

CAL CUP II: THEN & NOW

by **DEBRA GINSBURG**

Late in the evening of April 8, 1991, Bill Shoemaker rolled his Ford Bronco off the 210 freeway in San Dimas after a day of golf and a short visit to the '19th' hole with his racetrack buddies. After a career of battling back from terrifying spills and two career-threatening injuries to become the winningest jockey of all time, this accident turned him into a quadriplegic. It was just 14 months after he rode his last race and turned his sights toward training.

Early indications pointed toward a promising new career for the former rider. Instead, he nearly died twice from the catastrophic injuries. After spending five months at a rehabilitation clinic, Shoe returned to the racetrack and resumed his training career from a wheelchair.

One of the horses waiting for him was Shirkee, a 6-year-old Tell gelding. After Shoe claimed him for \$16,000 he worked his way up the class ladder, winning high-priced claimers and then allowance races. He even placed in the grade III San Simeon Handicap over Santa Anita's hillside turf course shortly after his trainer's accident. On Nov. 9, Shoe took the biggest gamble of all and started Shirkee in the California Cup Mile.

"Shoe had run two horses in earlier Cal Cup races that day (My Sweet Barbara in the Distaff Starter and Nat's Lea in the Matron) and they both ran just awful," recalled Doug Atkins, who owned Shirkee with Mary Rita DePietro. "I was hoping Shirkee could turn things around for him."

Sent off as the 6-1 fourth choice, the gelding was fifth early on and practically pulled Eddie Delahoussaye out of the saddle. The jockey had little choice but to give the old boy his head. Shirkee took the lead from Gundaghia deep in the stretch, then held off a late charge by French

Shirkee

California Cup Mile 1991

moment." The applause and cheering started as soon as Shoe was wheeled down the ramp toward the track. Then the place absolutely erupted with noise when Trevor Denman announced his name.

Shirkee provided Keith Card with his second Cal Cup win as a breeder. Linda Card, owned and bred by Card, captured the inaugural Distaff. It was Shoemaker's only Cal Cup win,

though. He eventually retired from training to concentrate on staying healthy, but still spends many afternoons at the track. On Dec. 10, 1999, he passed the title of racing's leading jockey to Laffit Pincay Jr.

Shirkee raced 11 more times, but on June 17, 1993, the gelding was eased in a Hollywood Park allowance race and X-rays revealed a tear in his right front suspensory. He had run 53 times and won 12 races for earnings of \$454,375. His owners felt he had done enough. Atkins received several offers from Thoroughbred retirement homes, but the one he finally accepted came from Stacy O'Brien,

wife of NFL quarterback Ken O'Brien. Shirkee began a new life near Sacramento as a hunter-jumper prospect.

Shirkee's family is still going strong. Manale, a full sister, produced Northern California stakes winner Natasha Fatale, a Moscow Ballet filly bred and owned by CTBA Director Dan Harralson. In subsequent matings to Moscow Ballet, Manale produced Del Mar Sale graduates Lustrous and Twelveyears later. The former brought \$105,000 in 1997 and never won. The latter fetched \$42,000 in 1999 and may compete in this year's California Cup.



Sylvia Bachmann photo

Nov. 9, 1991—Cal Cup Mile—Shirkee 1st