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**PROFILE**

A WOMAN  
FOR  
ALL SEASONS

# GAYLE VAN LEER

BY EMILY SHIELDS

One of the prominent names in California racing is that of Gayle Van Leer, a former trainer and farm manager turned successful bloodstock agent who has been behind a parade of graded stakes winners for decades. After trying her hand in just about every aspect of the sport, Van Leer is more than happy with her bloodstock business and continues to excel at her favorite sport.

Although she is best known as the racing manager for perennial leading California-based owner Golden Eagle Farm, Van Leer began her career in racing well before that gig.

"I started as an exercise rider," she said. "I was working the 2-year-old sales, and I was a really good rider, which got people's attention."

She ultimately opened her own training barn, taking in second-string horses for leading trainers around Southern California. Her program at San Luis Rey Downs in the 1980s helped develop Eclipse Award champion 2-year-old male Roving Boy.

How did she land the famous Golden Eagle position? Van Leer laughed while remembering the day she marched right up to John Mabee, who owned the farm with wife, Betty.

"I happened to be passing by the racing office, where two trainers were arguing with each other," she said. "Both of them worked for Golden Eagle. They both wanted to enter a horse in the same race, but they couldn't. One trainer said it happened all the time; there were so many horses and it was tough to get into a race. I walked up to John and said, 'I'd like to

talk to you about why you should hire me.'"

Mabee was only startled for a moment.

"He was taken aback, but then he started quizzing me," Van Leer said.

A breakfast meeting later in the week resulted in the job: Van Leer would manage the Mabees' racing stable.

"I used my training background and organizational skills and my networking with all these trainers that I already knew," Van Leer said. "It was just a matter of coordinating everyone together and making it fair so that everyone had a chance to run. I added order to the operation so it could run more smoothly, horses could be placed better. And the rest is history."

Best Pal was a yearling when Van Leer joined the team. That California-bred legend went on to earn \$5,668,245 in an era without the Dubai World Cup (G1) or Pegasus World Cup Invitational (G1).

"Go forward the nine years I was there, and you'll see Dramatic Gold, Fantastic Look, and Jeanne Jones," Van Leer said.

Although her time as Golden Eagle racing manager is long over, Van Leer still hunts for familiar pedigrees when scouring the sales catalogues.

"It was such an influential period of time," she said.

"I've found the pedigrees popping up as far away as Australia."

Now Van Leer operates a bloodstock agency.

"Basically, I'm a real estate agent for horses," she said.



ANNIE M. EBERHARDT PHOTOS

Gayle Van Leer is a ubiquitous presence at Thoroughbred sales around the U.S.



“I give advice if you want to start a farm. It’s a gamut of things from mating mares, working internationally, buying and selling horses. I love it, I’m happy.”

But she warns that the lifestyle is not as attractive as it sounds.

“People think it sounds glamorous, but the travel—especially in the spring and fall with back-to-back sales—is constant. Every time I catch up, it’s time to go again.”

During the Keeneland September yearling sale, Van Leer looks at 150 horses a day.

“If there is no selling that day I can see even more,” she said. “During breeding stock sales days, I’ve got some people on babies, some on mares, so that’s 50 or 60 a day. I laughingly say that those sales are like being on vacation.”

Van Leer works with an iPad, entering notes and keeping organized digitally.

“I’m a big technology person,” she said. “The iPad makes it easy for you.”

Whatever she is doing is working. American Theorem was grade 1-placed in 2019. Moose Mitchell, a Cal-bred son of Danzing Candy, is an exciting juvenile who broke his maiden at Santa Anita Oct. 30. Van Leer purchased the Stormy Atlantic mare Surrender, who quickly produced grade 3 winner Red Flag. Om was recommended to trainer Dan Hendricks; the Munnings colt earned \$1,355,082 and missed by just a nose in the 2016 Breeders’ Cup Turf Sprint (G1), but he is possibly more famous for defeating subsequent Triple Crown winner American Pharoah as a juvenile.

Van Leer purchased the dams of Danzing Candy, six-time stakes winner Enola Gray, grade 2 winner Pee



California’s favorite son and multiple champion Best Pal was a yearling when Van Leer took over the reins as racing manager at John and Betty Mabee’s Golden Eagle Farm



**“I don’t just buy them and say, ‘Good luck.’ I am very involved in the racing, and I go out every morning and watch them train.”**

— Gayle Van Leer



Often Van Leer will inspect up to 150 horses per day at a sale

Wee Reese, and grade 1 winner Evita Argentina, and she recommended the purchase of seven-time graded stakes winner Hystericalady as well.

After the horses leave the sales ring and head off to the breeding shed or the track, Van Leer stays involved in her purchases.

“I don’t just buy them and then say, ‘Good luck.’ I am very involved

in the racing, and I go out in the morning and watch them train.”

While Van Leer used to live on farm property, she now has a “regular” house.

“At first I thought having a house on horse property was really exciting, but there’s no peace,” she said. “Someone is always knocking at your door, so I never had any desire to own my own farm.”

In addition to bloodstock work, Van Leer offers consultations, appraisals, portfolio management, and advice for mating mares. Her website, [gaylevanleer.com](http://gaylevanleer.com), has a considerable section on new owner education, including the pros and cons of getting involved at each level of the sport.

“I like working with new people,” she said. “I want them to understand the good parts and the bad parts. I absolutely love it; and I love happy clients.” **CTB**