

Robert H. Walter Remembered

by DAN KENNY

California racing lost another giant with the passing of Robert H. (Bob) Walter, at his Vine Hill Ranch in Sebastopol, on May 7. He was 86 years old.

Walter and his wife Barbara have been a formidable presence in racing for a quarter of a century. The Vine Hill broodmare band has so far produced four grade I winners, headed by Santa Anita Derby winner Cavonnier. Cavonnier, a gelded son of Vine Hill stallion Batonnier, is best known for coming within an eyelash of winning the 1996 Kentucky Derby.

"I never won so much money and lost so much money in so short a time," said Walter with typical good humor after losing the photo finish to Grindstone. "At least I felt like I won the Kentucky Derby for about 10 minutes."

Four key purchases fueled the Vine Hill ascension from newcomer to a player at the top echelon of the sport. Their foundation stallion Batonnier (His Majesty) was purchased out of a Keeneland January auction and brought to Vine Hill where he thrived.

Batonnier has sired over 20 stakes winners to date, including Cavonnier, Batroyale and Charm a Gendarme, each of whom flew the familiar yellow and black colors of Vine Hill Ranch.

Bob claimed a filly one day at his hometown Santa Rosa track, paying \$16,000 for Verne Winchell's daughter of Sham—Fagers Charisma, by Dr. Fager. The claim of Fagers Charm was a most propitious act. She won a stakes at the Pleasanton Fair and retired with earnings of \$112,705. Then she produced stakes winners Charmonnier and Charm a Gendarme, the latter of whom won the grade III Senorita at Hollywood Park in 1:33 3/5, which still remains the stakes record.

Charm a Gendarme, in turn, is the dam of Tout Charmant who won the grade I Del Mar Oaks, for Vine Hill before she was sold to the Stonerside Stable as a 4-year-old. The \$1.2 million sales price is doubtless a record for a horse reared in the Wine Country.

Seeking more of the Dr. Fager female family, the Walters purchased the Caveat mare Direwarning, sight unseen from New York's premier horse trader, Lou Salerno of Questroyal Farm. She was a great-granddaughter of Aspidistra, dam of Dr. Fager. Bred to Batonnier, Direwarning produced Cavonnier.

Salerno also supplied another fateful piece of the puzzle when he sold Slewescent to Vine Hill. The son of Seattle Slew was a winner once in seven starts but his dam was the champion Our Mims. That caught the eye of Barbara Walter, whose role as mastermind of the Vine Hill matings is well documented.

Slewescent went on to sire three grade I winners from his first four crops numbering about 75 foals, an astonishing feat.

Bob was first and foremost a hands-on horseman. He played high level polo until he was 68, when he then trans-

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ferred his abundant energy to the task of breeding superior runners.

He liked to say that, "The best fertilizer is the owner's footprints." Nothing escaped his gaze when it came to his horses, and at times he could be a stern taskmaster with trainers who neglected his instructions.

Bob believed that the early training was the key to a successful racehorse. His horses were schooled to perform like polo ponies, with stress placed on using both the body and the mind. He loved to show a tape of Cavonnier's Santa Anita Derby, wherein jockey Chris McCarron extricates his mount from a very tight spot and maneuvers his way to a memorable victory.

"That ability was a product of his early training. You give the horse balance and agility with the proper developmental program," he maintained.

Some of Bob's methods in preparing horses for competition were plain common sense while others were somewhat arcane. He put the water at one end of his paddocks and fed at the other. Vine Hill mares and foals logged a lot of miles over the hilly terrain, developing bone and muscle for their athletic tasks ahead.

He'd put two yearlings together in a small pen for a time, with 10-foot shanks attached to each of their halters. Bob reckoned that this practice taught them to think about things, such as how to escape when one youngster inevitably stepped on the shank of the other.

"Horses are bred to go forward, but need to learn how to come back to the rider in order to be a racehorse. In this type of set up they soon learn that going backward produces results in getting free of the other horse. They activate their entire spine. Not everyone understands these things, but they are important."

Bob bred for stamina and it showed in horses like multiple grade I winner Lazy Slusan and grade I San Juan Capistrano victor Ringaskiddy. The most recent Vine Hill stakes winner is Pittsburgh Star who took the \$50,000 Hasta La Vista at Turf Paradise (May 18), at a trek of 1 7/8 miles. He is out of a daughter of Batonnier.

Bob gave Barbara carte blanche when it came to arranging matings. She would often pore over pedigrees deep into the night, seeking to unlock the mysteries hidden in the deep recesses of a particular family. Pittsburgh Star is inbred to Ribot, as was Robannier, another promising homebred stallion who is already the sire of the good 3-year-old stakes winner of 2003, Robledo.

Bob preferred to be out in the field with his stock until it was time to retreat to their lovely hilltop home. Baronial splendor, you might say. Bob and Barbara were closer than a dead-head. To be in their company was a distinct pleasure.

He was one of the last of the great owner-breeders and will be sorely missed by all who knew and loved him.