



# Dream Believers

by RUDI GROOTHEDDE  
Photos by Ron Mesaros

When Becky and Craig Shields moved from the East Coast to California in 1981, they brought with them the dream of eventually owning a ranch that was both their home and a commercial breeding farm. Then in 1991, they took their first serious step into the Thoroughbred business with the purchase of the broodmare Nickle Lady. Less than eight years later, they acquired a 45-acre farm in the beautiful Santa Ynez Valley. Today, Shields Thoroughbreds is now not only home to about 30 Thoroughbreds but is ready to welcome many more in its quest to fulfill the dreams of this dynamic, determined and dedicated couple.

Becky confides that, "I grew up in Maryland and I've always wanted to be involved in the horse business." This kind of passion for horses, similarly exhibited by her husband, has already seen them achieve a great deal of success. Their patient attitude to the game has also been a deciding factor, as Craig is quick to explain. "Many people make decisions that favor short-term revenues at the expense of the long-term expansion of their asset base. When Becky and I got into the business in 1991, we were determined not to make that mistake."

With this in mind, Craig notes that one of the major factors assisting them in this regard is "The wonderful bonus program for California-breds that offers an enormous incentive to

breeders and owners in the Golden State." Furthermore, Becky adds that, "We feel you can raise as good or better horse here in California as anywhere." Thus it is clearly apparent to the clients of Shields Thoroughbreds that when it comes to looking after their horses, Craig and Becky will certainly honor the farm's motto of "We Protect Your Investment."

## A Solid Foundation

The reason for their own success so far is rooted mainly in the exploits of their foundation mare, the aforesaid Nickle Lady. Becky reflects on their astute acquisition by saying, "We only had \$20,000 to spend when we went to the Keeneland November '91 sale with Andy (Havens) where, for two days, we carefully looked for a mare that would fit our program. Thank goodness we didn't get the mare we initially bid on as we probably wouldn't be in the business today, as we were then able to buy Nickle Lady for the exact amount that we were willing to invest."

She adds that, "She was a dream broodmare. Got in foal every time, never had a problem foaling, and even had great foals that brought good money." Sadly, Nickle Lady died in 2000, but her legacy is alive and well at Shields Thoroughbreds where one of her daughters (B. B. Queen) and a couple of her granddaughters (Choclatier and Tingle Me) are part of Becky and Craig's current band of 10 quality broodmares. For the couple, what is important is "to buy a mare for who she is, not for whom she is in foal to."

However, that does not mean they believe in cutting corners when it comes to stallion choices. In reality, it is quite the contrary, when Becky states that, "Because our primary objective is to sell our horses, as opposed to racing them, they have



to be by good stallions or no one will buy them.” She adds that, “With the high number of quality sires now standing in California—and being brought in on a continual basis—we think that, as local breeders, we have a real opportunity to utilize them for future success within the lucrative Cal-bred owners, breeders and stallion awards programs.”

### The Right Advice

“He gave me his business card and I can remember writing on the back of it ‘honest and down to earth guy.’” That’s how Becky glowingly describes bloodstock agent Andy Havens, one of the other reasons why Shields Thoroughbreds is where it is today. Since meeting at an owners’ seminar in Del Mar over a decade ago, they have successfully worked together in establishing the farm as a significant force in the local breeding fraternity. “We make a good team. Andy is a conservative realist while Craig and I tend to push the envelope a bit, so we usually end up meeting in the middle somewhere,” says Becky.

With respect to their neighboring breeders, Craig and Becky are swift to acknowledge the good two-way relationship they have enjoyed with them right from the farm’s beginnings. “We have supported the local farms by breeding to their top stallions, and they have helped us with their advice and support. From the Stulls (Tom and Debra) of Tommy Town Thoroughbreds and their farm manager Jim Wilson, to Pat Youngman and John Turner of Pepper Oaks Farm and, of course, to Russell Drake of River Edge Farm, they have all been there for us, answering our questions and giving their invaluable advice when we have asked for it.” Recently asked to join the board of directors of the Santa Ynez Valley Thoroughbred Association, Becky is “excited and proud to now be a part of such a fine organization.”

### A Well-Meshed Operation

The farm itself boasts all the necessary facilities for success, including both a main barn and back barn of 42 stalls in total (including a 12x24 foaling stall), along with 18 paddocks and pastures that range in size from 50’x120’ to three acres. All of these fall under the watchful eye of Farm Manager Bob Callahan, who has been with Becky and Craig almost since day one, and his assistant Mario Cabrera.

Shields Thoroughbreds also utilizes the “Foal Alert System”



## SHIELDS THOROUGHBREDS

### FACT-FILE

#### Owners:

Becky & Craig Shields

#### Farm Manager:

Bob Callahan

#### Physical Address:

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#### Web Site:

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#### E-Mail Address:

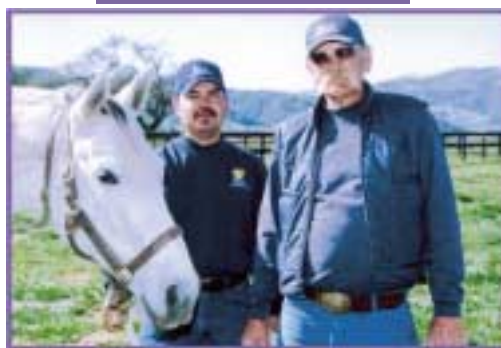
[cshields@theshieldsgroup.com](mailto:cshields@theshieldsgroup.com)

#### Services:

Breeding, Boarding, Lay-up &  
Sales Preparation

#### Current Horse Population:

Broodmares	.....16
Foals	.....8
Yearlings	.....5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>.....29</b>



Mario Cabrera and Farm Manager Bob Callahan (right) with Lindsali (Two Punch-Gateway South, by At the Threshold)

to monitor the foaling progress of its mares, and Bob proves he is its biggest fan by saying that, “It is the most accurate system I have ever seen and the beauty of it is that it allows the normal farm operations to continue without interruption.” It is comprised of a transmitter that is sewn into the vulva of the mare and which, at presentation of the foal, sends a signal to a receiver.

Then Bob, Mario, Becky and Craig each receive a cell phone message advising them that, “It’s Show Time!”

### The Quality Counts

Besides those already mentioned, some of the other more significant mares based at Shields Thoroughbreds include: Lindsali, whose 1999 foal sold for \$37,000 as a weanling, \$110,000 as a yearling and \$850,000 as a 2-year-old; Numero Uno, the multiple stakes winner and graded stakes-placed performer whose 2001 foal sold for \$180,000 as a weanling and \$360,000 as a yearling; and stakes-placed Charming Gal, who represents one of the many shrewd claims at the track that the couple have made to bolster their broodmare band. All this confirms Becky’s belief that, “In order to be successful, you need to have a good quality mares with productive families.”

Craig and Becky are also big supporters of the CTBA’s annual Del Mar Yearling Sale, where they sold a yearling colt out of their broodmare Parla Mi D’Amore for \$60,000 last year. For the 2003 renewal, they have nominated five top quality yearlings, including a couple from their main client Gene Ito, proving that, “This auction is the premier yearling sale in California, so we are breeding to fit its strict requirements.”

### A Bright Future

“As we look to the future, we propose to simply replicate the past—growing slowly, but with meticulous attention to quality,” so says Craig when asked about the future aspirations of Shields Thoroughbreds. Becky adds, “We would like to continue to expand and service more clients now that we have the farm running smoothly and efficiently. We want to build a really good reputation for our farm and become a name that we can all be proud of in the California breeding and racing industry.”

So, with the combination of positive words like these, their track record to date and their professional attitude towards the business of breeding horses, Becky and Craig Shields are definitely on the right track to making their dreams come true.