

A Horsey Addiction

Owner Profile: Jon and Sarah Kelly

By Mary Forney



The scene was idyllic... reminiscent of a bygone era of California Thoroughbred farms, as Jon and Sarah Kelly graciously welcomed *Owners' Circle* to their home at Tres Palomas Farm in Rancho Santa Fe for an interview. The 15-acre horse property looks like a California *plein air* painting come to life – a lush landscape, with rolling green pastures, studded with white fences, and shaded by rows of graceful Eucalyptus trees.

Through French doors in the Kellys' study, one has a view of horses and riders going through their paces in a training ring, under the watchful eye of the Kellys' daughter Melanie. The centerpiece of the farm is a beautifully appointed and well equipped barn and paddocks where Melanie runs a training and boarding operation. Melanie is one of seven children; the Kellys also have 15 grandchildren, including two granddaughters who regularly ride their ponies at Tres Palomas.

"Melanie's been riding since she was four or five, and she's still jumping," said Sarah, who also rode as a child. "We have four

daughters, and none of them were like that except Melanie."

The Kellys, who winter in Indian Wells, Calif., spend a little more than half the year at their Rancho Santa Fe home.

"Living here, in the afternoon," said Jon, "If I fix a glass of wine, pick up a couple of carrots, and walk down and feed a horse, by myself or with Sarah, it kind of just makes the day – makes me unwind real quickly. There's something about the majesty of a horse that causes serenity."

At the age of 72, Jon Kelly calls himself a "Johnny-come-lately" with only 12 years in the Thoroughbred business. Yet, in that time he and Sarah have already raced several graded stakes winners, including Lady At Peace, Meridiana, Vacare, and Sporting Art. And, in partnership, they bred and campaigned Pacific Classic and Jockey Club Gold Cup winner Borrego.

Jon is a retired broadcast executive who owned television and radio stations and a production company. Born in Berkeley and raised in Sacramento, he first got the racing bug at the California



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State Fair.

“I was probably eight or nine years old,” John recalled. “And I used to ride my bicycle over there and watch from the outside. As I got a little older, I started going to the races. Then I went to work for the State of California when I was 16, working at Cal Expo in the summers. I actually ended up cultivating chrysanthemums in the infield!” As he got older, and got his drivers’ license, he frequented the other fair tracks – Santa Rosa, Pleasanton, and Stockton.

Sarah comes from the Midwest, where there was really no local horse racing and her family had no involvement with horses. She came out west for college, attending the University of Arizona and later moving to Northern California. Sarah, who is still an avid tennis player, met her future husband on the tennis court in Sacramento.

With a total of about 50 Thoroughbreds, including 20 horses in training with Paddy Gallagher, Christophe Clement and Michael Matz, and 14 broodmares, the Kellys seem to enjoy every aspect of horse racing, including breeding, selecting horses at auction, and racing. They attribute their successes to a combination of diligence and hard work, luck, and a passion for the business.

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“I’m involved here every day,” John said. “I probably spend four hours a day, minimum. I’m in contact with all the trainers; I’m in contact with the farms; I’m on the computer.” He even studies the veterinary medicine books and has an extensive equine library. His business approach is methodical.

“I’m historically a chess player,” he said. “And chess is an intriguing game in that it’s a sequential game about 20 moves out,” Jon explained. “And that’s similar to breeding racehorses because you’re looking at the pedigrees and you’re thinking ahead. Like with Meridiana; her four babies are very important to us. Do we have a chance to replicate Meridiana? Maybe. Did we do it right? Maybe.”

Jon continued, “It’s a business that requires full diligence, meticulous work, hours and hours of labor, and luck. You’ve got to run it as professionally as you would any other business. On top of that, you’ve got to be lucky. So that’s part of the challenge. To make a few bucks in this business is almost diabolically hard. I’ve been in maybe 20 different businesses, and the separation between the winners and losers in business is hard work.”

The Kellys are also well aware of the setbacks and disappointments inherent in the game. As Jon put it, “You kind of get kicked in the stomach in this business with regularity. And you’ve got to be able to withstand those kicks and go on.”

“They’re very fragile,” added Sarah, “with bizarre things like colic



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and laminitis and so on. Those things crop up more often than you want, and you have to be able to bounce back from them.” On the other hand, the thrills have been unparalleled for the Kellys. Both Jon and Sarah count Borrego’s Pacific Classic win among their highest of highs, in part because it was so totally unexpected. Jon describes Borrego, who went off at 11-1, as a cardiac arrest horse because typically he’d start out dead last, be as much as 20 lengths back, and then start catching up.

“When we watched that race,” Jon recalled, “I was standing next to Sarah, and I saw him on the backstretch and said ‘He’s starting to move; I think we have a chance to get third.’ Two more jumps, and I said, ‘I think we have a chance to get second.’ Then two more jumps, I said, ‘Oh my god, we’re gonna win it!’”

“The horse business is, in my estimation, the most humbling business I’ve ever been in,” said Jon. “Because the animals are unto themselves, and they’re so fragile, that your expectations and your hopes are very high and they’re dashed all the time due to unfortunate occurrences that happen to the animals. That’s hard to get used to, but you’ve got to. And if you’re a successful businessman and you’re used to winning all the time and you get in the horse business, you’ve got to learn how to be a good loser or you’re going

to have to get out of it.” The key for the Kellys seems to be that they enjoy the game even when they don’t win.

“The few times that you do win are greatly appreciated,” Jon explained. “And it’s a thrill of a lifetime to win something like the Pacific Classic or the Gold Cup. When we won the Pacific Classic, my legs were shaking, because we had no expectation. When you have no expectation to win a race and you’re 11 to one and you do win, it’s very special, and it’s something you’ll never forget. So those days are so big that when you do lose the 80 out of 100 times you can deal with it and have a good time, particularly if you’re with the right people. And we’re with the right people all the time. And we have a blast going to the races!”

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“We never tire of talking about horses,” Sarah added. “And other horse people are the same way.”