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Ocala-bred trainer riding on a dream

Marc Casse got his start picking up manure. Seaside Retreat soon will mark the veteran's first Derby start.

By DAWN REISS
Published May 4, 2006

LOUISVILLE, Ky. - The silver tufts on Marc Casse's head contrast sharply in the early morning sun with his Pepto pink shirt and tanned skin. Standing outside Barn 17 on a muddy patch, the Ocala native reflects and jokes easily despite being several days away from having his first horse - Seaside Retreat - contend in the Kentucky Derby.

A few feet away is long-time friend and fellow trainer Tom Albertrani.

When Casse found out what barn he was going to be in he called Albertrani.

"I asked if we could be together so we could plot out our strategies," Casse joked.

Their friendship goes back to their teenage years, when Albertrani was 18 and 15-year-old Casse didn't have a driver's license.

"It was scary," Casse said. "He wasn't a very good driver. But when you have don't have any other options ... "

When Casse started training at age 17, Albertrani was a jockey for his father, Norman.

"Oddly enough Tommy was the longest priced horse I ever had win. It paid \$181. So I asked if he could make weight when he got to the barn," Casse said, joking. "I thought he could maybe ride Seaside Retreat in the Derby."

Both have 50-1 shots as first-time trainers on Derby weekend, Casse with Seaside Retreat, an ornery bay colt, and Top Notch Lady, a Bourbonette Breeders' Cup Stakes winner entered in Friday's Kentucky Oaks, and Albertrani with Deputy Glitters, who won the Tampa Bay Derby.



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"It's what you dream about," Casse said. "It's nice to finally be here. But for it to mean a lot we have to be competitive in the Derby and competitive in the Oaks. I think we will be, otherwise we wouldn't be here."

It's a dream that started early for Casse.

"Some people are born. I was foaled," said the 45-year-old father of seven. "When everybody was reading comic books at 12 years old, I was reading the Daily Racing Form."

Being a horseman is all Casse said he knows. It's due in large part to his father. Norman Casse, chairman of the Ocala Breeder's Sale Co., started as a breeder in Indiana, opened Cardinal Hill Farms, then moved to Ocala after cold Indiana weather left water frozen in buckets and "mud up to your butt when it thawed."

Marc mucked stalls early and in 1973, at age 12, attended his first Derby with his father. They watched Secretariat complete the first leg of the Triple Crown in track record time.

"At the time, I didn't realize it then that it would be my favorite Derby," Casse said. "We rode in the horse van from Ocala. I could hardly see because our seats weren't very good, but it was great being there with my dad, who has always been my idol."

By age 18 Casse was on his own training thoroughbreds. He's worked at Churchill Downs, where he was the leading trainer in 1988, and at Woodbine, the Toronto track where he was the leading trainer three years ago. His biggest win came in May 2001, with Exciting Story in the \$750,000 Metropolitan Handicap at New York's Belmont Park. He also has been the general manager for Mockingbird Farms in Ocala and recently opened his own farm, Moonshadow, with wife Tina.

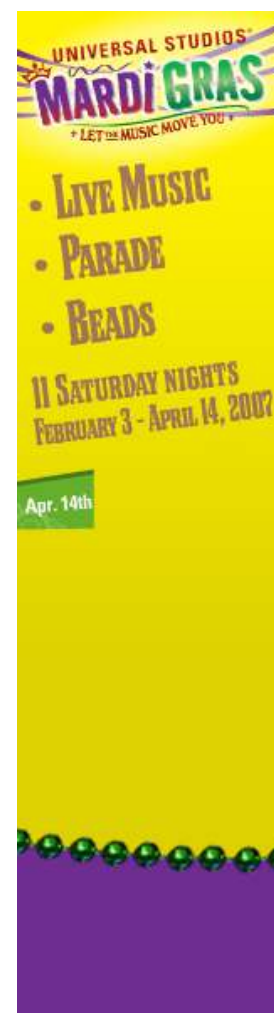
But Casse has never had a Derby contender. And it nearly didn't happen.

Owner Bill Farish was preparing Seaside Retreat for the 2-year-old sale when Casse saw something that helped change their minds. Casse liked Seaside Retreat's stride and breeding for distance as the son of Kingmambo sire King Cugat, who was strictly a turf horse, earning \$1.3-million in seven stakes races.

"Marc has a great feel for horses," Farish said. "He's trained for a lot of years, more than one would expect given his age."

After winning three of four races at Woodbine as a 2-year-old, including the \$140,950 Display Stakes, Seaside Retreat finished fifth in the \$125,000 Sam F. Davis Stakes at Tampa Bay Downs, second at the \$500,000 Land's End and a disappointing sixth at the \$750,000 Blue Grass Stakes. Seaside Retreat, on the bubble at 20th on the graded stakes earnings list, drew the 15th post Wednesday. He's as long a shot as last year's Derby winner, Giacomo. Casse's plan is for Seaside Retreat and jockey Patrick Husbands to stay 10-15 lengths off the lead in the hope that the speedsters wear themselves out, opening the door for his closer.

"Seaside Retreat is ornery, but he has a great mind," Casse said. "I think he'll do fine under pressure, where I'm not sure a lot of other



horses will."

Either way Casse is happy to have a homecoming of sorts.

In addition to Albertrani, he is in familiar company with Kieran McLaughlin, a former assistant trainer under Casse, and Danny Pietz, a friend he met when both had horses stabled at Belmont. McLaughlin is in his second Derby as the trainer of Jazil and Flashy Bull and Pietz trains Steppenwolfier.

"It's just kind of like old times," Casse said. "Of course I'd love to win, but if one of those guys could win I'd be happy too."

[Last modified May 4, 2006, 00:59:16]

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