JAVIER JOSE SIERRA
INVISIBLE NO MORE

Ed Golden  Zoe Metz
Javier Jose Sierra has survived if not prospered for 45 years in a game he loves. Yet, he does not warrant a bio in any media guide.

He is racing’s Invisible Man. The 66-year-old trainer has been sedulously plying his trade despite lack of recognition, ego be damned.

A native of El Paso, Sierra stands on a foundation adorned with pillars of self-confidence, gained in no small part from a proper upbringing in a family of 12 children, and tours early on with legendary trainers D. Wayne Lukas and J.J. Pletcher, father of Todd Pletcher.

Sierra grew up in Juarez where he played soccer as a kid. At 14 he aspired to be a jockey at Sunland Park in New Mexico, but his father, Cirilo, a native of Mexico, made education a priority. Javier aborted racing, went to school at the University of Texas El Paso (UTEP) and graduated with a degree in electrical engineering. Eventually, he earned an MBA while still working full time.

“I was doing well as an engineer,” Sierra said. “I worked my way up to vice president at an aerospace company.”

The appeal of the turf, however, proved an alluring temptress. Duly smitten, Sierra ultimately came to California in 1976.

“As soon as I graduated from college, I loved racing so much, I bought a couple horses,” he said. “I was doing both jobs at the same time, training horses and working in the aerospace industry.”

Most of Javier’s family were involved in racing. “All my brothers worked in racing in different positions, grooms, hot walkers, exercise riders, thanks to my father, who was a trainer.

“While in college, I worked three summers for Lukas when he trained quarter horses in New Mexico, and with J.J. Pletcher one year at Sunland Park. I remember Todd being there. He was probably five years old.

“I learned a lot from both men, especially Pletcher. I was impressed with the quality of horses he brought in from back east. One was a son of Bold Ruler named First Part of.

“I get up around 4:30 and get to the barn around 5, 5:30,” Sierra said. “We start getting horses to the track at 6:30. The grooms get everything ready, do the cleaning, and concentrate on preparing the horses for their exercises. After they go through their gallops or breezes, we check them again to make sure they’re OK.

“We administer medications and ice their legs as needed, and do whatever else is necessary. The horses are given some grain at four in the morning and then they’re finished training, a half a gallon of oats.”

A self-taught blue-collar bloodlines buff, Sierra has enjoyed success breeding and buying on the cheap. He hasn’t had any Carry Backs or Seattle Slew yet but he’s had others that have more than paid their way.

“All the horses I claimed for $8,000, $10,000 improved,” he said. “Some won at the $50,000 level and some in allowance races. All earned more than $50,000.

“I paid $2,200 for Tule Fog and he’s already won $150,000. I bought Plain Wrap for $1,700 and he’s earned over $100,000 and is still racing. Bella Sierra cost $2,000 and earned more than $70,000.

“Another was Blue Grass Reward, who I received from Nick Alexander (long-time prominent owner and breeder in California, and current president of the Thoroughbred Owners of California).

“My older brother, Cirilo Jr., was an assistant trainer for Jake Casio who conditioned quarter horses in New Mexico for many years,” Sierra continued, “but when Jake died, I asked my brother to help me train at Santa Anita. Ten years ago, he retired and I took over training full time, giving up my job in aerospace.”

All these years later, he is a mainstay in the Golden State, making Santa Anita his headquarters save for tours at Del Mar when the seaside track is open. He lives 17 miles from Santa Anita in La Crescenta, with his wife, Dulce. He has never raced on the East Coast.

A typical training day is similar to that of most horsemen.

“All the horses I claimed for $8,000, $10,000 improved.”

“All the horses I claimed for $8,000, $10,000 improved.”

“Another was Blue Grass Reward, who I received from Nick Alexander (long-time prominent owner and breeder in California, and current president of the Thoroughbred Owners of California).

“All the horses I claimed for $8,000, $10,000 improved.”

“Another was Blue Grass Reward, who I received from Nick Alexander (long-time prominent owner and breeder in California, and current president of the Thoroughbred Owners of California).
“Veterinarians and previous trainers of the horse said Blue Grass Reward would never run again, so he was given to me for free. I wound up winning three races with him and close to $100,000.”

Perhaps his most successful campaigner and certainly the most popular is a nine-year-old named Muchos Besos (many kisses in Spanish), owned by Hugo Catalan.

If ever there was a horse for course, it’s Muchos Besos and Santa Anita, where the gray has won nine of 39 starts, with eight seconds and 12 thirds, earning $286,311.

“He’s a nice, honest horse,” said Sierra, who generally books veteran jockey Matt Garcia to ride the committed front-runner.

A 48-year-old veteran from San Jose, Garcia and Muchos Besos enjoy rapport that borders on being fictive. Garcia was sidelined for two and a half years from August 2013 until January 2016 while recovering from major injuries to his neck and back suffered in a spill at Humboldt County Fair in Ferndale, California.

But a comeback was never in question. “Riding is what I love,” Garcia said.

As for Garcia and Muchos Besos, it’s a match made in racing heaven. “It seems like they both like each other,” Sierra said. “Matt stopped riding for a long while, but I put him back on and he rides with the reins kind of loose, and that’s what the horse likes.

“I believe in a jockey for the horse and a horse for the jockey. Matt and Muchos get along very well.”

Says Garcia, who began his career at the Salinas Rodeo in 1986: “Javier is a wonderful person and wonderful trainer. He’s honest, very loyal and does the best he can with the stock he has. If he had owners who gave him younger horses and quality horses, he would do very well with them.

“Give a trainer a good horse and he’ll win.”

On the whole, Sierra has done well despite parsimonious limitations not necessarily of his own making.

“Five years ago,” Sierra said, “I had 30 horses, mainly claimers, and a team of good employees. After improving horses I had claimed, I approached other owners to solicit more business but they never sent me any horses. I was disappointed, but took it in stride and decided to stick with my small barn. Now I have 12 horses and a couple of loyal owners.”
JAVIER JOSE SIERRA

“All my horses have become winners and made money for me. The money I earned training for others I used to pay my help and for other expenses. Fortunately, the horses I owned always did well for me.

“Mainly I rely on the breeding and conformation, but obviously, for the prices I pay, conformation is not perfect. I’m very good with bloodlines. The horses I buy become winners, but as I said, for those prices, they’re not perfect.

“I know how to train them, how to get them ready and how to get the best out of them. That’s the key. I get discouraged with rich owners who spend hundreds of thousands of dollars for horses that don’t pan out.

“I’ve offered to select horses for well-heeled investors for free, because with my knowledge, I’m confident I’d succeed. I’ve proven that with cheap horses, so imagine how I’d do if I could spend 50 or $100,000 for a horse. I’ve been studying breeding since 1976 and concentrate on successful combinations.

“But the most important thing is the training, knowing when to stop on a horse, when to keep going, because they all get hurt. I don’t care who the trainer is, who the horse is. Eventually, they’re going to get hurt, but if you’re conscientious and apply preventive maintenance, it helps.

“I believe in giving the horse time to develop and time to recover after a strenuous effort.

“Minor ailments show up but if you catch them in time, you can stop on a horse and give it a chance to recover.”

Sierra adheres to fundamental humanitarian beliefs in accordance with his equine morals.

Former jockey and trainer Chera Cluck, 57, believes horses are a gift from God to nurture and protect. A decade ago, when she didn’t know where her next meal was coming from, Sierra was there for her.

“About 10 years ago when we were both stabled at Hollywood Park, I was going through a really hard time,” Cluck recalled. “I was just holding on, literally eating 99 cent burritos from El Pollo Loco and putting whatever money I had into the horses, caring for them and preparing them.

“I wouldn’t cheat them, but I would cheat myself. Every time Javier had a barbecue, he would invite me over to have carne asada with him, and I honestly believe that’s what kept me alive until things improved financially.

“I appreciate what he did. He made sure I was eating properly, and since I’m a very private person, I never would have taken the initiative to do something like that on my own.”

As one of a dozen children, it was ingrained early in Javier to share and share alike, a principle that serves him well to this day.

“There are 10 of us left,” he said, “and we’re very close together. We were taught to help anybody if we could, and that’s what I did for Chera.”

Sierra’s philosophy, coupled with an unflagging dedication and passion for what he does, keeps him pushing ever onward in a game fraught with frailties that might prove overbearing to a lesser man.

But not Javier Jose Sierra. His future is infinite.

“Racing,” he says, “will be my life until I die.”