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# TOUCHING BASE WITH BILL CASNER

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*Bill Casner with Well Armed*

Bill Casner has a lifelong devotion to Thoroughbred racing, and some years after he and partner Kenny Troutt founded Excel Communications they also established WinStar Farm. Casner now operates individually in the name of Casner Racing. He and Troutt bred classic winners Funny Cide, Da 'Tara, and Super Saver and raced Belmont winner Drosselmeyer. Casner is a past chairman of the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association and a founding director of the Race for Education and Kentucky Equine Education Program (KEEP). He has many other roles in racing including chairmanship of the Welfare and Safety of the Racehorse Summit's Shoeing and Hoof Care Committee.

**The Kentucky Derby is at the center of the planning and investing, as well as the dreams, of American Thoroughbred owners. Can you put into words what it was like watching Super Saver and realizing that you were actually winning the Derby?**

*Winning the Derby was a 10-year goal that Kenny (Troutt) and I set for our WinStar team at our first managers retreat in 2000. We got part way there with the WinStar bred Funny Cide we sold as a yearling and who went on to win the Derby in 2003. But winning the Kentucky Derby with our home bred Super Saver in 2010 was the absolute epitome. Winning the Derby is everyone's dream, but it almost seems impossible. There is only one horse out of each year's foal crop of 30k that achieves that goal.*

*Super Saver was the 13th starter that WinStar had had in the Derby, yet I never really believed that we could win that race. When Calvin Borel made the lead on Super Saver at the head of the lane and was widening at the 1/8 pole, I was incredulous---Was it really happening--Were we about to win the Ky. Derby? It just didn't seem possible. After he crossed the wire it became a surreal event --an unbelievable culmination of a lifetime of racing that started when I was 15 years old at small track in New Mexico.*

**Following up on that experience, what were the next few days like?**

*For weeks afterwards when you wake up, it's the first thing that you reflect on--WE WON THE DERBY. I was at Hollywood Park the following weekend to watch a full sister to Colonel John run and ran into Jack Van Berg. He said "Bill, your life has changed forever--Your are now a member of a rare club--You have won the Derby" Over time, I have come to fully understand what he meant. It is something that they put on your tombstone.*

**Mr. (Paul) Mellon used to say that winning an important race made him want to win that same race again. How does having a Derby win in your past affect the excitement about being in that race or other big races?**

*For me, it's more of the quest for the really good horse. They are such rare individuals and when you have one, it is something incredibly special and of course the Grade 1 winner is the rarest of them all.*

**When Well Armed won the Dubai World Cup by a huge margin, did you have a sense of representing the United States?**

*When Well Armed won the Dubai World Cup it was a flood of many emotions. He is the horse that occupies the biggest place in my heart because of what he had to overcome to achieve what he did. We had spent countless hours together going through a rehabilitation and reconditioning program just to get him back to the races and he did everything he was asked. I truly believed that he would win that night. Eoin Harty did an amazing job of having him at his best and Aaron Gryder rode him to perfection and when they played the Star Spangled Banner that night we all felt a great sense of pride and accomplishment.*

**What do you recall about Sheikh Mohammed's response to Well Armed? He certainly would have an appreciation for such an astonishing performance.**

*Sheikh Mohammed was incredibly gracious that night and receiving the Dubai trophy from him personally was very special.*

**By contrast to the riches of Dubai, is it true that you once won stakes races with a horse named Alexander the Grape? (Who named that one?)**

*When I was training back in the 70's, I had an owner bring me a 3 yo that had never run and told me that he wanted me to get him ready to run in the Minnesota Derby ( for Minnesota breds ) at Assiniboia Downs. I had 4 months to get a first time starter ready to run a mile and 1/16 in a stakes race. I thought it was an insane goal but I poured the coal to the horse and damned if he didn't win and I still have the trainers trophy some where. Steve Erban was the owner and breeder and he had several "Grape" horses including Grape Expectations and Grape Balls of Fire.*

**Your work on committees of the Welfare and Safety of the Racehorse Summits includes your dynamic presentation to the Summit and later to the Racing Commissioners International on the risk factors of long, front toe grabs. That science had been available for more than a decade but it was only after your presentations that states and tracks began to adopt new rules restricting the length of front toe grabs.**

**Do you think that, in general, that sort of person to person contact with regulators is going to be necessary for other types of reforms to be adopted?**

*Elimination of toe grabs was a goal set by our WSS committee the first year of the Summit. There had been 10 years of data and research, much of it by Dr. Sue Stover UC Davis, that showed that toe grabs increased the likelihood for a catastrophic injury. What we did was take*

*all of the work that had been done by academia and deliver it to the decision makers at their conferences. The science and data was compelling and it seemed to create the sense of urgency when presented to the commissioners that culminated in virtually every jurisdiction banning their use. This was probably the proverbial "low hanging fruit" in that the science was there and it did not cost anything to implement and it did not decrease anyones revenues. Most of our challenges are not that straight forward and receive far more resistance. Virtually all of the racing commissioners are political appointees with many of them having a limited understanding of the problems that are facing our industry while incurring the wrath of those whose agendas are affected. In saying that, there are many commissioners who are passionate and dedicated to improving our industry.*

**You were ahead of the curve in announcing that your two-year-olds would not race on Lasix. Two questions come to mind—(1) did your trainer(s) resist the idea on the basis that it would put your horses at a short term disadvantage, and (2) what is your opinion of the results so far?**

*Actually, my trainers were very supportive when I suggested that we eliminate the use of Lasix. Eoin Harty had trained horses for Sheikh Mohammed in Dubai without it. He also had been an assistant for Baffert when Silver Charm won the Dubai World Cup and, of course, Eoin won the Dubai World Cup with Well Armed. We gradually transitioned all of our horses to running without Lasix when we found that they weren't bleeding and were recovering quicker. This year we've won 6 races from 18 starts with a track record, a G3 win, and 3 G2 places.*

**You have been quick to be innovative in other developments, such as being among the first to acquire a hyperbaric chamber and the vibration plate. What input gave you confidence that those were worthwhile providing for your horses? How do you assess the results so far?**

*I have always sought to use good science to find better ways to manage the health of our horses. Hyperbaric oxygen therapy has been a proven modality in humans that accelerates healing and is a powerful adjunct in treating infections. It was an easy assumption to expect the same results in the horse. We found the only chamber on the market at the time to be severely inadequate so we designed an equine chamber that was much less stressful to the horse. HBOT has saved the lives of countless horses over the years. The same is true of the vibration plates. The science had been done by NYU and showed its efficacy in building bone. The implications for its use in helping to keep our horses sounder is exciting and so far it is living up to our expectations.*

**As a supporter of Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation, what do you consider the greatest service that the equine research community has provided the horse in recent years?**

*Grayson has funded countless studies that have contributed to the health and welfare of the horse. It is hard to pick one particular project that is weighted more than any other. Grayson has provided funding for projects that developed a number of vaccines along with studies that*

*have advanced mare reproduction and soundness in racehorses. Perhaps the greatest benefit is that Grayson is one of the few avenues that offers the equine scientist a source of funding to continue their research. Knowledge builds on knowledge and Grayson's impact has been exponential.*

**What is your favorite vacation spot?**

*The American West. Last month, I rode the Custer Battle Field on a horse with a Crow Indian. We rode the route that Custer took to Last Stand Hill. It was an amazing afternoon.*

**What is your favorite sports team, and how often do you get to see it?**

*I don't really have a favorite team but I watched every minute of the Olympics that I could.*

**Can you tell us something about yourself that would surprise people who know you or have some knowledge of your career?**

*When I was 18 years old, I starved down and rode 4 races at Sunland Park and Ruidoso Downs. I was 5' 11" which made me the tallest jockey in the country. I was so weak from reducing that I nearly fell off the first horse I rode. It gave me an immense amount of respect for race riders and what so many have to endure to ride.*

