

CAL CUP II: THEN & NOW

Charmonnier

by DEBRA GINSBURG

California Cup Wells Fargo Bank Classic 1991

The stage was set for an incredible battle between equine and human athletes. Best Pal was installed as the heavy favorite for the 1991 California Cup Classic. John and Betty Mabee's popular Habitony (Ire) gelding had bypassed the first Cal Cup to run in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile at Belmont Park—and had finished unplaced, but his juvenile record had him winning six races for earnings of \$1,026,195.

He was not so dominant at three, so the Cal Cup was shaping up to be anything but a coronation march. Furthermore, Best Pal was being asked to carry 124 pounds and concede weight to all his rivals. His adoring public thought him invincible, however, and installed him as the 2-5 favorite under regular rider Pat Valenzuela.

"He's vulnerable," said a worried Gary Jones, who had taken over Best Pal's training at mid-summer. "This really is a perfect spot for him to get beat—a three-year-old giving away weight like this."

A battle was also brewing between Valenzuela and Corey Nakatani. They were sitting on either side of a steward's inquiry into the running of the Cal Cup Juvenile. Valenzuela rode the winner, Ebonair, and Nakatani was aboard Blackbeard's Ghost, who had a troubled trip to finish second. The stewards made no change in the order of finish and tension between the two riders was at the boiling point.

Nakatani had the mount on Robert and Barbara Walter's home-

bred Charmonnier, the only other 3-year-old in the Classic. The Batonnier gelding was a multiple stakes winner in Northern California, but had not tackled the likes of Best Pal. As a result, he was allowed to get off with a featherweight impost of 112 pounds and odds of 28-1.

Charmonnier and Habastar set the early fractions, but it was not a blistering pace. They went the first quarter in :23 2/5 and the half in :47 1/5. Valenzuela kept Best Pal right off them in third.

According to the script, the front runners would fade away and Best Pal would tour triumphantly home.

It didn't quite happen that way because no one told Charmonnier he was supposed to lose. He tried to lug out around the far turn and Nakatani swung him wide, carrying Best Pal almost to the outside rail. Charmonnier then matched the favorite stride for stride to the wire.

Best Pal forged into the lead at one point, but the gallant little Batonnier gelding

would not give up. He kept fighting back and won by a head in 1:49. He and Best Pal finished seven lengths ahead of third place Elegant Bargain.

The stewards immediately posted the inquiry sign and began examining the incident around the far turn, where Charmonnier forced Best Pal wide. After reviewing the films and confirming there was no contact made between the two horses, they upheld the order of finish. Charmonnier earned the biggest paycheck of his career—\$137,500—



Benoit photo

Nov. 9, 1991—Cal Cup Classic—Charmonnier 1st (right)

and rewarded his backers with a \$58.80 payoff.

"We were just as surprised as everyone else in the grandstand that day," said Mrs. Walter, "but this is the stuff that Charmonnier is made of."

Bob Walter had claimed Charmonnier's dam, Fagers Charm, for \$16,000 at Santa Rosa in 1984. He found a rare bargain in the Sham filly, for Fagers Charm went on to compile more than \$100,000 in earnings and win the Alameda County Fillies and Mares Handicap at Pleasanton.

As Fagers Charm's racing career was winding down, Walter bought Batonnier out of the 1986 Keeneland fall mixed sale for \$60,000. Fagers Charm was one of the first mares bred to Batonnier when he relocated to the Walters' Vine Hill Ranch in Sebastopol, and she produced Charmonnier from that 1987 cover. The next year, the mare bore to another Batonnier filly, Charm a Gendarme, who nearly pulled off an unique Cal Cup double in 1991 when she narrowly lost the Juvenile Fillies to Don B's Princess.

Charmonnier returned at four to run third in the 1992 Classic and place in two other graded stakes, the Del Mar Breeders' Cup Handicap and the Longacres Mile. The next year, at five, after cruising home by seven in a Santa Anita allowance race and running second to Memo (Chi) in the grade II San Bernardino Handicap, he was invited to run in the \$500,000 Hong Kong Cup.

"Back then this race was fairly new and only ranked a grade III. Now, it's grade I and part of the Emirates World Series," Mrs. Walter explained. "Charmonnier came storming up from last and got third. He made the lead just past the wire. After the race, we found out he had twisted his shoe and ran a nail up his frog. He was all heart to run the way he did. We were so proud of him."

Despite his game victory over Best Pal and his gutsy effort in Hong Kong, Charmonnier was never voted a California championship. That honor was bestowed on his little sister, Charm a Gendarme, who became California's Champion 3-year-old filly in 1992 after she won the grade III Seniorita Breeders' Cup Stakes at Hollywood Park and the San Jose Handicap at Bay Meadows.

The Walters' \$16,000 broodmare had become quite a goldmine for the Sebastopol couple. Fagers Charm produced just one other foal, a Cost Conscious filly in 1990, and died from colic in June, 1992. After her Cost Conscious filly, Charmalotta, finished

just a head behind unbeaten Soviet Problem in the 1993 Boo La Boo Stakes, Fagers Charm was posthumously honored as California's Broodmare of the Year.

Charm a Gendarme has carried on for her mother. Her first foal was millionairess and multiple graded stakes winner Tout Charmant, sired by Vine Hill stallion Slewvescent but foaled in Kentucky. She won the grade I Del Mar Oaks and the Matriarch Stakes, and also finished a close second to Perfect Sting in last year's Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf.

The Walters sold Charm a Gendarme in-foal to Unbridled at the 1998 Keeneland November sale, where she was bought by Aaron U. Jones for \$290,000. Tout Charmant was purchased privately by Robert and Janice McNair last year and is still in training. The mare is the dam of a Saint Ballado colt that brought a sale topping \$4 million at this year's Keeneland July sale. Robert and Barbara still own Charm a Gendarme's 1997 Alleged filly Allocute.

Charmonnier retired with earnings of \$508,590. Being a gelding, he was sold to a woman who trained him to be a hunter-jumper. He was entered in a few three-day eventing competitions, but proved too hot for dressage. These days, the 1991 Cal Cup Classic winner is living the easy life as a pleasure horse in Sebastopol, not far from his birthplace at Vine Hill Ranch.

"Sure, I keep tabs on him and all the rest of his incredible family," said Mrs. Walter. "He was the first good horse Mr. W and I bred ourselves."



May 16, 1992—Grade III Seniorita Breeders' Cup Stakes—Charm a Gendarme 1st



Nov. 4, 2000—Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf—Tout Charmant 2nd (left)