

# Popular “Mr. Cho” enjoys big results from his small stable



Cho with one of his owners, Rafael Martinez



By Steve Schuelein

**A** PLETHORA of thoughts and emotions will flood trainer-owner-breeder Myung Kwon Cho when he watches the Kentucky Derby from his California home on television this year.

Cho will remember the excitement of his first two trips to the Run for the Roses with a pair of longshots. He will agonize briefly over what might have been with Premier Pegasus, a homebred colt who was considered a leading contender before being sidelined with an injury a month before the race.

Cho will not dwell on the negative and will look forward to another crack at Churchill Downs in a future year. An eternal optimist, the 68-year-old Korean native will continue living his version of the American Dream.

“Mr. Cho,” as the popular conditioner is called by almost everyone at the track, has enjoyed maximum results from a small stable during two decades in the sport.

Cho still struggles with his English,

although his horses seem to understand him perfectly. He recently discussed his life as son Raxon, a 17-year-old high school student and aspiring trainer, helped to pinch-hit for him.

Like many of his horses, Cho has overcome long odds to reach the winner’s circle. Born in North Korea in 1942 during World War II, Cho moved as a child with his family to Seoul in South Korea to escape Communism.

In 1978, Cho moved to the United States with the same motivation as many immigrants, to seek a better life in the land of opportunity. Cho first paid his bills by painting apartments before his first stroke of good luck.

A friend from Korea in the clothing export and import business contacted him and said he needed a business link in Los Angeles. The friend explained how he ran the business and Cho began his own on that model.

Cho founded Comak Trading Co. in the City of Vernon near downtown Los Angeles in 1980 and expanded it into a clothing export and import business featuring vintage styles that serves an international clientele.

The success of Comak, where Cho still spends long hours as owner and president, enabled him to move his family to a home in posh Rolling Hills Estates on the Palos Verdes peninsula and support his new-found interest in horse racing.

Cho had never heard of horse racing in Korea, and when an American friend asked him if he wanted to go to the races at Santa Anita during the 1980’s, Cho thought he meant auto racing.

When the friend explained that it was horse racing, Cho conjured up an image of steeplechase racing. When Cho arrived at the track and saw his first race, he was immediately smitten.

That initial attraction eventually led Cho to make his first claim as an owner in 1989 on a horse named Zonar. Later that year, Cho was encouraged by the potential of a two-year-old colt named Video Ranger, who finished far back in a maiden sprint but finished with interest.

When Video Ranger routed for the first time at 1 1/16 miles in January, 1990, Cho claimed him for \$40,000 from trainer D. Wayne Lukas following a 13-length score in the mud. After the race, trainer Bob Baffert

■ *continued on page 12*



**Premier Pegasus was the favorite for the Santa Anita Derby before surgery on a hairline fracture of a cannon bone**

■ *from page 10*

approached Cho, said he had considered claiming him, too, and offered to buy him for \$50,000. “No way,” said Cho.

Video Ranger went on to finish second to Mister Frisky in the Santa Anita Derby, earning him a trip to the Kentucky Derby. Dismissed at 65-to-1 odds under Ron Hansen as part of the field, Video Ranger rallied from 14th to finish fourth behind Unbridled, Summer Squall and Pleasant Tap and in front of a three-horse entry trained by Lukas.

As much as the race, Cho remembered needing to find a Derby hat for his wife, Lydia, in quarter-horse time. Unaware that all ladies wore hats to honor the occasion until they arrived at the admission gate, Cho frantically searched the parking lot before finding another woman willing to sell hers.

Video Ranger earned \$257,650 before being retired to stud at Wilson Stock Farm in California.

Cho returned to Kentucky for the 1998 Derby as the trainer-owner-breeder of Nationalore, a homebred son of Video Ranger, who was still a maiden despite a series of stakes placings, including a third in the Breeders’ Cup Juvenile.

Nationalore, sent off at 109-to-1 under Goncalino Almeida, was last in a field of 15 with a half-mile to go and rallied mildly to finish a non-threatening ninth behind winner Real Quiet. Nationalore never did win a race in 26 starts during a career in which he earned \$318,227.

Cho said he never worried about the odds at which the public sends his horses postward, only that he knows that they are training well. He saw that Video Ranger was

training well before both the Santa Anita and Kentucky derbies and entered him in both races with confidence.

Cho said that Nationalore’s come-from-behind style reminded him of Video Ranger. He said that type of horse usually does not take as much out of himself and has a better chance for a longer career. He could count on Nationalore unleashing a patented rally and passing most of the field but, unfortunately, he could never quite get there on top.

A decade later, Cho was again excited about a possible trip to Louisville after homebred Street Hero proved he belonged with the nation’s top two-year-olds by capturing the Grade 1 Norfolk Stakes and finishing third in the Breeders’ Cup Juvenile, both at Santa Anita in 2008.

Unfortunately, Street Hero came out of the Juvenile with a knee injury that failed to respond to treatment. Derby hopes dashed, Cho retired the colt to stud at Vinery in Kentucky.

Cho had reason to believe he was going to return to Louisville with a bonafide Derby contender after Premier Pegasus, a half-brother to Street Hero, vaulted into prominence with a seven-length victory in the Grade 2 San Felipe Stakes in March.

Victorious in four of five starts, Premier Pegasus was established as the morning-line favorite at the Santa Anita Derby draw in April, only to come out of a gallop the following morning at Santa Anita lame. X-rays revealed a hairline fracture of a cannon bone, which required surgery to insert one screw.

The injury was a bitter pill to swallow, but Cho remained philosophical. The timing of it was the worst, lamented Cho, two days

before the Santa Anita Derby. But he considered it lucky that the injury was not more serious, and if it had not been caught in time, a catastrophic breakdown could have followed.

Cho said that the surgery went well and that after 90 days for recovery, the colt will be re-evaluated in July with hopes for a fall return.

Cho also hopes to have a second three-year-old stakes colt back around the same time. Riveting Reason was sent to a farm with a hoof injury following a second-place finish in the Grade 2 Robert Lewis Stakes at Santa Anita in February.

Premier Pegasus, by 2000 Kentucky Derby winner Fusaichi Pegasus, and Street Hero, by Street Cry, are both out of prize broodmare Squall Linda, a horse that Cho said turned his life around.

Cho, who began buying yearlings at auction in 1989, bought Squall Linda at the 1997 Keeneland September yearling sale for \$62,000. He explained the name in part to her sire, Summer Squall, and the fact that Los Angeles was lashed that day by a storm caused by Hurricane Linda.

Squall Linda enjoyed modest success at the track, finishing second in the Grade 3 Monrovia Handicap and earning \$154,727, but she has excelled in the breeding shed.

Cho hopes that two more sons of Squall Linda follow in the footsteps of the two stakes winners. Groovin Solo, a two-year-old colt by Bob and John, is ready to join the barn. A yearling colt by Street Cry waits in the wings.

Squall Linda, boarded with three other Cho mares at Hartwell Farm in Kentucky, is back in foal to Fusaichi Pegasus.

Cho initially began as an owner with trainer Ian Jory, who conditioned Video Ranger, and also used Steve Miyadi and Rafael Martinez before opting to train his own horses in the early 1990’s.

Cho explained that he wanted to test his own approach in training. He said he is still learning every day, using trial and error to find the right equation for each horse.

Cho has enjoyed more than his fair share of success for a small barn, which currently stables 10 head. Cho relies heavily on Maria Ayala, his Mexican-born assistant of 20 years, and also consults regularly with Martinez, who often saddles starters for him.

While waiting for the return of his two stakes colts later this year, Cho is hopeful a three-year-old filly will fulfill her stakes potential. Love Theway Youare, a late-developing stretch runner, is being pointed to the Grade 2 Hollywood Oaks in June.

Cho said the filly needed a mile and a sixteenth to find herself and that her style reminds him of Zenyatta. If Cho likes the filly, don’t sell her short. As he can tell you, anything is possible in America. ■