



CTBA Member
PROFILE

TWO
TO WIN

JOHN AND ALLEGRA ERNST

BY EMILY SHIELDS

John and Allegra Ernst, owner/breeders of California-bred stakes winner Tap the Wire, tell the story of their introduction to horse racing with palpable enthusiasm.

“We live only 10 minutes from Del Mar, and we had always loved animals and sports,” John began.

“We started going over there in the morning to see the horses work,” Allegra continued. “It’s the best show in town.”

From there the Ernsts met outrider Tom Ellis and peppered him with questions for several seasons. One rare time, Ellis didn’t know the answer and enlisted the help of trainer Dan Hendricks. By the end of the day, Hendricks had given the Ernsts a tour of his barn, answered

more questions, and planted the first seeds that later led them to become owners.

“We were saving money for a second house,” Allegra said, “but we never found that house. A year later we returned to Del Mar and there’s Tom and Dan out in the morning. Next thing you know John and I were getting our credentials and putting in money for a claim.”

The first horse they claimed, Stormy Spirit, was a \$20,000 pickup on July 31, 2002. The Ernsts were officially racehorse owners after years of watching from the sidelines. Stormy Spirit ran third twice at the meet, earning \$7,200, before being claimed away for the same \$20,000 tag.

“We were crushed,” John said. “We got so attached to her and went to give her carrots every day.”

The Ernsts wanted to claim another one immediately, but Hendricks made them wait. All three of them scoured the entries daily, going well into the Santa Anita fall meet. Three months later Hendricks claimed a mare named Rhiana for \$40,000, and immediately moved her back up against allowance company. Rhiana finished second, then won a Santa Anita allowance optional claimer by three lengths Dec. 31.

“Knowing Dan Hendricks like we do now, the way he moved her from that claiming level to an allowance is very unusual,” John said.

The New Year’s Eve victory proved to be a spectacular affair, as the Ernsts were joined by family and friends, and the winner’s share of the \$63,196 purse was worth \$36,600.

“But we’re in the tax and financial business,” John lamented. “So it’s the last day of the year and we’re all in the winner’s circle, and I said to Allegra, ‘We have a big problem, a tax problem!’ It was a nice problem to have.”

Rhiana went on to finish second in the Paseana Stakes two weeks later, then she ran third in the grade 1 Santa Maria Handicap.

“We still didn’t really understand,” John admitted. “Dan told us she was worth a couple of hundred thousand dollars, but we were in love with her. We didn’t want to sell her.”

Rhiana was twice more stakes-placed before she went through the ring at the 2003 Keeneland November mixed sale. The daughter of Runaway Groom went in with a \$200,000 reserve and her doting owners present ringside.

“I was crying when she got to \$200,000, because I knew she was gone,” Allegra recalled.



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John and Allegra Ernst are riding high with undefeated Cal-bred Tap the Wire

John and Allegra Ernst's homebred Tap the Wire wins the Graduation Stakes at Del Mar



“We kept breeding our mares even when the market was down. We’re both still working, so as long as we stay healthy and work, we’ll do that because it helps us hang on in the horse business.”

— John Ernst

“She went for \$270,000 to Dell Ridge Farm. They gave her a good home for life.”

Rhiana went on to be the dam of 2008 Coolmore Lexington Stakes (G2) winner Behindatthebar.

After the sale, the question arose: what to do with the money?

“Dan asked us if we wanted to go on a ‘road’ trip,” Allegra said. “We went to Newmarket in England and went to the Tattersalls sale.”

They came home with Irish-bred Chetak, a mare by Halling. She went on to produce Temple’s Door, a grade 2-placed runner by Leroidesanimaux bred by the Ernsts but not campaigned by them. The couple acquired more horses, raced a few, and stood by Hendricks when the trainer suffered a motocross accident that left

him a paraplegic.

Sixteen years after they got into the sport with whirlwind early success, they finally broke through with their very first stakes win via Cal-bred Tap the Wire.

Tapit mares are a rare commodity in California, but the Ernsts have one, unraced Tap the Till.

“She was recovering from pneumonia when we first saw her,” John said. “She had been at the hospital for three months but survived. She still had a hole in her side. But when we first saw her...”

“Her hair was blowing back, the sun was shining on her, and she was a jaw-dropper,” Allegra finished.

Tap the Till couldn’t be bred the first year because of her recovery, but her first live foal is Tap the Wire. The son of Eddington was in training with Dan

Dunham, who works out of San Luis Rey Downs and preps horses for several major trainers, including Hendricks. When the Lilac fire hit the training center last December, Dunham’s horses were set free, with Tap the Wire appearing in a neighboring field the next day.

“We had talked to Hendricks about racing these four Eddington colts we had, and said we were going to use Dunham,” John said. “Hendricks thought it was a good plan and strategy.”

Tap the Wire broke his maiden first out at Santa Anita on May 5, winning by $3\frac{3}{4}$ lengths as a 21-1 shot. He then had to wait for the \$98,000 Graduation Stakes at Del Mar Aug. 4 to make his second start, which he won by $3\frac{1}{2}$ lengths.

“We discussed the situation with Hendricks,” John said. “He deserves credit for not pushing us to switch trainers. We are loyal to him, but Dunham has done a heck of a job with the colt and we are loyal to him, too.”

“Dunham got us this far,” Allegra said, “so Hendricks deserves a lot of credit for not pushing us to take the horse away. We were very happy that everyone feels okay to keep the horse with the trainer that has done such a good job.”

Tap the Wire has earned \$89,400 in his two winning starts.

The Ernsts own 10 broodmares, with Tap the Till producing a Smart Bid filly earlier this year after a Circumference filly in 2017. Another unraced mare, the Rock Hard Ten daughter Incredible Ten, has two winners from two starters.

“We kept breeding our mares, even when the market was down,” John said. “We’re both still working, so as long as we can stay healthy and work, we’ll do that because it helps us hang on in the horse business.”

With several young racehorses in training and an outstanding 2-year-old, the Ernsts couldn’t be more excited. Sixteen years removed from their early days watching workouts at Del Mar, they are set to become a long-lasting force in the California breeding industry. **CTB**