



*Industry Insight*

# Cal-Bred Heroes Recover Together

by EMILY SHIELDS

Texcess can't resist boasting to the unremarkable-looking gelding who enters the next paddock, "I made over a million dollars and won two California Cup races! Who are you?"

The new arrival takes up his place across from Texcess and stares down the challenge. "I have won seven grade I races, six other stakes races and more than five million dollars. I am the most popular horse to grace the Golden State in a decade. I am Lava Man."

This silent conversation is what Sommer Smith, who runs the 25-acre NexStar Ranch in Temecula with her husband Dave Showalter, decided that the two California-bred champions said to each other when Lava Man arrived on Nov. 28, 2007. Since then, the two horses have taken up the stance of friendly rivals, simply staring at each other for about an hour every day; "exchanging race stories," Smith jokes.

Lava Man tore through California's handicap division for two and a half seasons, winning on dirt, turf and synthetic surfaces, gamely outlasting rivals by a nose and destroying fields by open lengths. It seemed as though his reign over the division would last forever but, inexplicably last summer, Lava Man's form faltered. He turned in three dismal performances in a row and the decision was made to send him to NexStar, his first visit to a farm since the seven-year-old gelding entered training as a two-year-old in 2003.

"At first he didn't know what to do," Smith explained. "When we turned him out for the first time, he stood for twenty minutes before he figured out he wasn't attached to anyone. He jogged the fence line and kept looking back to see if anyone was going to catch him."

It's hard to believe that the playful, happy horse enjoying life on a farm is the same Lava Man who grinds his way to victory in so many races. He is grazed by hand every morning for an hour, and his muscles ripple under a dappled, shining brown coat as he charges from spot to spot on the grass, ignoring his handler and attempting to find the very best greenery. He is turned out for seven hours a day, and divides his time between bucking, playing, standing in the shade, stretching in the sun, rolling in the dirt and staying as close to Texcess as possible, staring at him unwaveringly every day. What catches most of Lava Man's attention, though, is the morning training. He remains completely still with his head raised, watching some of the nearly 130 farm residents go through their paces, as if remembering life on the racetrack.

When a group of newly turned yearling fillies go for an effortless romp around their field, Lava Man joins in, circling his paddock with controlled grace and ease. He is ready to return to the racetrack, and is scheduled to join trainer Doug O'Neill's barn during the last week of January.



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Lava Man with his groom Noe Garcia after his third consecutive victory in the grade I Hollywood Gold Cup at Hollywood Park on June 30, 2007.



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Texcess improved his career record to 22-4-5-3 and \$1,235,335 by winning the California Cup Classic Handicap at Santa Anita Park on October 28, 2006.

Texcess, too, moves along the fence line each day with a smooth and balanced walk. Another veteran campaigner, Texcess earned \$1,235,335 while finishing on-the-board in 12 of his 22 lifetime starts, including a spectacular two-year-old campaign that saw him win the Cal Cup Juvenile Stakes and the \$1 million Boyd Gaming's Delta Jackpot Stakes in Louisiana. The towering In Excess (Ire) gelding, also the winner of the 2006 Cal Cup Classic Handicap, looks exceptional with his powerful shoulder muscles still strong, and gives the impression that he could return to the racetrack at any time. You would never know just by looking at him that, one year ago, Texcess was fighting for his life. In February, Texcess suffered an injury while galloping in the morning, that looked very severe at first. After several days, the injury was diagnosed as a break in his stifle and Texcess left the racetrack for NexStar. Sommer and Dave had foaled Texcess at their Riverton Farm on April 8, 2002, for his breeder Ron Gomez who originally owned NexStar but later sold it to them. To make the circle complete, one of their first clients was Jason Wood, who owns part of Lava Man along with Steve, Tracy and Dave Kenly.

Texcess is especially important to Dave and Sommer, who raised him and his seven siblings. His dam, the Regal Classic mare Danish Alamode, unfortunately died last July, a pain lessened by Texcess' continued recovery and healing. Many of the other foals from Danish Alamode currently live at the ranch, including two sisters who get turned out in a paddock alongside both Texcess' and Lava Man's.

Texcess will continue to enjoy his retirement when Lava

Man returns to Hollywood Park. Trainer O'Neill speaks glowingly of NexStar and is happy with Lava Man's progress there. "NexStar is a real hands on facility, and Lava Man doesn't get lost there like he would at a big fancy farm. The air quality in Temecula is great but we are looking forward to having him back in the barn!"

Horses are creatures of habit, and Lava Man becomes aggressive and irritated if left in his stall unable to graze on time each morning. It makes sense that his sudden loss of interest in racing coincides with the terrible injury suffered by his groom of almost three years, Noe Garcia, who lost his arm when his vehicle was hit by a drunk driver on Interstate 5 early in the morning of July 23. The incident, which came one month after Lava Man's heart-stopping, gritty nose victory over A.P. Xcellent for his third Hollywood Gold Cup and one month before the gelding's uncharacteristically dull sixth place finish in the Pacific Classic, certainly caused a change in Lava Man's daily routine last year.

Garcia continues to recover with the help of his friends and family, while Lava Man has almost finished his recovery on the farm. Although nothing was officially wrong or different about the horse, he has put on weight, his coat is no longer dull but bright, and he is alert, happy and full of himself. His return to the racetrack will once again give California racing fans something to cheer about.

With a little luck, and some determination on Lava Man's part, perhaps he will still be able to compete at racing's highest level, giving him even more to talk about the next time he is hopefully able to see Texcess again. 🐾



*The California-bred champions and equine millionaires Texcess (left) and Lava Man with Dave Showalter and his wife Sommer Smith at their NexStar Ranch in Temecula during January of 2008*

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