



KATHY WALSH

by Steve Schuelein

Veteran trainer Kathy Walsh watched a race on Cushion Track from her mezzanine box overlooking the stretch at Santa Anita Park during the Oak Tree Racing Association meet and marveled at the surface.



"Cushion Track has definitely helped; it's been the biggest salvation to racing in California," said Walsh, a major proponent of synthetic surfaces. Santa Anita completed the Southern California synthetic trifecta mandated by the California Horse Racing Board when it invested \$10 million to install Cushion Track in time for Oak Tree.

Hollywood Park was the first to comply when it implemented Cushion Track last fall. Del Mar put in Polytrack for its summer meet. "Santa Anita is a little tighter and faster than Del Mar, but I'm sure they'll tweak the Del Mar surface before next summer," said Walsh of the considerably slower times at the coastal track. "But they're safe. That's the main thing."

Walsh stables 18 thoroughbreds at Santa Anita, but plans to shuffle a few to Hollywood Park when the Inglewood track is open.

She finds herself in a much better mood during the past year. "I've been very happy since last fall, when I moved over to Hollywood Park," said Walsh of the shift to keep her horses equally happy on synthetic. "It was very refreshing."

The bespectacled Walsh predicts a rosy future for Southern California once the racing world has recognized the circuit is stable and safer.

"My owners are starting to buy more horses," said Walsh. "California racing has been put on a higher level. California tracks had a reputation of too hard surfaces. It was exaggerated, but that was the way we were perceived."

Walsh expects growth with new trainers and new owners being attracted. "Because the owners feel the racetracks are safer now, they will consider racing mares a little longer,"

pointed out Walsh, instead of retiring them to the broodmare ranks.

Walsh has no better proof of the positive synthetic influence than her own top story of 2007, the 2-year-old gelding Georgie Boy. The California-bred gave Walsh the second Grade 1 victory of her long career in the \$250,000 Del Mar Futurity in September.

"Georgie Boy has never been on a dirt track," said Walsh. "I broke him, along with three other 2-year-olds, on Polytrack at a state-of-the-art facility in Redmond, Wash., owned by one of my clients, Mark DeDomenico."

Georgie Boy went from Washington to the Cushion Track at Hollywood Park, where he raced twice last summer, to the Polytrack at Del Mar, where he won two stakes including the Futurity, to the Cushion Track at Santa Anita.

Georgie Boy hit the board in all of his first five starts and earned \$286,806 for owner-breeder George Schwary, a 75-year-old neophyte from Porter Ranch who is grateful he has listened to Walsh's advice.

"I claimed the mare (Ippodamia), mated (to stallion Tribal Rule) and managed her, and insisted on starting Georgie Boy on Polytrack," said Walsh with special pride. "It's fun to see a little one-mare breeder come up with a Grade 1 win."

The Del Mar winner's circle prompted a warm embrace between Walsh and jockey Garrett Gomez, who flew in from New York to ride Georgie Boy for the first time and rallied from 11th with a powerful stretch kick in the seven-furlong race.

"Garrett and his wife, Pam, are like family," explained Walsh of the poignant scene. "Pam worked in my barn for a lot of years. I knew Garrett from the Midwest and

saw how talented he was. It was a shock it took this long for him to catch on. He's a marvelous rider."

Walsh refuses to go out on a limb over the potential of Georgie Boy but hopes to have him in his best possible form as a 3-year-old. As to his prospects of handling two turns as convincingly as he negotiated one this year, Walsh is optimistic. "He relaxes and does what you want," she said. "He has a good head on his shoulders and doesn't get all riled up."

Walsh recorded her first Grade 1 stakes victory on the main track at Santa Anita, also at seven furlongs, in the 2001 Santa Monica Handicap for fillies and mares with Nany's Sweep.

"She had a multitude of problems, but she worked through them," said Walsh of the mare, owned by Sydney Belzberg's Budget Stable. "She was a sweetheart." Walsh said she was later sold to Stonerside Stable, joined the broodmare ranks and earlier this year became the dam of a stakes winner by A.P. Indy.

Georgie Boy is the star of the Walsh stable, which also includes Vauquelin, a European import who won a division of the Oceanside Stakes for 3-year-olds on the Del Mar turf for owner DeDomenico.

"I used to get a lot of foreign-breds during the last 10 years, but I've only got Vauquelin and a couple of others now," said Walsh of the changing look of her stable.

"I've always loved working with young horses but didn't have many the last 10 years," continued Walsh. "Most of my owners are coming back in the 2-year-old market, and I have six now."

"I'm trying to get a real balanced stable again," said Walsh, adding that she also has

four 3-year-olds and eight older horses.

The new look of the stable also includes a couple of new faces on the human side, with Jose Ramirez—a former assistant in the Rafael Becerra stable—taking over as chief assistant in September, and Warren Brown joining on as his top aide.

Walsh has a mixture of owners, including Schwary, DeDomenico, Belzberg, Jim Vreeland, Sanford Robertson, Kathleen Nikkel and a Rancho Santa Fe syndicate headed by Michael O’Riordan and Craig Edwards.

Walsh, who was born in Sonoma in

Northern California, has been around the track most of her life. Daughter of trainer James Walsh, she began working with him as a child at California fairs, assisted him at Longacres after he moved to Washington during the 1960’s and took over the stable following his death in 1970.

The well-traveled Walsh journeyed to tracks throughout the country during her younger years, learning from such luminaries as Allen Jerkens in New York and Buster Millerick and Charlie Whittingham in California, before leading the trainer standings at Longacres four times during

the 1970’s and twice at Canterbury Downs in Minnesota during the 1980’s. She viewed Millerick as an “adopted grandfather” and considers his omission from the Racing Hall of Fame a grave oversight.

“This is a beautiful industry like I said years ago in Seattle,” reiterated Walsh. “Not everybody can buy a baseball franchise, and the owners should be rewarded a little.”

For New Year’s wishes, Walsh would like to see Gomez win an Eclipse Award as leading jockey, Millerick elected to the Hall of Fame, and Georgie Boy fulfill his promise as a leading 3-year-old.