

# CAL CUP II: THEN & NOW

by DEBRA GINSBURG

A chance meeting between Robert Lewis and Bob Baffert at Santa Anita in the spring of 1991 had enormous repercussions for the California Thoroughbred scene. Lewis and his wife Beverly were trying to build a racing stable, but were not experiencing much luck. Now they were trying different tactics and different trainers.

"We just got to talking and Robert told me he wanted to have some horses with me at some point," said Baffert in a 1993 interview. "He told me if I found anything good to let him know."

At that time, Baffert was training a 2-year-old Debonair Roger gelding that was developing into a nice prospect. Bred by Lloyd Disler, Ebonair was purchased as a yearling by Bill Mitchell for \$14,000 at the Barretts October Sale.

In a promising debut, Ebonair finished second to another first timer named Bertrando in a six-furlong Cal-bred maiden race at Del Mar. He returned to the seaside track and broke his maiden in his next start, at the same distance, by 3 1/2 lengths.

Baffert knew Mitchell wanted to sell Ebonair and urged the Lewises to make an offer for him. Their acquisition of Ebonair looked even better when Bertrando scored back-to-back victories in the Del Mar Futurity and Norfolk Stakes, the latter by nine lengths.

Ebonair picked up some black-type of his own when he ran second in the Sunny Slope Stakes at Santa Anita. Then Bertrando chased Arazi home in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile and left the Cal Cup easy prey for Ebonair.

Sent off as the 7-5 favorite in a field of 11, Ebonair and Pat Valenzuela settled in behind a strong early pace. The front runners began to fade rounding the far turn as Ebonair bounded into contention. He put away the early leaders at the top of the stretch and shot a half-length clear of the field.

## Ebonair

### California Cup

### Juvenile

### 1991

Just when it appeared that Ebonair would pull away without a challenge, the gelding drifted in toward the rail while shying away from Valenzuela's whip. Blackbeard's Ghost, a 50-1 outsider charging through along the rail, was forced to steady and swing to the outside.

Piloted by Corey Nakatani, Blackbeard's Ghost bumped Friendship Forever, who was closing fast on the outside. Ebonair, oblivious to the bumping behind him, crossed the wire a half-length in front of Blackbeard's Ghost in 1:45 3/5 for 1 1/16 miles. Friendship Forever finished third.

"Patrick's horse came over and made me bump into Laffit's horse," said Nakatani. "He cut us off."

The stewards posted the inquiry sign and studied the tapes for several minutes, finally ruling there would be no change in the order of finish. While Ebonair gave the Newport Beach couple their first significant victory, he never won another stakes. They eventually lost him in a claiming race in 1993.

The stock of those connected with the gelding rose considerably since the 1991 Cal Cup. Recipients of the Eclipse Award of Merit in 1997, the Lewises campaigned champion filly Serena's Song, were co-owners of 1995 Preakness winner Tim-

ber Country and came close to sweeping the Triple Crown twice with Silver Charm and Charismatic. They serve on the boards of several high profile racing organizations, but more important for California Cup, their family-owned Foothill Beverage Company and Budweiser now sponsors the Juvenile.

The Lewises, Bob and Barbara Walter and Mike Pegram—the owners of Baffert's three Cal Cup winners in 1991—all took him to the Kentucky Derby. He struck first with the Walters' Cavonnier in 1996, losing by a nose to Grindstone, then won back-to-back Derbies and Preaknesses with Silver Charm and Real Quiet. How's that for Cal Cup beginnings?



Benoit photo

Nov. 9, 1991—Cal Cup Juvenile—Ebonair 1st