



Gayle Force

BY DEIRDRE B. BILES



Maybe Gayle Van Leer was destined for a career in Thoroughbred racing and breeding.

“I was born in Centinela Hospital across from Hollywood Park,” said the California native. “But I didn’t even know that until I applied for my first passport. It was almost like I was preordained to be in the horse business.”

Gayle Van Leer excels in all facets of California’s horse business

Now a resident of the San Diego area, Van Leer works as a consultant and bloodstock agent. But her background includes a variety of experiences, and she’s been associated with some of California’s most successful horses, trainers, owners, and breeders. She’s also known as one of the state’s most enthusiastic promoters of the Thoroughbred industry, speaking at numerous seminars and continuously working to bring new owners into California’s racing program.

“This is such an interesting business; every day, there’s something different,” said Van Leer, who turned 52 Feb. 18. “You meet so many people from all walks of life. You’ll see Sheikh Mohammed walking around and leaning on a fence near a handler or groom. It’s also such a challenging business because it levels the playing field. Even though having a lot of money really helps, you still get people who come up with horses that didn’t cost very much and that outrun horses that cost \$4 million. It’s also a business where

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Bloodstock agent and consultant Gayle Van Leer is one of California’s most enthusiastic promoters of the Thoroughbred industry

WALLY SKALU PHOTOS

***Van Leer broke
1982 Eclipse Award
winner Roving Boy
while she was a
trainer at San Luis
Rey Downs***

you can do everything right, and it still won't go right."

But while the Thoroughbred industry's environment is tough, Van Leer has managed to not only survive, but thrive. Her accomplishments include the following:

- She was the racing stable manager for John and Betty Mabee of Golden Eagle Farm from August 1988 until early 1997. They won their first of three Eclipse Awards as outstanding breeders in 1991 and captured North American earnings titles as breeders and owners in 1992.

- She broke 1982 Eclipse Award winner Roving Boy and prepared him for racetrack life while she was a trainer at San Luis Rey Downs.

- She purchased or advised clients to purchase such horses as Runaway Dancer, winner of the 2005 Jim Murray Memorial Handicap (gr. IIIT) and the 2003 Carleton F. Burke Handicap (gr. IIIT), and Cause to Believe, who scored in the Jan. 29 El Camino Real Derby (gr. III). Before Leave Me Alone captured the 2005 Test Stakes (gr. I), Van Leer, as agent, sold the filly for \$35,000 at the 2003 Del Mar yearling auction.

"Gayle is a first-class person," said Betty Mabee. "She's very sincere and very dedicated to what she believes in, which is the horse. She's also very knowledgeable about bloodlines and all the other things that go into breeding and racing."

Katie Kennedy of R L Stables, which races Runaway Dancer, believes Van Leer has been the key to the operation's success.

"When my stepfather (the late Bob Dudley) had R L Stables, he got in with a sort of bad trainer. He had 32 horses, and he had overpaid for them. They weren't winning hardly at all. Gayle came in and within two months she had turned the whole stable



Van Leer works her cell phone at Santa Anita

around. We're indebted to her. She's very hard-working."

Even though Van Leer was born and spent part of her childhood near Hollywood Park, it had little impact on her early life. Her family later left Inglewood and moved to the Santa Barbara area, where her father managed apartments.

"I can remember when I was a kid going out and catching goldfish in the Santa Ynez River," Van Leer said. "I don't know where they came from originally; I guess somebody turned them loose. They were like koi; big, giant things, and we would catch them and put them in our pond in our backyard."

Her home was near a school for special-needs children that had a therapeutic riding program. Van Leer and her sister volunteered to work there in exchange for riding lessons.

"I was in my early teens," she said. "When people ask me how I got involved in the business, I tell them, 'Well, I was just one of those girls who loved horses.' Lots of little girls love horses, but I just happened to have the opportunity because of that school."

The school's property eventually was sold to the University of California, Santa Barbara, but that change didn't prevent Van Leer from continuing her involvement with horses. Instead, it provided new opportunities.

"I haven't been back there in years," she said, "but the original plan was to expand the UC Santa Barbara campus. I'm assuming that they've done that by now. But at that particular time, they didn't really have a planned use for the horse property, so they created a program for the students to be able to bring their horses to school with them. And so my sister and I, being enterprising, we introduced ourselves to the students and basically created this little business of feed-



In her formative years, Van Leer worked as a riding instructor and camp counselor

“My second love is marine biology. I work hard in the horse business so I can go scuba diving.”

ing and taking care of their horses. We would go over there to feed and take care of the horses each morning before we went to school.

“Then, UC Santa Barbara put together a day camp program and a riding camp program, so I ended up working as a camp counselor and a riding instructor, too. A lot of the college students had horses that were good show horses, and I started showing them in junior classes. I was able to increase their value by earning points, and the

Hot Time for Cal-breds

The Sunshine Millions, held at Gulfstream Park and Santa Anita Jan. 28, pitted California-breds against Florida-breds, and unlike last year, when Florida-breds took five of the eight races, it was Cal-breds that dominated this year by that five-to-three margin. Cal-breds also laid claim to the day’s biggest prize.

Lava Man proved too hot to handle in the \$1-million Classic Stakes at Santa Anita. The \$550,000 in first-place earnings upped his career winnings to \$1,584,706 for Steve



and Dave Kenly’s STD Racing Stable and Jason Wood. Not bad for a 5-year-old gelding who began his career for a \$12,500 claiming price and who was claimed by his present owners through trainer Doug O’Neill for \$50,000 in the summer of 2004.

Lava Man has reached a new level in O’Neill’s hands. He won the Derby Trial Stakes at Fairplex Park in his first start for his initial stakes win after being claimed and later placed in three other stakes that year. But it was in 2005 that he really excelled.

Lava Man captured the Hollywood Gold Cup (gr. I) and Californian Stakes (gr. II) and was third in the Pacific Classic (gr. I). He recently was voted 2005 California Horse of the Year and champion older male.

A son of Slew City Slew, Lava Man was bred by trainer Lonnie Arterburn in partnership with Dr. Kim Kuhlmann and his wife, Eve. Arterburn had claimed Lava Man’s dam, Li’l Ms. Leonard, and later took in the Kuhlmanns for the mare’s breeding career. Lava Man was Li’l Ms. Leonard’s third foal.

Following Lava Man’s birth, Arterburn and the Kuhlmanns



Lava Man winning the \$1-million Classic

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Van Leer (far left) in the winner's circle with John and Betty Mabee and Best Pal

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students liked that. I showed pretty extensively in just about everything—Western pleasure, hunter/ jumper.”

She also graduated from high school and attended Santa Barbara City College.

“One day,” she remembered, “while I was warming up a horse in the back ring at the Earl Warren Showgrounds, this guy flags me down. He says he’s setting up a small farm in the Santa Barbara area and he needs exercise riders. Somebody had recommended me to him as someone who could handle a tough horse. I don’t remember exactly what the pay was, but it seemed outrageous for working just four hours every morning and it fit right into my schedule. It was my first Thoroughbred job. One thing led to another, and in a fairly short amount of time, I ended up becoming the assistant manager of the farm, which was called Berkshire Farm.”

While at Berkshire, she prepared horses to be sold at 2-year-olds in training sales and worked with prominent California bloodstock agent Rollin Baugh at the auctions. She later ran a

gave Li'l Ms. Leonard to Carol A. Lingenfelter, who had bred the mare and initially raced her in partnership.

“We just wanted the foal (Lava Man), so we gave the mare to her,” Arterburn said.

Li'l Ms. Leonard has produced two later foals.

Slew City Slew, who has stood his entire career at Brereton C. Jones' Airdrie Stud near Midway, Ky., covered 97 mares in 2005 and is expected to cover 80 to 100 mares this year.



Bordonaro ran his win streak to three with a score in the Padua Stables Sprint Stakes at Gulfstream Park. Bordonaro, a son of Memo who was voted California champion sprinter of 2005, races as home-bred for Fred Carrillo and Daniel A. Cassella.

Carrillo and Cassella board Bordonaro's dam, Miss Excitement, at Pat Thompson's Ridgeley Farm near Hemet, Calif., where Memo stands. Miss Excitement, whom Thompson said lived up to her name on the racetrack, is in foal to Siberian Summer and is booked to Memo. Her 3-year-old Memo colt is in training with Bordonaro's conditioner, Bill Spawr.

Thompson said Memo figures to cover about 40 mares this year.

Moscow Burning, another former claimer, reached millionaire status by virtue of her victory in the Warren's Thoroughbred Filly and Mare Turf Stakes at Santa Anita for Don Van Kempen's Bullseye Racing. California's 2004 Horse of the Year, Moscow Burning was bred by John C. Harris' Harris Farms and Ken Maddy Trust, and sired by the Harris Farms stallion Moscow Ballet.

Moscow Ballet, who has stood his entire career at Harris Farms, is 24, but farm manager Dave McGlothlin figures the son of Nijinsky II



BILL DENVER/PHOTO

Bordonaro shipped east to win the Padua Stables Sprint



Van Leer with trainer Dan Hendricks

public breaking, training, and lay-up operation known as Fairbrook Farm. She also worked on the racetrack as an exercise rider for future Hall-of-Fame trainer Neil Drysdale.

"I ended up getting sucked into the race track," said Van Leer, explaining why she left college and dropped her marine biology studies after two years. "My second love, after horses, is marine biology, but now I can do that for fun by scuba diving. I work hard in the horse business so I can go scuba diving. I've been to Fiji, to Australia, to New Zealand, to four or five different places in the Caribbean, and to Hawaii."

Van Leer spent eight years as a trainer at San Luis Rey Downs, where her clients included Drysdale and other conditioners such as Gary Jones, Joe Manzi, David Hofmans, and John Russell. She also had horses for owners Robert E. Hibbert, Saron Stable, and Summa Stable. In addition to Roving Boy, other horses Van Leer worked with included 1981 Santa Anita Derby (gr. I) winner Splendid Spruce and Flaming Leaves, who captured a division of the 1979 Manta Handicap at Santa Anita Park and placed in a pair of grade II events.

"I had the second-string horses, basi-



Da Stoops

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will give a good account of himself in this year's breeding season.

"His health and fertility will enable him to get the job done," said McGlothlin, who indicated Moscow Ballet will cover about 20 mares.



Da Stoops was a wide-margin winner of the Dash Stakes at Santa Anita. Bred by Brian Boudreau's Malibu Valley Farms, the son of Distorted Humor won by 7½ lengths for Kathy Watson and Paul Weitman's Watson and Weitman Performances.

Boudreau, who owns two shares in Distorted Humor, sent Da Stoops' dam, Glamorous Lady, to Distorted Humor because the mare is from the same female family as one of Distorted Humor's earlier stakes winners, grade II winner Humorous Lady. Humorous Lady was bred by Malibu Valley.

Distorted Humor stands at Bill Casner and Kenny Troutt's Win-Star Farm near Versailles, Ky.

House of Fortune also was an easy winner. Bred by John Treasure, she captured the Ocala Breeders' Sales Distaff Stakes by 6½ lengths at Gulfstream for Arnold Zetcher over the previous year's winner, Sweet Lips.

House of Fortune, who won her first stakes as a 2-year-old in 2003, was the initial stakes winner sired by Free House. The popular stallion stood at Frank "Scoop" Vessels' Vessels Stallion Farm near Bonsall, Calif., prior to his death in 2004.

By David Schmitz



House of Fortune

RYAN McALINDEN/FERDUSI-PHOTO

cally," Van Leer said. "I broke horses and brought lay-ups back from their injuries. When they were just about ready to run, they went to their trainers. I never saddled any horses on the track even though I had my assistant trainer's license. Basically, at one point in my life, I had to make that choice: Do I want to go on and be a trainer on the track or not? But I just didn't like Los Angeles, so when I had the opportunity to do the second-string horses, I took it so I could live in the beautiful area around San Diego County."

***Van Leer
spent eight years
as a trainer at
San Luis Rey Downs***

In 1985, Van Leer became the racing stable manager for Leonard Pearlstein, and also managed his broodmare band. That job lasted a little over 3½ years, until Van Leer became restless and started looking for a bigger challenge.

"He (Pearlstein) had some business issues, and he wasn't really paying attention to his horses," she said. "I started seeing that I needed to move on from there. I'll never forget it; one morning I was standing at the racing office at Del Mar. Two trainers were arguing about what horses they were



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Van Leer worked with the Mabee's Golden Eagle operation, among the largest in the country at the time

“(John Mabee) basically handed me the list of all the horses in training and the broodmares and said, ‘You’re hired. Take it from here.’ ”

going to enter. I mentioned this to the trainer I was standing with and I asked him, ‘What’s going on here?’ He said, ‘This happens all the time. Those trainers with the Golden Eagle horses don’t talk to each other, so nobody knows what’s going on. John Mabee really needs somebody to help him out.’ ”

Hearing those words, Van Leer saw an opportunity.

“Ding, the lightbulb turned on,” she said. “I knew John Mabee a little bit, so I thought,

‘I ought to ask him for a job.’ He wandered around the stable area a lot in the mornings, and I was very bold. One day, I saw him and said, ‘Good morning. If you’ve got a minute I’d like to talk about why you should hire me.’ He was really taken aback, and he said, ‘Well, let me think about it.’ Then, the next day, he called me up and said, ‘You can meet with me.’ We ended up having a breakfast meeting, and we talked for a while. He basically handed me the list of all the horses in training and all the broodmares and said, ‘You’re hired. Take it from here.’ I thought, ‘Oh my.’ The moon and the stars kind of lined up, and that’s how I got the job.”

The Golden Eagle racing and breeding operations were among the largest in the country, with hundreds of horses and thousands of details that needed to be worked out for their care.

“I became an administrative person,” Van Leer said. “Foal crops were at least 100 horses every year. Some of them got sold at Keeneland, and the rest we had to break. Then, when they went into the racing string, there was constant organizing and we had a lot of turnover because we wanted to make sure we didn’t just collect horses.

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Van Leer buys and sells horses under her company name, **Gayle Van Leer Thoroughbred Services**

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We had at least 80 coming in every year, so 80 had to go out. Some became broodmares; some went into claiming races. We were always shuffling horses. At one time, I had 16 different trainers I was working with. It was such a challenge, and I loved it.

“He was a really neat guy to work for,” Van Leer said of Mabee, who died in 2002. “He could be a micromanager, but once he could see you were capable, he let you run with it. He reeled out a lot of rope to you, and as long as you didn’t get tangled in the rope, he would keep reeling it out. He was tough, but he was also fair. Even when he was totally against your decision, he would go along with it. If it failed, he wouldn’t give you a hard time, but he would needle you a little bit about it. But on the flip side, if I requested something and he didn’t want to do it, and it turned out we should have done it, then he would let me needle him about it.”

Under Van Leer’s supervision were a host of top runners, among them six-time grade I-winner and \$5,668,245-earner Best Pal, 1996 Buick Meadowlands Cup Handicap (gr. I) winner and \$2,567,630-earner Dramatic Gold, and River Special, who captured the 1992 editions of the Hollywood Futurity (gr. I) and Norfolk Stakes (gr. I). Other Golden Eagle standouts during Van Leer’s tenure included 1988 Fantasy Stakes (gr. I) winner Jeanne Jones, 1989 Fantasy winner Fantastic Look, and 1991 Santa Ana Handicap (gr. IT) winner Annual Reunion.

“Best Pal was a really special horse to be around,” Van Leer said. “He was so intelligent, and he always seemed to be one step ahead of you. He seemed to know what was going to happen. He was classy and nothing fazed him. You could blow up a bomb in front of his stall, and he would just stand there. He wasn’t a pretty horse, but there was something mechanically about him that made him able to run the way he

could. And he loved carrots. You’ve never seen a horse that could eat carrots as fast as he could.”

In 1997, Van Leer left Golden Eagle and went out on her own as a bloodstock agent and consultant.

“It was time for me to do something else,” she said. “Mr. Mabee’s health was declining, and he wasn’t as involved as he had been. The whole operation was changing. I also wanted the independence of being on my own.”

Gayle Van Leer Thoroughbred Services was born. She buys and sells horses, and also manages racehorses and plans matings for broodmares.

“I’m happy,” Van Leer said. “I have a lot of small clients, and I’ve had so much fun with them. It’s a home run when you buy a horse for \$20,000, get it to the races six months after you buy it, break its maiden for \$40,000, win \$50,000 with it, and then lose it for \$25,000 in a claiming race.”



Van Leer likes to mentor new Thoroughbred owners and has an "Ownership 101" section on her personal Web site

Van Leer also has worked for the California Marketing Committee, supervising a promotional effort to encourage Thoroughbred owners to run their horses in the Golden State. Two hundred people received a trunk from the committee last year containing a bottle of wine, sunblock, a CD with songs about California, a stopwatch, and material with information about California racing. Her duties with the committee also included developing a California racing Web site (www.calracing.com).

"Given the circumstances, I think California is doing a lot better than what's per-

ceived," Van Leer said. "We have high purses and some of the best trainers in the country. We also have beautiful weather. And there's Zia Park over in New Mexico that is giving away more than \$200,000 a day; it's an easy ship from Southern California. There's also uncertainty about the Indians, not having slots, and the future of Hollywood Park, but I think we'll get them all resolved, one way or another."

One of Van Leer's special areas of interest is the mentoring of new Thoroughbred owners. On her personal Web site (www.gaylevanleer.com), she has a section called

"Ownership 101" that provides basic information about getting started in the Thoroughbred business, the costs of ownership, insurance, tax considerations, and choosing trainers.

"I just feel that it's really important to get new owners into our business in a healthy way," she said. "I volunteer countless hours to speak at new owner seminars and various racing-related functions, and I try to answer every single e-mail that I get. I think the more information we, as an industry, can put out there for the new owner, the better off everyone will be." 