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Lone Star Park photo

Lone Star Park photo



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Savvy eye: Among the horses Mark Cornett considers the best to race for Turf Express Inc. are Texas-bred Eagle Lake (above), winner of Lone Star Park's WinStar Distaff Handicap in 2003, and Tamweel (right), a stakes-winning daughter of Gulch who was second to Azeri in the '04 Overbrook Spinster Stakes

Express to the winner's circle

Mark Cornett's Turf Express operates a little differently, but it is hard to argue with success **by Denis Blake**

MARK CORNETT is not afraid to speak his mind, whether it is about his horses or the future of racing in his home state of Texas. It is not that he is brash; he just knows how he wants to operate his stable. It seems to be working, and the proof is in the purses—an average of well over \$1-million earned by his horses each year since 2002.

As president and chief executive officer of Turf Express Inc., which he co-owns with his uncle Joe, Cornett is hands-on in every sense of the word. The stable's trainers—Wayne Catalano, Cole Norman, Bret Calhoun, and Steve Miyadi—condition the horses, and Cornett does just about everything else.

He is quick to point out, however, that one of the keys to success is having a sense of trust and respect between himself and each trainer that has been built over the years.

"It sure helps the whole operation when your trainers are willing and able to give accurate information and have effective communication with you," said the 41-year-old Dallas native, whose operation has about a dozen horses in training. Cornett formerly owned a Dallas-area residential roofing company that he sold to concentrate full time on Turf Express.

"What Turf Express has chosen to do is to let the trainer focus more on trying to bring every ounce of talent out of the horses that are placed with them and take some of the load and responsibility off their shoulders by being responsible for the purchasing, racing management, and sales side of the business."

Cornett also knows what he wants when it comes to buying a horse. And if you have a colt or gelding for sale, he is probably not interested. His operation, which started in 2001 in the claiming game, now focuses almost solely on the private purchase of fillies and mares in the \$50,000 to \$300,000 range. Sometimes he buys in partnership with others, sometimes just in the name of Turf Express.

"I'm a contrarian buyer," he said. "If you see a filly and she wins by 15 lengths the first time and she's by Storm Cat and she looks

physically unbelievable, that's easy to identify, but you are going to pay the price. So you've got to have something that has a hole somewhere, maybe it's the way she looks physically or maybe her pedigree is not as strong as some would like or she's not bred to go two turns."

Right time to sell

By purchasing distaffers that fly "under the radar," Turf Express has been consistently successful on the track and in the sales ring, most recently with Somethinaboutlaura. Purchased for \$90,000 after a nine-length starter allowance score in June at Golden Gate Fields, the four-year-old Dance Floor filly in seven subsequent starts has won four times, including two stakes, and finished third in the El Encino Stakes (G2) at Santa Anita Park while earning \$151,880 through February 28 for Turf Express and partners Bobby Beck and Luigi Mastrocinque.

Holding true to his mantra of buying low and selling high, Cornett put the filly in this year's Fasig-Tipton Kentucky winter mixed sale. Having won the Foster City Handicap at Bay Meadows Race Course on February 4, just nine days before her trip through the ring, Somethinaboutlaura brought a sale-topping bid of \$375,000, a record price for a racing or broodmare prospect at that sale.

"We always try to sell at the right time, and that could mean right in the middle of their career," explained Cornett.

Cornett also hit a home run with Tamweel. In partnership with Darrell and Evelyn Yates Ltd., Turf Express acquired the filly for \$200,000 after an optional claiming victory at Hollywood Park in June 2004. They quickly bumped the daughter of Gulch up in class and captured the Mariah's Storm Stakes at Arlington Park before she posted second-place finishes in the Arlington Matron Handicap (G3) and Overbrook Spinster Stakes (G1), the latter behind Azeri. Then it was on to the Breeders' Cup Distaff (G1) at Lone Star Park, in which Tamweel ran a credible fourth to Ashado. After earning \$294,640 for her new owners, the time

Mark Cornett

Birthdate: September 14, 1964

Birthplace: Dallas, Texas

Residence: Lake Kiowa, Texas

Family: Wife, Sidney; daughter, Samantha; son, Cooper

Position: President and chief executive officer of Turf Express Inc.

Best horses raced by Turf Express and with partners: Eagle Lake, Intelligent Male, Somethinaboutlaura, Tamweel

was right to sell. And Cornett did just that, selling the Grade 1-placed runner privately for \$1-million.

According to Cornett, Turf Express runners have won more than 350 races and won or placed in 53 stakes since 2001.

In addition to the racing arm, Cornett oversees Turf Express Stud Inc., which is based on 105 acres in the north Texas town of Collinsville. The breeding operation stands two stallions, Aggressive Chief, a veteran son of Chief's Crown, and New Trieste, a younger full brother to the late Old Trieste.

Texas plan

At a time when many Texas breeders are either getting out of the business or heading for the greener—at least money-wise—pastures of neighboring states with slot machines at racetracks, Cornett has expanded his operation and now has about 30 broodmares.

New Trieste's first crop of runners will hit the track next year, and Cornett is taking steps to make sure they have purse money for which to run.

"We hit rock bottom and there's nowhere to go but up," he said about the Texas breeding industry. "We need to focus on new creative ways to generate additional purse money for Texas breeders and additional incentives for breeders and owners of Texas-breds, whether it be through slots, off-track betting, or sponsorship supplements of purses."

Backing up his words with actions, Cor-

nett earned a spot in 2004 on the Texas Thoroughbred Association's board of directors. As a way to increase purses for Texas-breds competing in stakes races, Cornett is pursuing a corporate sponsorship initiative that would pay a 100% purse bonus to horses that hit the board in any open company stakes run in the Lone Star State. So if the program gets the funding and support to come to fruition, a victory by a Texas-bred in the \$400,000 Lone Star Park Handicap (G3) at the state's flagship track would be worth \$480,000 to winning owner, rather than the traditional 60% winner's share of \$240,000. That would essentially make it an \$800,000 race for horses bred in Texas.

"If we get this done, and you see a Texas-bred going through the sales ring, you'll be willing to look twice at him," said Cornett. "And Texas-breds from around the country will be more likely to come back home and race because there will be the added purse supplements for them."

And while Cornett, like almost all Texas breeders and owners, would welcome video lottery terminals at the state's tracks, he says that is not the only option.

"Texas is basically the largest state, yet the only place you can wager on a horse race is at a pari-mutuel facility," he said. "No one is going to drive from Lubbock to Dallas [about 350 miles] to place a wager; it's just too far. We need to get simulcast outlets in the smaller cities throughout Texas."

Whether it is with his racing stable, breeding operation, or activism for the industry, Cornett does not settle for the status quo.

"We need to look at other things that are creative and out of the box," he said. "The time for people to sit back and wait on slots is pretty much over." 🐾

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