



CTBA Member
PROFILE

CALIFORNIA
OWNER
ROCKING
INTO THE
NEW YEAR

GARY HARTUNIAN

BY EMILY SHIELDS

With a son drafted into the Atlanta Braves baseball team out of high school and a daughter who is a multiple national champion ice skater, Gary Hartunian dedicated much of his life to sport. When the children's respective careers ended, the real estate giant found he missed the thrill.

"I was always really involved with my kids," Hartunian said. "I was looking for something to spend my time on."

He likes to joke that he could have bought a plane or a yacht, but instead opted to buy a horse at Del Mar.

"I got involved with Dave Lanzman, who won a

Breeders' Cup with Squirtle Squirt," Hartunian said. "I was learning with him and watching what they were doing, and really started liking it a lot. The competition was great, and I loved the thought of going to the sales and finding the best horse."

With the help of trainer Peter Miller, Hartunian bought his first horse in 2012. He went to \$50,000 to secure the race-ready gelding Fast N Furious Cat at the Barretts paddock sale at Del Mar, earned \$8,520 next out when the horse ran third, and then lost him for \$32,000 just one month after buying him. Undeterred, Hartunian jumped in.

"One thing led to another, and I bought about 25 horses," he said.

Hartunian's Rockingham Ranch quickly rode a meteoric rise to fame. He won 12 races in 2013, then another 22 in 2014. He broke the \$1 million earnings barrier in 2015 with the help of horses such as California-bred Richard's Boy, a son of Idiot Proof—Marissa's Joy, by Cee's Tizzy, who won stakes races at Santa Anita, Santa Rosa, and Pimlico.

Cal-bred runners propelled the stable through 2016 as well, headed by the brilliant California Diamond, who became the Golden State's champion 2-year-old male. The son of Harbor the Gold—Carrie's a Jewel, by Slewdledo, won five times that year with four seconds, and racked up victories in the \$125,345 Santa Anita Juvenile, \$100,000 Barretts Juvenile, \$84,745 Speakeasy, and the \$196,000 Golden State Juvenile stakes. California Diamond was also second in the Bob Hope Stakes (G3).

He wasn't the only good Cal-bred that year for Rockingham. Bad Ju Ju won the \$94,935 Kalookan Queen Stakes and four other races, and Richard's Boy placed in four stakes, including the grade 3 Eddie D Stakes (G3T) at Santa Anita.

The year 2017 handed Hartunian the highest highs and staggering lows. Rockingham Ranch won a pair of Breeders' Cup races with Roy H (\$1,380,000 TwinSpires Breeders' Cup Sprint, G1) and Stormy Liberal (\$920,000 Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint, G1T). But just one month later California Diamond was lost in the raging Lilac Fire at San Luis Rey Downs. The



Rockingham Ranch's Gary Hartunian, left, accepts the winner's trophy for Eclipse champion Roy H's Palos Verdes score at Santa Anita

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heartbreaking event took the lives of 46 horses.

“We certainly had a setback with the fire,” Hartunian said. But the tragedy allowed him the chance to redefine and revamp his operation. “Going forward, it’s been like running a minor league baseball team.

We’ve gone for younger horses, buying yearlings and developing them.”

In 2018, Roy H and Stormy Liberal (both co-owned with David Bernsen) successfully defending their Breeders’ Cup titles and won Eclipse Awards, Roy H for the second time. The quick sprinter Bobby Abu Dhabi, also owned by Rockingham and Bernsen, was a grade 2 winner and grade 1-placed at Santa Anita. Hartunian’s rise among the top owners in the game was complete.

“We’ve gotten more diverse out there,” he said, noting he has runners in Kentucky and West Virginia with trainers such as Steve Asmussen, Wesley Ward, and Jeff Runco. “I’ve been careful to give trainers the horses that fit their program and flourish, such as distance horses, dirt horses, and grass horses going to different people. I’ve been working with Kim Lloyd, who bought me 15 really nice horses. I’m getting pumped up about the future because of all these nice-looking young horses developing.”

Among them are European import Masteroffoxhounds, a son of War Front and the group 1-placed Galileo mare Outstanding, as well as classy juvenile Gypsy King. And while he waits for a host of youngsters to reach the races, Hartunian has Mo See Cal to enjoy.

Cal-bred Mo See Cal is by Uncle Mo and out of the Lydgate mare Do Dat Blues. The 2015 gray mare was good enough to finish sixth in the 2019 Longines Breeders’ Cup Distaff (G1), defeating grade 1 winners Wow Cat (Chi), Street Band, and Paradise Woods. She was away from the races for an entire year



Cal-bred Mo See Cal takes the Betty Grable Stakes at Del Mar for Hartunian’s Rockingham Ranch

but returned in style, taking the \$101,000 Betty Grable Stakes at Del Mar Nov. 8. On that occasion, she and jockey Flavien Prat defeated top division rivals Warren’s Showtime and race favorite Just Grazed Me.

“She came back real strong in her return on the dirt,” Hartunian said. “Then there was no place to run, so we tried turf but she didn’t like it. She will come back at Santa Anita and run seven furlongs there, which will hit her right where she wants to be. She had a knee issue that we had to clean up, but hopefully she can have another year racing. If not, she will become a broodmare and be sent to (Triple Crown winner) Justify.”

With more than \$11.7 million in purse earnings in just eight years of racing, Rockingham Ranch has become one of the most competitive outfits in the game. Although the operation is now nationwide, California is still home.

“Santa Anita is probably the nicest place I’ve ever been,” Hartunian said. It’s just gorgeous and has so much history. You just feel old school when you go there. Then there is Del Mar, where you just relax, go to dinners, talk to your friends. It’s like being in Hawaii in California. I think both of those tracks are just phenomenal, and they did a great job of cleaning things up and going over the horses with a fine-tooth comb to make sure they are sound before they run. Everything they’ve done lately is good.”

Hartunian is the first to admit that the racing game snowballed on him, as his stable has grown to 98 horses.

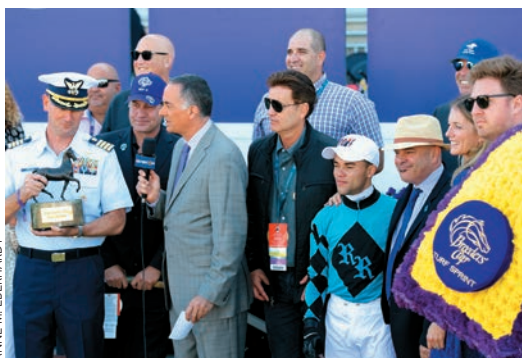
“When you have a little success, you want more,” he said. “We’ve been going full speed ahead, but we have some really nice horses on the rise who will soon be ready to fire away.” **CTB**

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Two-time Breeders’ Cup Sprint winner Roy H in his Del Mar victory



Hartunian, center, enjoys the Breeders’ Cup ceremony for Stormy Liberal’s second consecutive win in the Turf Sprint