The success story of Mark Casse

Mark Casse with Art Sherman, trainer of California Chrome

Mark Casse is an American success story, despite the fact that many of his achievements have come in Canada, where in April, he received his seventh Sovereign Award as the nation’s outstanding trainer.

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PHOTOS: HORSEPHOTOS, FRANCES J KARON

Through diligence, dedication and devotion, Casse has won favor with major clients who have helped make him a respected horseman at any shed row under which his shingle hangs.

Presently, that would include California, Kentucky and his home away from home, Woodbine near Toronto, where he won his eighth straight title in 2014 and his ninth overall.

He won the crown at Turfway Park four times, topped the list at Churchill Downs in 1988, was champion of the 2014 Keeneland Spring meet, and was among the leaders at the 2015 Winter session at Santa Anita, no easy feat against the likes of perennial alpha males Bob Baffert, Jerry Hollendorfer, Peter Miller, Doug O’Neill and John Sadler.

Casse has made an indelible mark in Canada. In addition to his own plaque last year, he trained Queen’s Plate and Woodbine Oaks winner Lexie Lou, Canadian Horse of the Year; Dynamic Sky, champion male turf horse; Hillaby, champion female sprint winner; Conquest Typhoon, champion two-year-old male; and Conquest Harlanate, champion two-year-old filly.

Casse’s love affair with The Great White North, as the McKenzie brothers affectionately called it, began years ago. He wasn’t even old enough for kindergarten when he was smitten with thoroughbred bug.

“I always loved racing,” said Casse, 53, a native of Indianapolis, round of face with wall-to-wall teeth that form an ingratiating Cheshire cat smile. “I grew up in it with my father, Norman. We lived on a farm since I was four. My dad had a van company and we rode together in the van from Ocala to Louisville, and I watched the Kentucky Derby in 1973.

“It was one reason I developed an interest in racing: the father/son relationship, the bonding if you will. Plus, I got to see Secretariat. I didn’t realize at the time that it would be my favorite Derby. I could hardly see because our seats weren’t very good, but it was great being there with my dad. He has always been my idol.”

His father had a successful breeding business in Indiana before moving to one of the nation’s horse capitals, Ocala, Florida. In just six years, Mark went from mucking stalls in the sub-zero temperatures of an Indiana winter to running his father’s Cardinal Hill Farm in Ocala. At 18, Mark officially became a trainer and saddled his first winner, Joe’s Coming, at Keeneland on April 14, 1979.

Casse’s annual migration to Canada was prompted in part by what he considers a haphazard racing schedule in Kentucky.

“In the 80s, I was leading trainer in Kentucky, but I was a little frustrated with their circuit,” he said. “It’s still kind of broken up.

“I went to Canada one summer in the mid-80s, I guess it was, and I just liked it. It was nice for me because they usually run from about April until December, which meant I got to spend the winters in Ocala, which was home.

“We built things up and had success, but this seventh Sovereign was a long time in coming. It didn’t happen overnight. We had to work hard to win our first one. Things kind of snowballed as we got better and better horses. We were lucky.”

Humility aside, Casse recognizes the significance of currently having a veritable Who’s Who of blue blood owners, among them, Gary Barber, Conquest Stables,
PROFILE

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Randi Melton

hated the real world, came home one day to the barn, smelled the horse poop and that was it. I knew I was home. I was working for an architect and I’m like, ‘I wasn’t happy.’

“Ever since I was a kid I wanted to be a jockey and it took me about four or five years. I took my time, did other things, worked as a vet’s assistant, you name it.”

“I started riding at 25 and tacked 107 pounds when I was the leading apprentice at Calder in 1999. In 1998 I won the first race I ever rode on a 30-1 shot at Tampa Bay Downs-Chilka.”

“I just rode for a little bit because I got hurt a lot since I had to reduce so much. I worked for Mark on and off for years and assisted Al Stahl for three years during the period Blame beat Zenyatta in the 2010 Breeders’ Cup Classic.

“I was part-time assistant for Mark in the winter and Al in the summer, and it worked out that I could stay with Mark full time, and it was the best thing that ever happened, a blessing.”

With 100 horses in training, understandably there are days when news is not good. One way or the other, Casse copes with it admirably.

“He’s the best,” Melton said. “You could call him with bad news, which we inevitably have to do at some point, but he handles it. He doesn’t micro-manage, but he knows everything going on with every horse, and he wants to know, and that’s what I love about working for him.

“He’s so savvy with the horses. He can tell me over the phone, ‘Randi, I think it’s this,’ and it’ll turn out to be that, and I’m like, ‘Mark, you really irritate me sometimes. Why are you always right?’”

Mark Edward Casse, meanwhile, despite the rigors of his profession, makes time to enjoy the best of both worlds, business and pleasure. His wife, Tina, and two of his seven children, Norman and Colby, lend their support, moral and physical, at various levels of the operation.

“This has only come about in the last 10 years,” Casse said, “but it’s really nice when your family is so closely involved. I don’t take myself too seriously, but I understand it’s a business and it’s important, but not near as important as your health and your family.

“People ask me how I handle the pressure of it, but the pressure is usually put on by myself. Any pressure that exists is because I have all these wonderful people who put so much confidence in me and I don’t want to let them down. In the end, it’s about my family being happy and healthy. That’s the most important thing.”

Casse’s priorities are in order. His Sovereign Awards and other glitzy hardware accumulated through the years look nothing like Broadway’s Great White Way or the neon overkill on the Vegas Strip.

Calumet, Cheyenne Stables, Gabe Grossberg, Live Oak, Robert Masterson, John Oxley, Mike Rutherford, Spendthrift Farm, Stonestreet, Three Chimneys Farm, and highly-regarded newcomer John Malone, who races as Bridlewood Farm, an existing expanse in Ocala that Malone recently purchased. “He owns the Atlanta Braves,” Casse said, “and he’s the largest private land owner in North America. He bought a weanling in November for $3 million.

“We have some great, great owners, prominent men and women, who are very smart and very wealthy,” Casse said. “I’m very proud of that.”

He should be, as he should his valued principles. Casse adheres to an honesty-is-the-best-policy philosophy, and, without giving away trade secrets, has a great eye for a horse, an advantage at any sale.

“It’s not really one thing over another,” Casse said. “There are horses that appeal to me and horses that don’t. I like an athletic type and I like a really refined neck and a strong shoulder. I look for a strong back, as well.

“Honestly, I just be myself,” he said of his credo with clients. “I’ve been fortunate over the years in working with some very smart men and women who trust me, and it’s something I’m very proud of. . . In this business, there are a lot of good people and a lot of bad people. I just have a real, true love of the game and I feel like I represent it and I take it very personally.

“Unfortunately, so many good people are run off because they encounter the wrong people who take advantage of them. That’s really disturbing and upsetting to me. It’s not something I do. I’m a straightforward person and I tell it the way it is.”

Like any stable, large or small, care is a constant and can’t happen without good help. Casse has that from coast to coast. In California, the day-to-day operation is in the capable hands of 43-year-old Randi Melton who has been with Casse going on six years.

She was once a jockey but has long ago outgrown the wardrobe of silks and tight white pants, but her experience and work ethic remains of infinite value.

“I grew up on a farm in a town called Spar, north of Ocala, in Florida’s horse country,” Melton said. “My father trained race horses, my parents got divorced and my mom ended up marrying Mark’s dad, so we’re step-siblings.

“I went to college at an art institute in Ft. Lauderdale. I

Conquest Two
Step, with Joe Talamo up, wins the G2 Palos Verdes Stakes at Santa Anita
“We hardly keep any trophies,” Casse said. “If you came to our house (in Ocala), you would see four pictures. Three of them are of our first Kentucky Derby runner, Seaside Retreat, who ran against Barbaro in 2006. We haven’t even gotten the fourth one yet, but it’s framed and it’s of Lexie Lou winning the Queen’s Plate.

“I have maybe one trophy in my office, and that’s the Sovereign Award. Any of the others are all in our office on our farm in Ocala, where our home is, as well. We have 85 acres. For us, it’s kind of paradise. “I like to fish, but I don’t really have time to do it, so we built a pond in our front yard about 10 years ago and we stocked it. It’s about an acre and it’s beautiful. When I get a little tired, I go out and fish for 15 minutes or so, then go back in and do some work.

“Sometimes after dinner I’ll go and fish for a while. That’s my only little diversion. The rest of my day is all consumed by horses.

“Our day starts at five o’clock in the morning. Normally, before cell phones and all this social media, it used to be we’d start the day around 5, and about ten o’clock, you could kind of take a breath and say, ‘Hey, we don’t have anything going on till around 3 o’clock. We don’t have to worry.

“But now with the California division, activity starts three hours earlier than on the East Coast, so you’re kind of always on pins and needles when the phone rings. Or if I’m in California, as soon as training is over, instead of taking a break and going home, training is starting in the east, and we have horses running there.

“It’s a long day, but I love it and wouldn’t trade it for anything. I don’t tweet and I’m not on Facebook. If I don’t read my e-mails for a few hours, I may have 30 or 40 to answer. With today’s technology, most of my owners don’t have to be told when their horses are running. They get their entries and their work reports, so things have changed a lot since I started 35 years ago.”

In the future, changes, be they ill or good, will continue.

“I think racing has leveled off,” Casse said. “I think the strong tracks will continue to do just fine, but things are a lot different than they used to be when racing was the only game in town. It’s not that way any more, with all the gambling on line and all the casinos and everything.

“My son, Norman, who’s 31 or 32, is one of my main assistants. I feel good about his future. My youngest son, Colby, is 12, and of all my kids, he probably loves horse racing at this age more than any of them did at this point in time. I think the business will be there for him, too.

“It’s a great sport.”

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**Casse Graded Stakes Winners**

**GRADE 1**
- Dark Ending
- Exciting Story (champion)
- My Conquestadory
- Pool Play
- Spring in the Air (champion)

**GRADE 2**
- Conquest Harlanate (champion)
- Conquest Two Step
- Conquest Typhoon (champion)
- Funny Proposition
- Higher World
- Hillaby (champion)
- Kaigun
- Marchfield (champion)
- Prospective
- Roxy Gap (champion)
- Royal Oath
- Seaside Retreat
- Skyway
- Spring Venture
- Uncaptured (champion)

**GRADE 3**
- Added Edge (champion)
- Arch Hall
- Blue Laser
- Clearly Foxy
- Delegation
- Delightful Mary (champion)
- Dixie Strike
- Dynamic Impact
- Dynamic Sky (champion)
- Florida Won
- Laugh Track
- Lexie Lou (champion)
- Madly Truly
- Northern Passion
- Officer Cherrie
- Ol’ Fashion Gal
- Precise End
- Raja’s Shark
- Sealy Hill (champion)
- Sisterly Love
- Skip Code
- Sky Captain
- Sprung
- Stealcase

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Kaigun wins the G2 Seabiscuit Hcp at Del Mar last year

Tapin
Top Notch Lady
Turf War

**Sovereign Award**

Outstanding Trainer