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JORGE Gutierrez trained in relative obscurity during the past decade in Southern California, a reserved individual who enjoyed moderate success with a stable of mostly California-breds.

A name virtually unknown outside the Golden State, Gutierrez had established a reputation among followers of the circuit as a hard worker, whose highest accomplishments were a handful of Cal-bred stakes scores.

That image was elevated dramatically this winter with the meteoric ascent of Bright Thought, a four-year-old colt that promises to be his breakthrough horse.

Bright Thought shocked the racing world on March 16 at Santa Anita Park when he won the \$150,000 Grade 2 San Luis Rey Stakes on turf in 2:22.72, the fastest 1½ miles ever recorded in racing!

The San Luis Rey climaxed a string of three consecutive eye-opening victories on the Santa Anita turf and a rare training triple for Gutierrez with his first graded triumph.

"It's exciting," said Gutierrez between races at Santa Anita a few weeks after the scintillating win. "I've been around a lot of nice horses, like Sangue, when I first started working for Henry Moreno, and Bien Bien, when I was with Paco Gonzalez.

"It's kind of the same feeling with this horse, although it's a lot different because this one is under my care," continued Gutierrez in adapting to a newly discovered prominence. "I've had a lot of texts and calls and have been on a few radio shows.

"Bright Thought caught the eye of a lot of people," added the appreciative Gutierrez. "That's important for me. It's getting me more exposure."

Gutierrez, the 47-year-old son of a former jockey, credited being around the stable since he was five in providing the foundation to offer many bright thoughts in properly training a Thoroughbred.

Those decades of experience helped Gutierrez recognize the potential of Bright Thought when he arrived in his barn as an unraced three-year-old early last year.



Bright Thought gives Gutierrez his moment in the spotlight



Bright Thought set a world record time when winning the G2 San Luis Rey Stakes at Sants Anita last month

"Turf had always been the plan," said Gutierrez of the Kentucky-bred colt. "The way he traveled, he looked like a turf horse." Gutierrez said his pedigree supported the observation, being by the Sunday Silence stallion Hat Trick out of the Smart Strike mare Smart Thought.

Bright Thought was sent to him by co-owner and co-breeder Alex Venneri, a La Cañada resident who had horses with Gutierrez when he first took out his license and co-owns Blackhorse Farm in Kentucky. The horse is also co-owned by Marjorie Post Dye, who co-bred him under her Postum Farm stable name.

Bright Thought took a long and circuitous route to begin strutting his stuff on grass. "He could run on dirt, too, so to give him a tightener, I shipped him to Hollywood Park for his first start last July," said Gutierrez of his debut in a six-furlong maiden special weight race on Cushion Track.

Bright Thought broke slowly and finished

seventh, beaten by 11½ lengths. "It was not the ideal spot, and he hurt his shoulder a little after breaking awkwardly," said Gutierrez.

"He was ready to run again at the end of Del Mar, but races did not fill and Alex did not want to race such a big horse around the tight turns at Fairplex Park, so he sent him back to Kentucky," explained Gutierrez.

From there, the colt was shipped to trainer Stephanie Beattie at Penn National. Bright Thought returned to break his maiden by 11 lengths in a \$25,000 maiden claiming race at six furlongs at Laurel Park in November.

Following a pair of allowance races on dirt in Pennsylvania, Bright Thought was returned to Gutierrez in January.

"He really blossomed when he came back," said Gutierrez. "He was more professional and also more aggressive, but in a good way. He's the toughest horse in the barn, but he won't try to savage you. He's happy. He stands out on the track, a big black horse, on the muscle, kicking, a hotshot."

Anxious to put the hotshot on turf, Gutierrez found an overnight handicap at one mile on February 3. Bright Thought led all the way after an early duel and won by 2½ lengths. He returned in an allowance race at 1¼ miles on February 21, set all the pace and drew off to a 5¼-length win in 1:57.86, flirting with the course record.

Gutierrez was beginning to feel his pulse quicken. "His first win in 1:33 and change was a nice race, but when he came back the second time to win the way he did showed he was for real," said the trainer.

Gutierrez was optimistic that Bright Thought was ready for bigger game. The public thought so, too, sending the lightly raced colt off as the 2.70-to-1 second choice in a San Luis Rey lineup that included major turf stakes winners Slim Shadey, Interaction, and Bourbon Bay.

Bright Thought did not disappoint, breaking on top, yielding the lead to Slim Shadey, reclaiming it on the far turn and drawing off in

deep stretch under a hand ride for a 3¼-length victory.

"Victor told me how the race was going to go and that was exactly how it went," said Gutierrez of winning jockey Victor Espinoza. (Bright Thought's record was lowered one week later when Twilight Eclipse won the Pan American Stakes on turf at Gulfstream Park in 2:22.63.)

Bright Thought's victory highlighted the most memorable day of Gutierrez's career. He sandwiched the victory between scores by Warren's Morgan and Warren's Flasher, a pair of Cal-bred claimers, in the first and last races, respectively. "The race set up perfectly for my filly in the first race, and when she cleared off and won, I had a feeling it was going to be a great day," said Gutierrez.

Gutierrez traces his racing roots to Mexico. "My dad, Juan, started riding in Mexico City," said Gutierrez. "My grandfather, Narcicio, first started working at the track there. My uncle, Silvano, trained there.

"My father came to this country under contract to Laz Barrera when I was two years old," said the Mexican-born Gutierrez. "Laz took him to New York, where we moved to a farm near Albany.

"When his three-year contract ended, my father moved to California with trainer J.J. Pletcher because he wanted to be closer to his relatives in Mexico," explained Gutierrez. "When Pletcher left for Florida, he stayed and went to work for Henry Moreno."

Gutierrez's father remained with Moreno for 42 years, exercising horses and rising to stable foreman. "I started coming out to Henry's barn when I was five and he put me on the payroll when I turned 12," said Gutierrez of the junior contract. "I started walking hots on weekends."

During his teen years, Gutierrez became the only student at Duarte High School to carry a racing form with his textbooks as he continued to hone his equine degree while working under Moreno and his father in his spare time.

He marveled at the emergence of such major stakes winners as Sanguie, Lite Light, Bastonera II, Tizna, Lucky Spell, Sam Who, and Timely Assertion – rubbing some of them – and could only dream of one day training one on his own.

"At 16, I started to travel with horses I groomed," said Gutierrez, who remained with

Moreno and his father for another decade rubbing horses. "Then I got married and went to work for Paco Gonzalez, where I became assistant and stayed for seven years."

From there, Gutierrez worked for one year with Ben Cecil and two with Marty Jones before going on his own. He thanked all his teachers for different lessons learned.

"My dad taught me how to horseback," said Gutierrez of the primary influence in his life and career. "He was a very smart horseman and could really see a horse physically. Henry said he was the best exercise rider he had ever seen. (D. Wayne) Lukas would ask Henry if he could come over and gallop his problem horses."

Gutierrez hired his father, who remains a reliable consultant in his barn. "He retired three years ago – for six months," said Gutierrez,

"The race set up perfectly for my filly in the first race, and when she cleared off and won, I had a feeling it was going to be a great day"

unable to keep a good man away from horses. "He's 76, but comes to the barn five days a week to walk hots and keep an eye on everything."

Gutierrez also took good notes from his former employers. "Henry had a way with fillies," said Gutierrez of Moreno's long list of female stakes stars. "Paco was brilliant with the way he treated each horse as an individual. I learned a lot from Ben on the business side and how he handled himself professionally with clients."

After training privately for Ben Warren for six years, Gutierrez broadened his stable to other owners last year. Warren remains his primary owner with about 75 per cent of his 42-horse stable.

Gutierrez annexed his first training title at Fairplex Park last autumn and was in position for his first top ten finish at Santa Anita heading into the final days of the meet. He credited his rising fortunes to a strong crew,

headed by chief assistant Enrique Galindo and foreman Miguel Vasquez. Gutierrez also tipped his hat to groom Pedro Perez and exercise rider Juan Landeros for their work with Bright Thought.

Gutierrez made most of his early noise with California-bred stakes wins by such horses as Warren's Jitterbug, Warren's Amber, and Sip One For Mom for Warren and Jack's Wild, Mr. Wolverine, and Seminole Native for Venneri and partnerships.

"Sip One For Mom was the first horse I bought for Ben," recalled Gutierrez of the filly who upset millionaire Moscow Burning in the 2006 Solana Beach Handicap at Del Mar.

"I saw James Cassidy, Moscow Burning's trainer, after nominations for the Solana Beach came out," said Gutierrez. "I told him my horse was training great, and he said Moscow Burning was probably going in a Grade 2, to my relief. When he changed his mind, I thought 'Oh, God!' but the outcome was pretty good."

Gutierrez said that Jack's Wild was also the first horse he bought for Venneri, an early decision that inspired the confidence for Venneri to later entrust him with Bright Thought.

Gutierrez has lofty goals for Bright Thought and does not want to squeeze the lemon dry. "I'm freshening him for the Arlington Million," said Gutierrez of the prestigious Grade 1 test in Chicago on August 17. "He will get a little time and prep once for that."

Gutierrez has never shipped a horse out of state, but is looking forward to an auspicious showing in Arlington. "Bright Thought could put me on the map," concluded Gutierrez optimistically. "I've been doing well with Cal-breds, but want to reach another level."

Gutierrez lives east of Santa Anita in Fontana with his wife, Arlynn, and their sons Jonathan, 19, and Kevin, 15. Baseball is the second most popular sport in the household. Jonathan, a sophomore at Cal State Fullerton, coaches during the summer. Kevin, a high school sophomore, plays on the junior varsity. Gutierrez could be a catcher, built short and stocky in the Pudge Rodriguez mold. This summer they will be cheering for the Dodgers and trying to hit a home run with Bright Thought.