

John Harris: Continuing a California Legacy

By Mary Forney

John Harris is one of the more visible and outspoken supporters of the California racing and breeding industry – from the “winner’s circle,” to his farms, to Sacramento, where legislation and politics have such a dynamic influence on the industry. Yet he is also a man who protects and cherishes his privacy. In an interview with *Owners’ Circle*, Mr. Harris recently shared a look at his personal side. It is a story that resonates with the spirit of the pioneers and entrepreneurs that built our Golden State.

Harris is the current Chairman of the California Horse Racing Board (CHRB), and over the years has been involved in nearly every Thoroughbred horse organization in the state and beyond, including the Thoroughbred Owners of California, California Thoroughbred Breeders’ Association, the California Jockey Club, and The Jockey Club.

One of California’s most recognized agribusinessmen, Harris oversees a vast farming operation, one of California’s largest beef feeding and processing plants, a Thoroughbred breeding and training farm, and the famous Harris Ranch Restaurant and Inn. In all, he employs over 1,600 people.

Harris’ family came to central California in 1937. “My father was only 23 years old at the time,” he said. “And this area on the west side of Fresno was just opening up.” Harris explained that, at that time, farmers in the San Joaquin Valley used waters diverted from various rivers on the east side of the valley for irrigation, but western Fresno County had no rivers going through it. “The only water was from wells, but deep well and turbine pump technology was just coming into force.” Harris continued, “It was a good opportunity for someone who wanted to be highly leveraged. The pump companies wanted to sell pumps, so they’d finance the wells, and a lot of the people that owned the land were just using it for sheep grazing; so they were willing to lease their land pretty cheap. We got together about 640 acres of land and



started farming cotton and grain, using water from wells.”

After graduating from U.C. Davis with a degree in Agricultural Production, and a stint as an artillery officer in the U.S. Army, Harris joined his father, Jack, in developing the Harris operations, located midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco on Interstate 5 near Coalinga, eventually taking the reins himself after his father died in 1981.

“We’ve gotten a lot more diversified and vertically integrated,” he said. “We started out with cotton, grain, and cantaloupes, and now we’re farming more than a dozen crops in a given year – from almonds to onions, and processing tomatoes,

wine grapes, and citrus. Our main ranch is about 14,000 acres,” he continued, “but we’ve got another three farms. In total, we farm about 17,000 acres.”

Harris’ family has also been in the cattle business for many years. “My father was feeding some cattle in Arizona in the fifties,” he said. “And then we built our feedlot in 1964. It was a good area for feedlots because our area traditionally grew a lot of barley, although water costs have pretty much eliminated that, and our grain now comes in from the mid-west.” Harris continued, “Once we were in the cattle business about ten years, we realized we needed a meat packing plant; so we bought a beef processing plant near Selma, which we have subsequently expanded greatly.”

Today Harris has the largest cattle feedlot on the West Coast, accommodating up to 100,000 head of cattle. Harris Ranch Beef Co. produces nearly 200 million pounds of beef a year.

“We were one of the first to develop a branded beef program,” said Harris. “It’s very important for us to control the quality and food safety of the product every step of the way, and we have many grocery and food service customers that have been very loyal to us.” Harris was also recognized by his



peers in the livestock industry as Livestock Man of the Year.

In addition to the ranch and farming operations, Harris Ranch Inn and Restaurant features a 153-room inn, three restaurants, a bar, country store, meeting and banquet facilities, and service stations. Harris built the Inn in 1976, and, although consultants urged him to build an economy motor hotel, he followed his own instinct that it would be successful. "People will take the time to stop anywhere if you have a nice place," he said. "We are just about half way between the L.A. Basin and the Bay Area, and people feel they deserve a break when they get to our place."

Harris and his wife, Carole, live in a French chateau-style house along the Kings River about 50 miles east of the main ranch, and he often commutes to work in his Cessna 210, landing on a private airstrip. Soft-spoken and unassuming, yet quietly intelligent, Harris is equally at home overseeing the daily operations at the ranch, on the backstretch at the racetracks, or in the walking ring before a race shaking hands and chatting with racing's elite.

"My grandfather – my father's father – was a good horseman, and I used to go riding with him" Harris recalled. "He lived next to the Fresno Fair, and I remember going there for the first time when I was 7 or 8 years old. We went down and sat in the grandstand and watched the horses. He had a good eye for horses, and we picked three or four winners, and I thought it was an easy game!"

It was the beginning of a lifelong love affair with the Thoroughbred. "We got into the game – as a lot of people do – through claiming horses," said Harris. That eventually led him into the breeding business. As he explained, "I owned a horse named Sonic Blast, by Curragh King out of a mare named Game One. The people that owned the mare approached us and said, 'Do you want to buy the mare?' So we bought the mare, and it got us into the breeding business." He continued, "One of the first stakes horses we bred, Big Jess, who was known for a while in the early 70's as 'King of the Fairs' was her grandson. Over the years, we've never really spent a lot of money for horses, but we continually



tried to upgrade." Harris had his first Grade One stakes win just last December, when Alphabet Kisses won the La Brea at Santa Anita.

The Harris Farms Horse Division – devoted to raising and training Thoroughbred racehorses – was started in 1966 by Harris and his father. "It's a complete operation," Harris said. "We stand stallions, breed, train horses, do lay-ups, and even have a big pasture just devoted to retired mares. It's actually two farms. On the west side farm – now about 300 acres – we have the stallion station and breeding farm, as well as our whole training division and some lay-ups. On the

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east side – which is where I live, east of Sanger – we raise the yearlings and do some sales prep. Just about everything there is to do,” he said, “we’ve got some way to do it. We try hard to keep up with the latest techniques in horse husbandry and are always looking for ways to improve our bloodlines.”

“I like to be somewhat ‘hands on,’ but am blessed to have a terrific team of knowledgeable and dedicated people, and I delegate pretty easily. They care deeply for our horses and both our clients and I appreciate them very much,” Harris said.

The Horse Division alone has about 40 employees, including general manager David McGlothin, resident veterinarian Dr. Jeanne Bowers, trainer Per Antonsen, two intern veterinarians, several key middle managers, plus a staff of three that run a completely computerized office.

Harris has bred and raised five two-time Valkyr Trophy winners: Alphabet Kisses, Moscow Burning, Super High, Work the Crowd, and Soviet Problem. Harris Farm’s current stallion roster includes Cee’s Tizzy, High Brite, and Moscow Ballet. Cee’s Tizzy has sired 20 stakes winners, including champions Tiznow, Budroyale, Gourmet Girl, and Cee’s Elegance. In addition to Moscow Burning, Moscow Ballet has sired 19 stakes winners, including champions Soviet Problem, Dominant Dancer and Golden Ballet.

“Soviet Problem, who I owned and bred with Don Valpredo, was probably the best horse I’ve had so far, Harris said. “She was just a really brilliant mare; she won 15 of 20 starts, and was trained by Greg Gilchist. She actually reminds me of Lost in the Fog; maybe we should breed her to him some day!”

With the late state senator Ken Maddy, Harris owned and bred another top mare – Work the Crowd – who won five graded stakes. Harris now has about 30 horses at the race-tracks with several trainers, including Marty Jones, Carla Gaines, Howard Zucker, Craig Lewis, and Bill Spawr in the

south and Dean Peterson and Dennis Hopkins in the north.

A huge proponent of California’s breeding industry, Harris is quick to point out our lucrative breeders’ incentive programs. For instance, even though he lost Moscow Burning for \$25,000 in a claiming race, she went on to win over \$800,000, earning him almost \$100,000 in breeders’ awards. In fact, Harris was involved in the structuring of California’s breeders’ incentive program in the early 70’s, when the legislation was completely rewritten.

“I think a lot of people don’t really realize the breeders’



awards are out there; California’s program is the best in the country,” he said. “There are better horses being raised in California all the time, and breeders’ awards are an important factor. I have all Cal-breds,” he continued, “and while I realize that some owners may want a variety of horses, I sure think they are making a big mistake if they don’t have at least some Cal-breds.”

Harris is deeply committed to California racing. From his tireless service on racing industry boards, to his sustained investment in California’s racing and breeding industry, Harris is just the kind of person about which we all like to say: “Why can’t there be more people like that in this business?!”