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If you are born in Oxford, given a middle name of Amherst, and are the nephew of a trainer knighted “Sir,” intelligent contributions in the Thoroughbred racing industry may be an expected given.

Ben Cecil would have seemed a natural to keep his bloodlines and ply his skills in his native England, but he instead chose the United States as the site for his career.

“When I came here originally (in 1992), I worked one and a half years under Gary Jones and planned to go back,” said Cecil between races at Santa Anita Park in January. “But seeing the level of prize-money here compared to England, I decided not to rush back.

“It’s very easy to start training here,” explained Cecil, 44, of another contrast with his homeland. “You don’t have to buy or lease a yard.”

Cecil knew of the giant footprints left in American racing during the 1970s and 1980s by such English-born trainers as John Russell, Neil Drysdale, and John Gosden, and he continued the British invasion.

England’s loss has been America’s gain. Since taking out his license in 1996 and basing his stable in California, Cecil has earned more than \$20 million in purses and conditioned one Eclipse Award winner.

Cecil brought a wide background of international experience to this country, having broken in under Colin Hayes in Australia after graduation from high school and sandwiching a pair of stints in England under Ian Balding and Mark Tompkins around an assignment with the British Bloodstock Agency.

Cecil’s career took off in California. “I got used to it very quickly working for Gary Jones,” said Cecil of adapting to American training methods.

Cecil accepted a better job as the top assistant to Rodney Rash in 1994 before the unexpected shocked the racing community. Rash died suddenly of a rare blood disorder at age 36 in 1996 with a classy 33-horse stable.

Cecil hurriedly took out his trainer’s license, inherited most of the stable, and quickly learned of the vicissitudes of the game. “My first two starters finished second and third in a race



## Cecil continues family’s European winning tradition in America

at Santa Anita, and a week later I won my first race with Celtic Arms in the Pan American Handicap at Gulfstream Park,” said Cecil of breaking his maiden in style in the Grade 2 stakes. “But he injured a sesamoid ligament and never raced again.”

Celtic Arms thrust Cecil, 27 at the time, into the spotlight, and stamped him as a young trainer on the rise, as well as one who would continue to thrive on turf

with European imports.

“I kept most of the clients from Rodney’s stable, and the biggest was Gary Tanaka, who had eight to ten horses, most of which were bought in Europe and concentrated on turf,” explained Cecil of his early success on turf, a pattern that has continued throughout his career.

“Winning the Pan American was a good way to get started, and we were very lucky and kept

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it going,” said Cecil of the early years on his own. “We won 14 stakes one year.”

The late 1990s produced Cecil’s first Grade 1 winner in Donna Viola, who captured the Santa Barbara and Gamely handicaps in 1997. The following year produced another double Grade 1-winning European import owned by Tanaka in Squeak, who annexed the Beverly Hills Handicap and Matriarch Stakes.

“Squeak loved a cut in the ground and won the Matriarch by six on soft turf,” recalled Cecil.

But for sheer accomplishments, the easy number one choice is Golden Apples, another Tanaka-owned filly who won the Eclipse Award as champion female turf horse in 2002.

“She got here a week before winning the (2001) Del Mar Oaks,” said Cecil of the Irish-bred filly. “I’ve had a couple that I thought might be better, but nobody achieved what she achieved.”

At four, Golden Apples won the Beverly D and Yellow Ribbon stakes, two of the marquee events in her division, en route to the championship.

“She had a helluva turn of foot,” said Cecil. “She would sit last and explode. She was a very laid-back horse around the barn. She just did what she had to do, that’s it.

“She was from the first crop by Pivotal,” said Cecil of the British stallion. “I never heard of him. She was his first good one. He went on to be a top stallion and sired horses like Megahertz.”

Golden Apples went on to earn \$1,672,583 before being retired and sold at auction to Shadwell for \$3.4 million.

Golden Apples, Donna Viola, and Squeak were all females. “There aren’t many grass stakes here that I haven’t won for fillies,” said Cecil. “That’s what I tend to buy. I try to push my clients onto buying European horses. I still get the odd European sent to me. That’s probably my reputation.”

Indeed, of 38 graded stakes wins recorded by Cecil, 34 have been on turf, 22 by females.

Cecil’s favorite victory by a non-female may have been an 11-1 upset by Passinetti in the historic 2003 San Juan Capistrano Handicap, the longest Grade 1 in the country at about 1¾ miles on turf.

“He was brought off the farm after a three-year layoff and Mr. Tanaka had nearly

given him away six months before the race as a riding horse,” said Cecil, who rejuvenated the seven-year-old gelding.

Cecil credited his own racing pedigree to both his father and mother. “My father (David) was the twin brother of Henry Cecil,” said Cecil of the famed English trainer elevated to “Sir” status by Queen Elizabeth in 2011.

“My father trained briefly and ran a stud farm in Yorkshire,” continued Cecil. (David Cecil died in 2000.) “My mother (Fiona) had a brother, Arthur Corbett, who trained in Newmarket and won a lot of big handicaps. I had it a bit on both sides.”

Cecil remembered a visit to Newbury with Henry Cecil at 14 that changed his life. “He had two horses in, I bet them, and they both won,” said Cecil. “I thought, ‘This was easy.’ That’s when I decided what I wanted to do.”

Cecil visits England three times a year and remains in contact with Uncle Henry. “I certainly keep an eye on what he does and last saw him in December at Newmarket,” said Cecil.

“He went through some tough years in addition to his health problems,” said Cecil of his uncle, 70, who is battling stomach cancer. “It’s great to see him back on top.”

Carrying the elder Cecil back to the pinnacle of the sport was superstar Frankel, who was retired last year after going unbeaten in 14 races.

“The one time I saw him race live was probably the worst race he ever ran,” said Cecil of a narrow score in the 2011 St. James’s Palace Stakes at Royal Ascot. “I saw Frankel at Juddmonte in December. He was pretty special, maybe the best horse of all time in Europe.”

Sir Henry Cecil will always rank number one in his nephew’s eyes. “For someone I looked up to since I got into training, he’s definitely the one,” said Cecil of role models.

“The two trainers I respected most in



Golden Apples won Cecil an Eclipse Award for champion female turf horse in 2002



Cecil's stable star is 2012 Royal Heroine Mile winner Quiet Oasis

America were Charlie Whittingham and Bobby Frankel," added Cecil of the legendary pair. "When Rodney died, Charlie got an offer from (owner) Bob Hibbert to take his horses, and Charlie told him to leave them with me. Not many trainers would have done that."

Cecil also thanked Rash, who went on his own after several years under Whittingham. "He was quite a tough guy on his help and made me work pretty hard," said Cecil. "I had to be at the barn at four o'clock. But that's where I had the most responsibility. That's how you learn. You don't learn from watching. You learn from doing it."

Cecil considers himself a product of varied influences. "There are a lot of little things you pick up from different people," he said. "There is no one specific thing. As a trainer, you're learning every day. You learn from your mistakes. Every horse is different."

"The thing is you never stop learning," continued Cecil. "There is a different challenge every day. That's what makes it fun."

Cecil is not afraid to express his displeasure with medication rules in both California and the United States. "I'm one of a handful of California trainers who is anti-medication," said Cecil. "It's damaging American racing, the breeding industry,

and our perception in the rest of the world.

"Go other places and they think America is full of drugs," continued Cecil. "I'm not saying it is, but there is only one way to change it. It is affecting sales and breeding. The majority of the great stallions are now in Europe. The roster of American stallions is not as strong as ten years ago."

"I think it's a bit sad that we have to rely on drugs to get horses to the races," added Cecil. "If you dehydrate a horse with Lasix before he runs, you're going to knock him out and he won't be able to run back for three or four weeks. In England, you can run a horse back in a week. If nothing else, the medication rules in America should at least be consistent from state to state. That's why American racing doesn't get the respect it deserves."

Cecil is also pro-synthetic in the ongoing debate over track surfaces. "Statistics prove synthetics are much safer," said Cecil. "We rushed to put them in in California. Some were not put in properly and not maintained the way they should have been."

"There was a lot of pressure from old-time trainers to have them removed," continued Cecil. "Del Mar was the one track that spent the money and did it properly. It took a few years but they have a good track now."

Cecil balanced his comments by commending the progress Santa Anita has made since re-implementing a dirt track. "Santa Anita's dirt track is also good now because of the work that was put in during the last year," he said.

"I may be biased," admitted Cecil. "My horses are mostly turf horses, and a lot of turf horses won't run on dirt, but will run on synthetic."

Cecil said his 18-horse barn is predominantly made up of European imports, about 75 percent. Even his chief assistant of eight years is a European import: Alannah Holloway from Wales.

Cecil's stable is headed by Quiet Oasis, a five-year-old Irish-bred mare who highlighted an otherwise sub-par 2012 with victories in the Grade 2 Royal Heroine Mile and Grade 3 Wilshire Handicap – Cecil's third win in that race.

"She had a chip taken out of a knee last summer, is working and should be ready to race in February," said Cecil. He is also high on Tiger Day, a three-year-old colt from Europe; and Shumoos, a four-year-old filly on the comeback trail after finishing second in the 2011 Breeders' Cup Juvenile Sprint.

Cecil's primary owners are Paul Reddam, Arnold Zetcher, Paul Boghossian (Triple B Farm), and David Fernandes (Davon Stable).

Cecil's wife, Kristina, has also earned a reputation for churning out winners. She is co-producer of the television sit-com hit "Big Bang Theory" on CBS. The couple lives in Pasadena with their children: Francesca, three; and Hugo, two.

Cecil compared widely contrasting training methods between America and Europe. "There is much more time for the horse in England: one and a half to two hours each morning," he said. "Here you are pressed for time."

"In England, there is much more variation," he continued. "In Newmarket, you can go somewhere different each day to vary training. Here we have the main track and the training track and are confined to an amount of time. In an ideal world, I think England is probably better for the horse."

Cecil, wearing a navy blazer and blue jeans, looked like a perfect model of merging the best of both worlds. ■