

Swaps

THE CALIFORNIA COMET

BY BARRY IRWIN

by **DEBRA GINSBURG**

Forty five years before Tiznow appeared on the scene, a golden chestnut named Swaps became the first California-bred horse to wear the title of North America's Horse of the Year. While he was the first Cal-bred since Morvich 33 years earlier to win the Kentucky Derby, it was not for this accomplishment that he earned racing's highest honor. It was in honor of his 4-year-old campaign in 1956, in which he captured eight of 10 starts and set or equaled world records from a mile and 70 yards to 1 5/8 miles while toting imposts of up to 130 pounds.

Swaps is the subject of the latest book in Eclipse Press' Thoroughbred Legends series, a massive undertaking by *The Blood-Horse* to acquaint today's racing fans with many of the great Thoroughbreds of yesteryear. It was written by Team Valor President Barry Irwin, a California native and former managing editor/advertising manager of this publication during the early 1970s.

"Swaps has always been my favorite horse, ever since I was a kid," Irwin

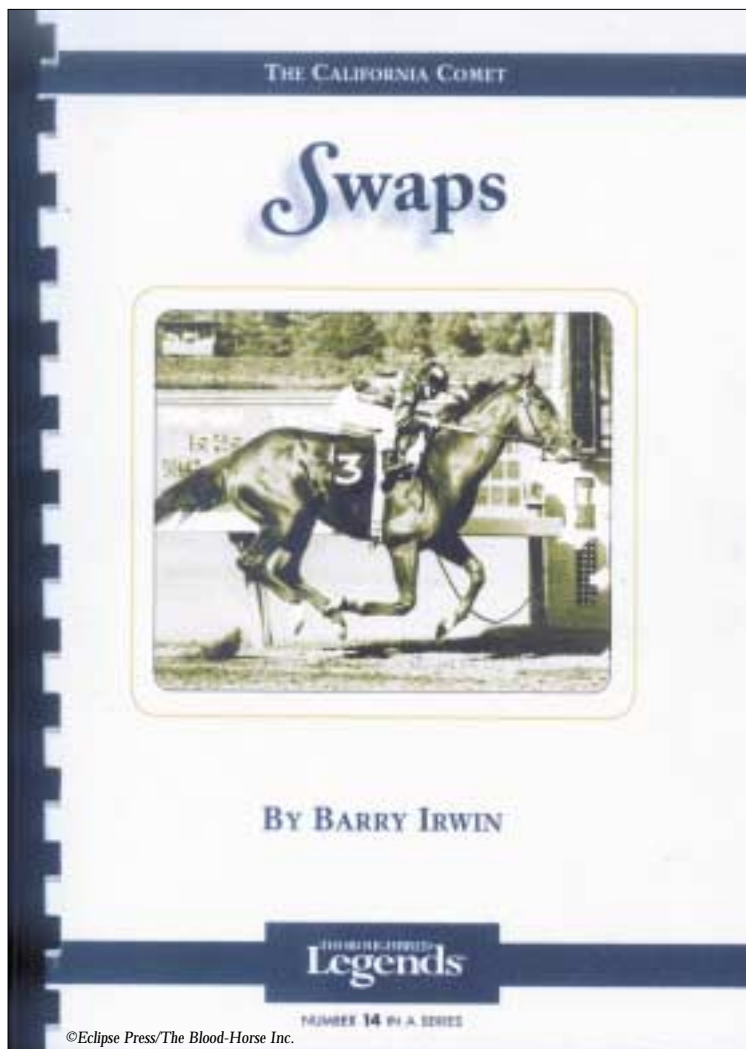
said. "I don't recall if I saw him in person, but I did watch his races on television. He was definitely the horse that drew me into racing."

ries ended and the tall tales began.

"Rex Ellsworth and Mish (Mesach) Tenney really challenged the racing establishment back then, much like the way guys like D. Wayne Lukas and Bob Baffert do today," he added. "People either loved them or hated them, and the stories varied wildly. Sometimes it was difficult to know what really happened from what people tell you, especially since the two principal characters are gone and no longer available for interviews themselves. There are still people out there who have strong opinions about Ellsworth and Tenney to this day."

Irwin has done a masterful job digging through the tall tales to present an accurate portrayal of Swaps and his colorful connections. Much of the information he includes in the book has never been published before now.

Although Ellsworth and Tenney have always been portrayed as hardened cowboys from the Arizona back country, Irwin gives us a glimpse into their human side. While they were not likely to treat their horses like pampered hot-house roses, it was very evident they loved Swaps. The Cal-bred, in turn, was a well-trained, gentle-



Irwin explained that one of the challenges he encountered while researching Swaps was that there were so many stories about the horse's colorful connections that he often didn't know where the true sto-

manly colt who would follow Rex and Mish around the barn without so much as a halter or lead and even allowed a young girl in a wheelchair to visit him in his stall. Horsemen that Irwin interviewed had never before seen such interaction between horses and humans. It was Swaps' gentle disposition and trust in the men around him that helped him survive the life-threatening injury that ended his racing career.

It had been previously told that after Swaps showed his heels to Nashua and the top Eastern colts in

days before the match race with Nashua and his status appeared doubtful, Arlington Park didn't want the colt's injury to be made public for fear it would keep the crowds away. Track management pressured them to run Swaps and he was soundly defeated by the Eastern colt.

The following year, with Swaps winning everything in sight, his connections tried to arrange a rematch. Nashua's people were not interested. The horse had just been syndicated for a record price and they were afraid a



the Derby, Ellsworth and Tenney challenged racing's oldest tradition and took their golden colt home to California without even attempting to go for the Triple Crown. Irwin pointed out, however, that Swaps could have been supplemented to the Preakness in those days, but not the Belmont. Therefore, his connections figured it was pointless to run him in the race if he wasn't eligible for the final leg. Swaps' troublesome foot had also flared up after the Derby, so it was doubtful he would have been able to run in the Preakness.

Irwin himself also expressed his amazement over the power racetracks had in the 1950s to suppress negative publicity. When Swaps was sore in the

defeat by Swaps would bring his value down. The two horses never raced against each other again, although Swaps later joined his old foe at Spendthrift Farm.

The book concludes with Swaps' stud career in Kentucky and the racing careers of his successful offspring, Kentucky Derby winner Chateaugay and his champion fillies Affectionately and Primonetta. A revelation to this reader was the fact he was also the sire of the first yearling to sell for six figures at auction. All told, *Swaps* is an entertaining, informative book about California's first national champion and should be a welcome addition to any racing fan's bookshelf when it is released this month.

The Author: A Local Talent

Although Barry Irwin is best known as the president of Team Valor racing partnerships, he actually began his career as a



Benolt photo

turf writer for *The Thoroughbred of California* magazine in 1970.

"When I came for my interview with Brian Sweeney for a staff writer job, they were way behind on their deadline and needed someone to write a report about the 1970 Belmont Stakes," he recalled. "Brian asked if I could write a story on the Belmont. I told him I watched it on television and figured I could do a creditable enough write-up if I had to. He found an empty office and put me to work."

"I really enjoyed my job with the CTBA," he added. "It was a wonderful time to be a turf writer in this country, with Secretariat and all those great champions during that decade."

Irwin eventually managed both the editorial and advertising departments of the magazine before moving on to pursue other interests in the racing industry. He was a regular correspondent for *The Blood-Horse*, *Thoroughbred Record* and *Daily Racing Form* before becoming actively involved with forming racing partnerships that give fans a taste of racehorse ownership.

First, with Clover Racing Stable, and later as the head of Team Valor, he has syndicated and raced such major stakes winners as Prized, Martial Law, Star of Cozzene, Captain Bodgit and The Deputy (Ire). Irwin also purchased Moscow Ballet in Ireland and brought him back to this country to stand at stud. Now one of California's leading stallions, he is the sire of Team Valor's outstanding filly Golden Ballet, a dual grade I winner in 2001.

Barry lives in Versailles, Ky., with his wife Becky and daughter Chloe.