bwana Charlie won such races as the 2010 CashCall Futurity (G1) at Hollywood and the 2013 Tom Fool Handicap (G3) at Aqueduct.

Miller selected Comma to the Top out of the 2010 Ocala Breeders’ Sales’ spring 2-year-old sale for only \$22,000.

“He’s at Old Friends in Lexington,” said Miller. “He was a really neat, cool horse, and one of the first big horses I had.”

“You’re never as good as you think you are, and you’re never as bad as you think you are. You try to stay even-keeled. It’s not easy to do.”

— PETER MILLER



Miller going over tactics in the paddock at Santa Anita

Miller bought Appealing Tale for \$95,000 out of the 2012 OBS select 2-year-old sale. For Barber, sometimes in partnership, Appealing Tale became a multiple graded winner and earned \$773,222. Miller later turned the gelding into a stable pony.

While Miller acquires horses through a variety of resources, he has found particular success at 2-year-old sales. He purchased Roy H for \$310,000 at the 2014 Keeneland April 2-year-old sale for Gary Hartunian's Rockingham Ranch.

"I like the 2-year-old sales more so than yearling sales," said Miller. "I like to see them run and have them six months further down the road. The risk to reward is better on 2-year-olds. We've done most of our best buys at OBS."

Primarily through word of mouth, Miller over the years picked up several major owners. David Lanzman recommended him to Hartunian, who has become Miller's biggest client. Of the 75 horses in Miller's care, he has about 40 for Hartunian. Other owners include Kirk and Judy Robison and Richard Pell, the latter the owner of grade 3 stakes winner Calculator, a horse Miller bought for \$132,000 at the 2014 OBS spring 2-year-old sale.

Miller keeps an ownership stake in several of his horses under the name of Altamira Racing Stable. He owns multiple graded winner St. Joe Bay with Bernsen and Donworth with the Robisons.

As the Santa Anita winter meeting began, Donworth signaled the resurgence of Miller's stable following the fire. Though Donworth ran fourth

at Los Alamitos the day of the fire, he bounced back to capture a race at Santa Anita Dec. 30.

"Training horses is a roller-coaster ride, with lots of highs and lows," said Miller. "You're never as good as you think you are, and you're never as bad as you think you are. You try to stay even-keeled. It's not easy to do. You've got to appreciate the good times because you know they're not going to last. Going from one of the best days of your professional life to one of the worst, it's hard to handle. But we won three on New Year's Eve, and we're on top of the standings at Santa Anita right now. It'll take more than a fire to keep us down." **BH**

Tracy Gantz is the Southern California correspondent for BloodHorse.



Miller with Richard's Boy

GRADED WINNERS TRAINED BY Peter Miller

Appealing Tale
Belvoir Bay
Big Cazanova
Calculator
Chief Havoc
Comma to the Top
Fast Parade
Finnegans Wake
Heir Kitty
Majestic City
Poshsky
Reneesgotzip
Roy H
Set Play
Solid Wager
St. Joe Bay
Stormy Liberal