

A Glorious Time



by ROBERT KNOLHOFF JR.

David and Elizabeth Whelan have always been diplomatic when selecting a trainer for a particular homebred. The Florida breeders always prefer the conditioner, and not themselves, to choose from among their yearlings the individual or individuals who might best suit that horseman's particular style. In their time, few horsemen have come on board with a more polished style than the late Eddie Gregson.

"Eddie was a master field general who could always foresee down the road," says David. "He'd always say, 'You don't want to win just one race. Anybody can win one race. You want your horse to have a campaign.'"

In 1984, when the Whelans flew Gregson into Ocala to view their babies, the couple went out of their way to point out a strong but otherwise traditional bay sired by Yukon, an unraced stallion by Northern Dancer and a half-brother to Mr. Prospector.

"After circling the horse, he said simply, 'He's perfect, put him away,'" recalls David. "Eddie was not effusive when it came to his opinion of a horse, so we were pretty taken aback."

During Gregson's return trip to Ocala one year later, the same colt, now a yearling, was led out before the trainer. His recall was instantaneous.

"He's still perfect. Put him away." The trainer had made his selection, and the colt would be named Candi's Gold.

Foaled on March 25, 1984, Candi's Gold was produced from a granddaughter of Nashua named Holmgirl, one of the first horses ever purchased by David and Elizabeth, whose brilliant colt Tsunami Slew reigned as one of California's best turf milers of the 1980's under the tutelage of Gregson.

"Eddie took a lot of time with his special horses," continues David Whelan. "Eddie wanted them to spend as much time out of their stalls as possible, giving them long walks to and from the track so they could take in the sky, the birds, everything in sight. He was a true purist—a hay, oats and water horseman who frowned at the growing use of raceday medications."

Joining a stable brightened by stars like Love Smitten and Super Diamond, Candi's Gold started once as a 2-year-old in July of 1986, before bucking his shins and being put away for a sophomore campaign. Upon his 3-year-old return, little time passed before Candi's Gold affirmed his trainer's high early marks, promptly winning two of his first three starts

Candi's Gold



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before heading to Keeneland for the grade III Lexington Stakes on April 11. Candi's Gold finished second in the Kentucky Derby prep, and to the surprise of many, Gregson decided to keep the colt in the Bluegrass awhile longer.

A notably conservative horseman who had won the Kentucky Derby five years earlier with the stretch-running Gato Del Sol, Gregson politely convinced the Whelans that their homebred also belonged in the race. A model pupil, Candi's Gold was maturing into a racehorse of generous scope, sound and inherently fast, and possessing a congenial temperament that would allow him to carry his speed over 1 1/4 miles.

In only his fifth career start, Candi's Gold served as a pacesetter (beneath Sandy Hawley) for the opening mile of 1987's "Run for the Roses," before finishing ninth in that field of extraordinary 3-year-olds. Bouncing right back off the experience, Candi's Gold was, by summer's end, both a grade II winner, courtesy of a diligent triumph in the Silver Screen Handicap, as well as grade I-placed, namely in the 1 1/4-mile Swaps, both at Hollywood Park. If a



Candi's Gold narrowly defeats On the Line in the \$150,000 Silver Screen Handicap (Grade II) at Hollywood Park on July 3, 1987

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CANDI'S GOLD Continued

start in the Breeders' Cup Classic beckoned, Gregson, with his sights now set on the paramount autumn season, sought two prerequisites from his colt—a convincing performance at 10 furlongs and a competitive try versus top older horses.

In September, the former task was met at Louisiana Downs where Candi's Gold made Alysheba fully earn a half-length decision when he finished second to the Derby and Preakness hero at equal weights in the grade I Super Derby. Back home, amongst his elders in the grade III Goodwood Handicap, he clinched his Breeders' Cup invitation by running second again. Even though he found his best cadence just nearing the wire it was Ferdinand, to his outside, who effortlessly glided home with seemingly Pegasus-like wings.

On November 21, 1987, a field of 12 that only a union of the Breeders' Cup and the 1980's could have produced, assembled at Hollywood Park for the \$3 million Classic. A glowing, red-coated Ferdinand was both the logical and sentimental favorite for Charlie Whittingham and Bill Shoemaker. Alysheba was also on hand, as were the redoubtable sophomores from the east like Afleet, Gulch and Cryptoclearance, as well as Skywalker, the 1986 Classic champ brought out of retirement to defend his title.

Drawn in on the rail, Gregson played the hand he was dealt, equipping Candi's Gold with blinkers and instructing Corey Black, substituting for a sidelined Gary Stevens, to send his mount to the front. The Californians, Judge Angelucci and Candi's Gold, commanded all of a honest pace, narrowly holding Ferdinand and Alysheba at bay while turning for home but then reluctantly giving way in mid-stretch to a dramatic crescendo by the two Kentucky Derby winners. Candi's Gold respectably checked home fourth in this stellar field.

The durable performer returned for Santa Anita Park's Strub Series, placing in both the grade II Malibu and grade I San Fernando Stakes behind a brilliant On the Line, before the pair were joined by Alysheba in the series finale at 1 1/4 miles. Alysheba and Candi's Gold turned for home on even terms before the former drew off to a comfortable win, with Candi's Gold second yet again to a Derby-winning champion.

Prescribing first some time off to allow a quarter crack sustained in the Strub Stakes to grow out naturally, two familiar names dampened Gregson's aim of finding an easier race for his charge over the summer. First, Candi's Gold ran third to an invincible Cutlass Reality in the grade II Bel Air Handicap, then found no easier test awaiting in a simple one mile allowance at Del Mar.

Sitting on his first major effort since emerging from retirement was the remarkable Precisionist, whose track record-setting mark of 1:33 1/5, four lengths ahead of Candi's Gold, still stands to this day. Precisionist's trainer in 1988 was John Russell, who had years earlier first met Eddie Gregson, then an aspiring thespian, on the set of the television series *Combat* in which Gregson had a bit part.

"Characteristic of Eddie, as he was always gracious," remembers Russell, "he came over to me and said that Precisionist's was the most impressive performance he had ever seen."

A persistent blockage in a hind leg's iliac artery would, not long thereafter, force an otherwise healthy Candi's Gold into retirement. He was sent to stud at North Ridge Farm in Kentucky, where a veterinarian, Dr. Ben Kincade, began giving Candi's Gold one large aspirin every day to treat the arterial condition that promised to eventually compromise the horse's fertility. The blockage soon dissolved, so with Gregson's blessing, who believed he couldn't improve on his past work, Candi's Gold was returned to California and trainer Jerry Hollendorfer for the opportunity to bow out on his own terms.

With his career mark of four wins and earnings of almost \$900,000 virtually untouched seven starts into his comeback, the partnership that included David and Elizabeth Whelan retired Candi's Gold for good. He has called Ron and Fran Stolich's Blooming Hills Inc., near Clements, Calif., home ever since, where the attentive care he received as a racehorse has buoyed a long, rich career at stud. The same 145-acre Northern California farm was, likewise,



Candi's Gold subsequent to his fourth-place finish in the \$3 million Breeders' Cup Classic (Grade I) at Hollywood Park on November 21, 1987

the first home for a Ted Aroney homebred named Yougottawanna, the stallion's most successful performer to date with victories in the 2001 Cal Cup Juvenile and the grade III El Camino Real Derby last year.

While earning his reputation as a reliable juvenile sire, year in and year out, Candi's Gold has proven a successful match with daughters of local favorites Bargain Day and Shanekite, as readily as with descendants from the classic Roberto and Raise a Native lines. His mares follow a similarly diverse pattern, producing winners in locales near and far, including Japan where 3-year-old Foundry World, out of Ribbon Candi, appears to have a bright future sprinting on the grass. Even so, the heart of the Candi's Gold story will never wander far from the meticulous California shedrow bearing the initials of Edward Janss Gregson.

"Eddie always said he'd never won with a horse who didn't have what he best described as deportment—or in human terms, good manners," says David Whelan. "Candi's Gold certainly had it—a kind, smart horse who sought to please whenever he stepped onto the track."