

Greg Gilchrist in Profile

By Steve Schuelein



At this time of the year when trainers and owners can sometimes be swept up in an obsession to get a 3-year-old with any glimmer of hope to the Kentucky Derby, trainer Greg Gilchrist remains forever thankful that he developed immunity to Derby Fever.

Relaxing in his home in Castro Valley in Northern California recently, the veteran conditioner cited the 2005 tale of Lost in the Fog as a memorial to both the horse and his owner, Harry Aleo.

Gilchrist recognized that he had a sprinter of uncommon ability in his barn before Lost in the Fog began his career as a 2-year-old in November, 2004. By the time the colt stretched his unbeaten string to four with a 4³/₄-length victory in the seven-furlong Swale Stakes at Gulfstream Park in March, 2005, several heavy-breathing outsiders suggested pointing him to the Kentucky Derby.

There was still time to consider the Run For The Roses after Lost in the Fog extended his streak to five with a 4¹/₄-length romp in the seven-furlong Bay Shore Stakes at Aqueduct in early April, but Gilchrist and Aleo had already made up their minds to keep the colt off the Triple Crown trail.

"I was under the gun from people telling me I got to get to the Derby and how stupid I was," said Gilchrist, recalling the deluge of phone calls.

"I found out one guy who kept calling me had made a \$100 bet in the future book. I finally told him I would send him his \$100 back."

Gilchrist never seriously considered the temptation and credited his long-time owner. "A lot of that had to do with Mr. Aleo never pushing me and letting me do the right thing with the horse," said Gilchrist.

Gilchrist and Aleo were rewarded for their actions with an Eclipse Award for Lost in the Fog as champion sprinter in 2005 after he toured the country to win 10 races in a row.

Gilchrist was surprised he was able to buy the colt privately after attending an Ocala 2-year-old sale in 2004 with Aleo. "The first time I saw him was on video, but after I went to his stall and saw Jess Jackson and his trainer looking at him too, I told Harry that he looked good on tape and was a beautiful animal, but that we probably don't have a chance," recalled Gilchrist.

"We bid to \$185,000, but it went to \$195,000, and we stopped," added Gilchrist. "Later we found out that Greg and Karen Dodge of Ocala bought him back for that price. We got to talking with them and purchased him a week later."

Gilchrist will never forget the 10-race dream ride before Lost in the Fog's heart-wrenching demise that resulted in his death from cancer the following year. The colt suffered the first blemish on his record with a seventh-place finish in the 2005 Breeders' Cup Sprint at Belmont Park, where Gilchrist recognized he was off his game on race day.

"He was just kind of a mess," said Gilchrist. "In New York, horses have to go to the holding barn seven hours before the race. He was nervous, and that just wasn't him. I don't know if the cancer was starting or if it was the excitement."

Gilchrist sent Lost in the Fog to a farm owned by the Dodges in Williston, Fla., for a 60-day break, hoping the "old Lost in the Fog" would return. The colt came back as a 4-year-old with a creditable second-place finish in the Golden Gate Sprint Stakes in April and a victory in the Aristides Breeders' Cup Handicap at Churchill in June.



Jockey Russell Baze, Harry Aleo (center), and Greg Gilchrist

“The Aristides was a big race and I started to think ‘Here we go again!’” said Gilchrist as the colt raised his earnings to \$978,099. “But after that, his mannerisms weren’t the same. You’d have to know him as well as I did to notice.”

Gilchrist had misgivings before the colt’s final start in the Smile Sprint Handicap at Calder in July, but yielded to Aleo’s wish to run. “I will feel bad until the day I leave this earth that we didn’t scratch, and that I should have been more forceful,” said Gilchrist after Lost in the Fog ran a poor ninth.

The inoperable cancer was discovered and two months later, in September, 2006, Lost in the Fog was euthanized with the trainer at his side. “It started in his spleen,” said Gilchrist. “The autopsy showed about 100 pounds of tumor.”

Gilchrist can reflect upon the happier days of the colt’s career. “I still have his ashes here,” he said.

Gilchrist also entertains fond memories of Aleo, a San Francisco resident who died in June, 2008, at age 88 after a three-decade alliance.

“When anybody has a 30-year relationship on the racetrack, it is a very odd occurrence these days,” said Gilchrist. “All you need to know is this ran a lot closer than trainer-client.”

Gilchrist said he began his affiliation in 1979 after Aleo called him on the recommendation of Glen Nolan, a farm owner who knew the young trainer. “The first horse I trained for Harry was Sonny Shy, who I bought for \$10,000,” said Gilchrist. “He was later claimed, and Harry said I should get him some more.

“We were very close friends, and always spoke freely,” continued Gilchrist. “Some times words were exchanged, and the next day we came back and it all worked out.

“We bought a lot of horses, and they weren’t all success stories,” added Gilchrist. “Harry loved to go to auctions but always left the decisions to me. He said ‘you’re the guy that knows’ and made my job a lot easier.”

Gilchrist still thinks often of Aleo. “Even though Harry is gone, he is still helping me out to this day,” said Gilchrist, in reference to about half of the 20-horse stable he trains at Golden Gate Fields belonging to the Aleo estate.

Gilchrist made big noise in the Sunshine Millions at Gulfstream Park in January by winning with two Florida-bred horses for the estate: Wild Promises in the \$500,000 Filly & Mare Turf and High Resolve in the \$300,000 Filly & Mare Sprint. Gilchrist was sure that Aleo was watching from heaven as Wild Promises, a 5-year-old mare, won for the 12th time in 17 starts to raise her earnings to \$656,610; and High Resolve, a 4-year-old filly, won for the seventh time in 10 outings to lift her earnings to \$426,270.

Gilchrist also trains Victorina, a multiple stakes winner, for the estate. The 6-year-old mare has won 14 of 25 starts and earned \$672,455.

Gilchrist said horses from the estate will continue to be dispersed. “Two will stay with me, my choice,” said Gilchrist of Aleo’s will. “Those were Harry’s wishes.”

Gilchrist said that Aleo and Lost in the Fog were big parts of the puzzle that make a successful trainer.

“Four things make a good horse trainer,” said Gilchrist. “Good horses, good owners, good help, and last and most important, a lot of good luck. If you can put all four together, you can have a good career.”



Gilchrist has also left his mark on the sport with horses for other owners. “John Harris and his father, Jack, were influential in my early career,” said Gilchrist of the prominent California owner-breeders. “They were the ones that got me started in Phoenix in 1973. Harris Farms in Coalinga was not as big as it is now. I never forgot those guys.”

Gilchrist forged into national prominence for Harris Farms with Soviet Problem, a California-bred filly who finished second in the 1994 Breeders’ Cup Sprint, a head behind Cherokee Run.

Soviet Problem, by Moscow Ballet out of Nopro Blama, was a multiple stakes-winner co-owned by Don Valpredo and one of five Northern California Horses of the Year conditioned by Gilchrist. She won 15 of 20 starts and earned \$905,546.

Gilchrist did not initially expect much out of the filly, whose dam had produced a pair of duds. “When she first arrived and I looked at her pedigree, I said ‘how long are you going to keep breeding to that thing?’” said Gilchrist. “She was just kind of a freak.”

Gilchrist thought Soviet Problem was unlucky not to win the Breeders’ Cup, in which she was caught at the wire. “Churchill moved the gate back 30 or 40 yards,” said Gilchrist. “If the Breeders’ Cup was anywhere else that year, she probably would have won.”

Gilchrist, who was born on April 24, 1948, in California, has been on the racetrack most of his life. “My dad came from a family that was a bunch of farmers in Julesburg, Colorado,” explained Gilchrist. “He was one of 13--nine brothers and four sisters--and some of them began racing in the Midwest.”

Gilchrist’s father and some of his uncles worked their way to the West Coast and became trainers. “Everybody called my dad ‘Boots’ although his first name was Wilbur,” said Gilchrist. “Another uncle was called ‘Whiz’ but his real name was Loren. It seemed like they all had nicknames. I didn’t know my uncles’ first names until I was 15 or 16.”

Gilchrist credited his knowledge to observing old-school horsemen. “I worked for Willard Proctor at Del Mar and Oak Tree in 1970 and 1971,” said Gilchrist. “I had another uncle, Gene, who worked for El Peco Ranch. I probably learned more from my dad and uncles and Proctor than anybody.

“These were people I respected,” added Gilchrist. “If you didn’t do too much talking and did a lot of listening, it was hard not to learn from them. They kept some late hours at night, but always arrived at the barn early and stayed late.”

Gilchrist recalled one of his family’s star horses, Gold Seal, who started with his father and ended with him, winning 31 of 118 starts and earning \$214,719 from 1971 to 1980. “That was a lot of money in those days,” said Gilchrist of the stable meal ticket.

Gilchrist learned plenty from his father. “I was very young and did something I shouldn’t have,” said Gilchrist of one example that stuck with him. “He wasn’t one to holler and said, ‘son, you got to be smarter than the mule if you’re going to plow the field.’”

Boots, who died in 1996 at age 92, would be proud to see how well his son is plowing along. □

