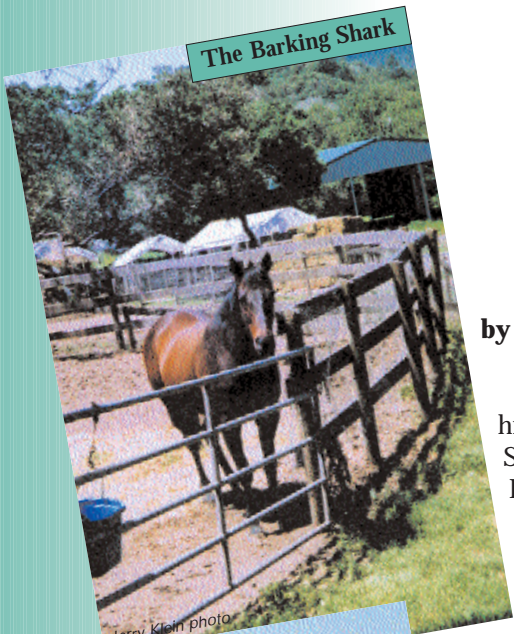


GEVA INC.



The Barking Shark



Jerry Klein photo

by **JERRY KLEIN**

He's a few years removed from his runner-up effort in the grade I Strub Stakes of 1997, but The Barking Shark seems quite content as the most distinguished resident of GEVA Inc., Northern California's only non-profit horse retirement facility.

The 10-year-old gelding was still plying his trade at Golden Gate Fields in mid-March, albeit in \$5,000 claiming races, when a concerned group that included owner-breeders Teddy Cole and Andy and Connie Pansini bought the horse with the idea of giving him a good home. "He needs to be under the care of someone who understands his condition," Connie Pansini said at the time.

That someone would be Pam Berg, GEVA's owner, founder, administrator and, on most days, its entire staff. GEVA is an acronym for Glen Ellen Vocational Academy, conceived as a combination school for novice grooms and other stable employees and an 'R&R' facility for Thoroughbreds—R&R, in this case, standing for rehabilitation and retirement.

Berg's observations of backstretch conditions in the early 1990s inspired her to start GEVA. "I saw too many horses being needlessly euthanized," she says. "Once they were no longer useful as racehorses, many owners just walked away from them." She also saw an absence of basic horsemanship in many of the workers employed on the backstretch, as the economics of the game forced trainers to hire entry-level help despite lacking the wherewithal to properly instruct them.

"I decided to serve a dual need," she continues. "Train people to work with horses in a caring,

humane and safe manner so they wouldn't learn at the expense of the animals they worked with, while using the injured horses sent to me as teaching materials. It seemed like a perfect situation."

GEVA was incorporated as a non-profit entity in 1995, and Berg put out word on the backstretch that an option to euthanasia was available. But the academy never held a class. "I intended to operate the school out of the fairgrounds at Santa Rosa," she remembers. "At first, it looked promising, but then they told me they couldn't give me the space gratis and asked for stall rental and usage fees. We were a non-profit with no money in hand so the school never got off the ground."

The horses, though, started to arrive. Trainers Allen Severinsen and Brent Sumja sent the first pair, one with a broken pelvis and the other with a suspensory injury. Despite the collapse of the grand plan, Berg couldn't bring herself to turn them away. "I'd get them with bowed tendons and broken knees, too," she says. "Most of these horses just need time to heal. It may take a year for them to recuperate, physically and mentally, but eventually most are of sound mind and body again and ready for a new career."

That time would be spent on Berg's secluded 8 1/2-acre site near Glen Ellen, in the Sonoma Valley about 50 miles north of San Francisco, that she originally developed for her own racing operation. It's a semi-wooded tract that slopes down into a large paddock with its own pond, encircled by an exercise track. At higher levels are seven more paddocks, reinforced with stone walls and redwood fencing. The seemingly idyllic spot has its drawbacks, however. Adjoining her property is a vineyard lacking proper drainage. The result is huge winter runoffs that swamp the GEVA property, knocking down walls and turning some paddocks into quagmires. "Grapes rule here, so you're not going to see the county take any action," Berg says ruefully.

Berg grew up with horses on the East Coast, but prevailing attitudes kept her focused on hunters and jumpers. It wasn't until moving to the West Coast that she got involved hands-on with racehorses, and then it was her hands doing everything—breeding, breaking and



Apple King



Jerry Klein photo

training. "In the early 1980s, friends encouraged me to give it a serious try," Berg confides. "I took the test and got my trainer's license. I didn't have any stalls and did all the foaling, breaking and conditioning at home."

An accident at Santa Rosa in March of 1987, though, ended that phase of Berg's career. "A filly I was hand-walking got spooked by a gate. I dropped the shank so she wouldn't get tangled and she took off. I went another way and we sort of met coming around a corner," she recounts. A bruised heart, punctured lung and broken shoulder were the most serious of her injuries. When doctors warned that a subsequent fall could disable her permanently, Berg turned to racing administration.

She began as a simulcast steward in 1988, then attended the University of Louisville's steward accreditation program. After serving as a medication steward, she was named Associate Steward for Bay Meadows and Golden Gate Fields, as well as Steward for the fair circuit, positions she's held for the past 13 years.

Finding new careers for her boarders hasn't been easy. Berg placed one with a family who wanted a jumper but then the horse couldn't jump high enough for them. She adds that, "Another was to become a riding horse but the new owners wanted me to take care of some minor surgery. In both cases, I took the horses back."

This decision restored equilibrium to the GEVA social structure. "Those horses had made some fast friends here and the spirits of the ones left behind had noticeably drooped when they left," Berg says. "They sure were happy to see each other again."

Though the academy remains a long-term goal, her horses were recently able to help the education process, when eight third-year students from U. C. Davis' School of Veterinary Medicine came to GEVA to field-test their recent laboratory work in horse dentistry.

"They tranquilized the horses and then filed their teeth and performed other necessary work," Berg says. "It was a wonderful opportunity for them to encounter horses of all ages and problems, and the horses needed the attention."

Because of both space and funding

limitations, Berg would like to keep the horse population at 25, though there are 28 horses on the premises at the moment, all but two being Thoroughbreds. She tends to their myriad needs herself, feeding and turning out the stock each morning, and administering individual care—which includes worming, bandaging and administering shots and ultra-sounds—upon returning from the track in the afternoon. "Track veterinarians offer assistance when x-rays are needed and I get occasional help with grooming and fence repair," she says. "Otherwise, I pretty much handle everything."

Somehow, Berg is able to do all this despite a yearly budget of under \$50,000, derived primarily from the annual stallion auction and Kentucky Derby vacation raffle that Berg conducts, and bolstered by contributions from the Thoroughbred Owners of California (TOC) and Thoroughbred Charities of America. Still, she's constantly on the lookout for any new source of funds, searching out grants and donations while also working to raise racing fans' awareness of the necessity of caring for the sport's lifeblood.

Of course, the touching moments, such as the recovery of Dissinger, a son of Conquistador Cielo who overcame osteomyelitis and a vet's advice that he be put down, are not measured in monetary terms. 'Dissy' occupies a paddock across from The Barking Shark, who still maintains his regal bearing as he commands a panoramic view of the landscape. They can both look forward to long and peaceful lives due to the tireless efforts of Pam Berg's GEVA, Northern California's horse haven.

GEVA has a web site, www.glenellenfarms.com/geva, where visitors can learn about the facility and its residents, sign up to sponsor a horse or simply make a donation.



Jerry Klein photos

California-bred Mr. Moore



California-bred Governor Elect

**GEVA (GLEN ELLEN VOCATIONAL ACADEMY) INC.
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