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An up-close
interview
with
America's
Triple Crown
trainer.

ThoroFan
Voice
goes inside
the Turner barn

In the Right Hands

by Dennis G. Hogan

Billy Turner is excited. Although he's trained horses for over 40 years, each and every spring he feels just like a kid again. "It's an entirely new experience every single year." He declared, as we sat together alongside Barn 44 at Belmont Park, where the veteran trainer is based. "It's invigorating. It stimulates my interest and I think it stimulates the nation's interest." He's referring of course to Derby season; the time of year when America's finest 3-year-old Thoroughbreds, and the occasional foreign challenger, engage in a series of competitive preps all leading up to the grandest spectacle of them all, the Kentucky Derby.

“There are some pretty nice horses this year. It’s going to be a very competitive Derby.” Billy adds, before sharing his pick to wear this year’s roses. “Many of them have been beating each other, but barring getting into trouble, I’d have to say-” *Hold on, Billy. Let’s not let the cat out of the bag just yet! What about your own aspirations? Don’t you long for another Derby opportunity?*

“I’ve had a number of horses that I could have started, and they would have run alright, but you don’t go down to the Derby unless you think you can win it.” Billy should know. In fact, few trainers in history were ever more confident than he was, when on the first Saturday in May, back in 1977, he lead an undefeated colt by the name of Seattle Slew into the paddock at Churchill Downs.

From the first crop of freshman sire Bold Reasoning, and out of the debut mare My Charmer, Slew was offered at bid as a yearling in 1975. His untested pedigree received little attention, yet his presence caught the eye of West Coast entrepreneurs Mickey and Karen Taylor, along with veterinarian Dr. Jim Hill, and his wife Sally. Upon Dr. Hill’s suggestion, the partnership decided to bid on the rangy, immature youngster, and the hammer dropped at \$17,500. Sent to Andor Farm in Monkton, Maryland, he was broken by Paula Turner, and then placed in training with Paula’s husband William H. “Billy” Turner.

Slew won all 3 of his races as a two-year-old, including a sensational 9 & 3/4 length victory in the Champagne Stakes. Then in 1977, he began a magical run which included wins in the Flamingo Stakes at Hialeah, and New York’s classic Derby prep, the Wood Memorial. Riding a 6-race undefeated streak, Slew was the favorite to take the Roses. “That was probably the greatest race he ever ran in that he broke last in the field,” remembers Billy. “They figure he ran a quarter of a mile in :22.4, and by then he was just off the lead. To finish it off going a mile and a quarter after a first quarter like that - in the Derby, it had never happened before.”

Two weeks later he dominated the Preakness field; only the Belmont Stakes stood between him and immortality. “I was a little concerned that we wouldn’t get him settled enough to run a good mile and a half. But I trained him with that in mind the entire time. Sure enough, when all was said and done, that wound up being the easiest race for him.”



Slew had done it. With Billy’s help he came forth to lay claim to America’s most grueling test of champions, the Triple Crown - but for Slew and his connections, the ‘Slew Crew’ as they were called, it wasn’t all a smooth ride.

“Oh my gosh, newspapers and TV were comparing Seattle Slew with Secretariat. Well, Slew was undefeated, and there is a mystique about undefeated horses. That mystique eclipsed Secretariat right away, and people didn't want to hear that. I got hate mail. Shucks, the fans really didn't like the idea.”

The reaction from the Secretariat camp only served to confirm what Billy had already known: Seattle Slew was one of the greatest racehorses the world had ever seen - and as Billy had learned years earlier, you never take a great racehorse for granted.

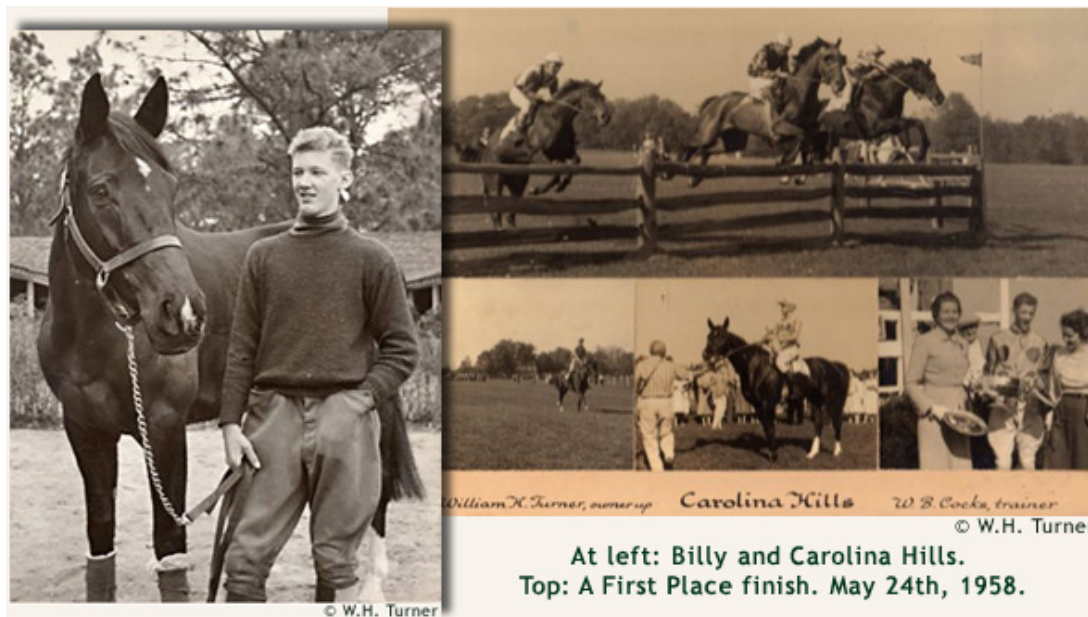
“My dad worked for the Dupont Company, based in Wilmington, Delaware, right near the border of Southern Pennsylvania, and that was horse country. I started out fox hunting and steeplechasing. This was during the fifties. There was a famous old trainer down there by the name of Burley Cocks. I had met his kids and we were all friends. Well, one of those old, fox hunting families gave me a horse by the name of Carolina Hills, and I turned him into a steeplechase horse. But I didn't know anything about training horses. I rode him in a point-to-point and he was all over the course. I wasn't strong enough to even begin riding him well.



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Bill as a teenager aboard Carolina Hills at the Cheshire Horse Show, Unionville, PA.

One day, old Burley Cocks comes along and says to me, “Would you like me to help you with your horse?” And that was all I wanted to hear. He worked with the horse for about a month, and we next had him at one of the regular steeplechase meetings and he won right away, and with me riding him. Well, the relationship built up and I started to spend all my time working for Mr. Cocks.



William X. Turner, owner-up Carolina Hills W B Cocks, trainer
© W.H. Turner

**At left: Billy and Carolina Hills.
Top: A First Place finish. May 24th, 1958.**

I rode steeplechasers at Saratoga, and Sunny Jim Fitzsimmons was still training at that time. He'd run his horses, then after, they'd take them under the trees by the saddling area to wash them off before walking them back to the barn. And the old man would sit there on the bench. Sometimes, I'd go over and sit down on the bench with him and ask him questions. And you only had to ask him one question and he'd start talking. You'd just listen and you learned an awful lot. Once I asked him, "Mr. Fitzsimmons. What do you do for horses that buck their shins?" And he said, "Never had a horse buck his shins. They get a little off now and then, you just don't breeze 'em." Well, if you look at the horses he trained, they had bones on them this thick. They were real horses. They'd get a little sore but they never bucked their shins (laughs).

By the time I got out of college I was too big to ride in the steeplechases anymore, so Burley put me in charge of the young horses going to the racetrack. I'd go to Pimlico and Laurel. Eventually, the horses under my care started running well and people took notice. Then one of the owners asked me if I would train their horses, and I was on my way.

While in Maryland, I was around many good horsemen. You had people like Henry Clark, who trained for Christiana Stables. You also had Frank Whiteley, who went on to train Damascus, Chieftain, and Icecapade, one good horse after another. Of course, Ruffian came later. And there was Jim Maloney, who trained for William Perry. The first year I trained any horses in New York, Jim Maloney invited me over to his barn at Saratoga. He had eight horses. Six of them were multiple-stakes winners, and two of them were Champions. And I thought, well now, that's the kind of stable you want to train (laughs).

One of the horses that got me started in New York was a filly by the name of Flightoletti. Desert Vixen was the Champion 3-year-old filly, and was also voted Champion, as a 4-year-old. Well, we met her 3 times and we beat her 3 times - but I always met her on my terms (laughs).



Billy Turner (far left) in the winner's circle with Flightoletti. November 5, 1974



Then, how lucky was I to come across a horse like Seattle Slew. Interestingly, if I had had a big stable I would have never trained him because one of the reasons I got him was that I had a small stable. First of all, he was just made right. He had the conformation, he had the bone, and he had a burning determination to run. It didn't make a difference if it was a race or what, he just wanted to go out there and go, to use himself. In races he was an absolutely formidable competitor because there was no quit in him. Slew had so much energy. We would exercise him an hour a day - every day. In fact, we trained him the morning after the Derby before we loaded him on the plane just to get the energy out of him.



© W.H. Turner

Seattle Slew with exercise rider Mike Kennedy, and Billy Turner alongside on his pony horse Steamboat.

He also had the mind that you find in a great athlete. After he began breeding, everybody said, "The Slews, they're so intelligent." But that can be a problem for a trainer. When you're dealing with a mind like that - if you insult them, you might not get any results. They might just say, 'the heck with you,' and decide not to run. That's why some people just can't train a good horse. Because people don't know what they have, don't know how to treat them, and they don't run for them."

Billy Turner knew what he had. He'd learned his craft from the some of the best horsemen in America, and they taught him to never insult a great horse. That was why he felt compelled to speak out shortly after Slew had captured the Triple Crown.

"I told national TV right after the Belmont that we were going to give Seattle Slew some time off and then get him ready for the Travers. Marge Everett had just bought Hollywood Park, and to get Seattle Slew out there she boosted the purse for the Swaps Stakes. She put up a bigger purse than any of the Triple Crown races and made a deal with the owners. Then it was dropped on me. I was vehemently against it. I knew that mentally, the horse was exhausted. Well, if the mind is there, he can be sore and he'll run well, but if the mind's not there, I don't care how well he's doing - he's just not gonna' run. I was a traditionalist, and didn't see that times had changed. You had young owners with ambitious plans, and they said, "That's what we're going to do." So, I went along with the play."

Slew had soundly beaten J.O. Tobin in the Preakness, but in the Swaps Stakes, J.O. Tobin went wire-to-wire. Slew finished 4th, some 16 lengths behind the winner. Turner explains, "I didn't have to say a word. The press already knew that I was against going out there. Well, when things didn't work out, the press blamed the owners.

Commercialism was something that had just come into racing. They (Slew's owners) had made up T-shirts and bumper stickers, and had even wanted to parade the horse during the annual Horse Show at Madison Square Garden. I said, you're making a big mistake. This was a great racehorse, and the traditional way of doing things, - well, you treat a good horse differently.

A fellow named John Phillips wrote an article for the Sunday New York Times Magazine. He had been covering the whole Seattle Slew thing from the beginning. He sent me the article and asked, "What do you think?" I said, John, it's accurate, but you know, that'll be my job. He said, " Well, then I won't run it." But I told him the world might as well know. So it all came out in the Times, and my job didn't last one week after that, (laughs). Yeah, that was the last straw."

In December of 1977, Billy Turner was dismissed as Slew's trainer. The series of disagreements regarding the horse's care had driven a wedge between him and the Taylor - Hill partnership. Asked what he would do today if faced with a similar situation, Billy confided, "Well, now they do that with every sort of athlete there is, and you go along with it. The thing is, I would now know how to explain things in a way that any owner could understand." He laughs a bit, then flashes a wry smile before adding, "In fact, I could just use Slew as the example."



“You see these barns?”

Billy asked. “The original barns at Belmont Park were built by the breeders. Years ago the owners bred their own horses. And if you look at those barns up on Millionaire’s Row, as they call it, they’re 20-stall barns. Each owner had their own barn. They kept their stables small because they wanted their horses to have individual attention. You don’t get that in a tremendous stable, it’s not possible. The trainer of a big stable, the mega-stables we now have, spends his time at the computer and on the telephone. The old breeders knew that if the trainer wasn’t around, their horses were not getting individual attention, and they didn’t want it that way. I have 17 horses in training now, but later in the year I’ll have 20. In today’s terms that’s a small stable. It wasn’t small when I came around, it was a typical stable. I stayed the same and the others got bigger and bigger and bigger.”

William H. Turner has seen many changes over the years, and he’s learned that one must adapt if they hope to stick around. He also knows that it’s harder to go it alone. He speaks highly of his staff, and gets a great deal of help from his current wife, former jockey and exercise rider, Patti Turner. “She runs the whole show.” Said Billy. “She handles the business, feeds the horses, tells me that so-and-so’s not eating or moving just right. Put it this way, I wouldn’t be here in New York, putting up with everything you have to put up with, if I didn’t have Pat.”

With an experienced staff and Patti by his side, Billy concentrates on the business at hand: training horses. And unlike the mega-trainers he speaks of, Billy is one-hundred percent hands-on.

Each day he walks the shed row, talking to those in his care, and planning a course for them. He relies upon the knowledge acquired in his younger days, though his training strategies incorporate several, more forward-thinking methods.



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Patti & Billy Turner



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With Patti's assistance, Billy checks on To The Mat

"A gentleman by the name of Dr. Marvin Cain had a small animal practice out in Cincinnati, Ohio. Well, he went to China for 2 or 3 years to study acupuncture, and he came back and was using it on cats and dogs. He decided, why not try it in horses. So, he went over to River Downs, just inside Kentucky, and claimed a bunch of horses with everything wrong with them known to man. He began using acupuncture, and these horses started to run well. I was down in Florida with a string of horses and a new owner when I got wind of it. We called in Dr. Cain, and boy, these horses started running well. I mean, they were outrunning their pedigree.

Then he met a few Europeans who were using chiropractic methods on horses. Again, you had horses that weren't going anywhere, but when you lined up their vertebrae properly, overnight they became different horses.

I also use a device invented in the 1980's by a guy named Dan Paris. He was working with a research team at the University of Miami. They discovered that various tissue: ectoderm, endoderm and mesoderm, all have different resonant frequencies. And by applying light waves of the same frequency as the tissue, they could stimulate healing on a cellular level and cut healing time in half. I had a friend who knew Dan Paris, and he gave me one. He just wanted some feedback on it. So, we tried it and were surprised by the positive results achieved.

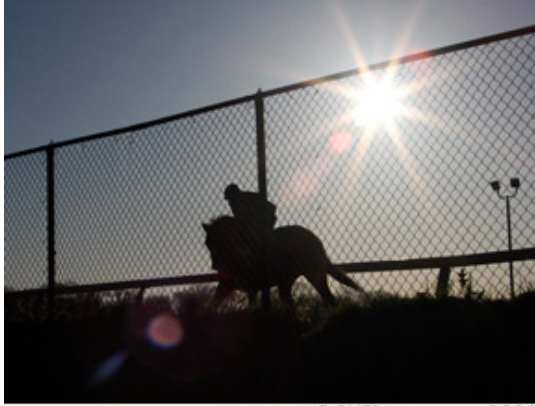


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At left: Dan Paris's Tec Lacer device. Right: Assisted by Patti, Billy demonstrates the Tec Lacer on Ocean Goddess.

If you walked around this entire facility you might find 3 or 4 trainers using it today. Others just don't buy into it. It uses wavelengths that are not in the visible light spectrum - and if they can't see it, they just don't believe it. But when you combine this therapy with chiropractic and acupuncture, you've really got something."

Turner stands by his Aquarian methods, recognizing that you have to do all in your power to remain competitive, yet he is outspoken when regarding commonly used medications such as Lasix. He calls its introduction a mistake, and predicts that its use in New York will soon be discontinued. He's also concerned by currently-held attitudes towards breeding. Again, he points to the time when owners bred their own, and sought only to breed a great horse.

"The concentration of quality in the horse has gotten smaller because these days we are breeding for the market and not to run. They are breeding pedigrees that will sell, and are getting more inferior horses as a result. You cross this with this, and in the catalog it will look like this, and bring a lot of money. The breeder doesn't have to watch this thing run, so the general quality has gone down. Although in that group there are always going to be a few really good horses."



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Although from each year's crop of 3-year-olds a Derby winner will emerge, Turner believes it takes a combination of efforts to produce a horse capable of sweeping the Classics. "A Triple Crown horse is always a dominant horse. Look at the horses who have won it. They have all been dominant: Slew, Secretariat, Whirlaway, Citation. Gee, Citation, he was an iron horse, he ran so many times. And the horse needs to be in the right hands. Assault won the Triple Crown. Well, he was bred by Robert Kleberg of the King Ranch, and he came up with Max Hirsch. One of the greatest horsemen and trainers of all time was old Max Hirsch.

People ask why we haven't had a Triple Crown in so many years. Well, we may have seen 3 or 4 Triple Crown horses since the last, but if they were placed in the wrong hands, you would have never even known they were there. So, you need a dominant horse, and the right people, and of course - you need a bit of luck. In my case, (in the Derby) Cruguet came out of the gate and almost fell off of the horse. Well, that would have been the end of the story right then and there."

When asked about the decline in attendance figures he points to the loss of media coverage once afforded racing by newspapers and magazines. "Although it's really not racing's fault." He adds. "Papers and magazines are disappearing thanks to the widespread use of the Internet. Back in Slew's day there were some twenty or so reporters and photographers around the barn from the time of the Wood Memorial, all the way through the Travers. And these folks did a great job. Now, almost all the coverage is through television. It's just not the same."



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To The Mat and Billy talkin' things over.

Yet despite all that's changed, Billy Turner is hopeful. "Horses have always been a part of American life. We have scores more owners than we've ever had, and it's a very big thing. And it's thrilling. TV may have taken the crowds out of the stands but the interest in racing has grown. I still get letters about Slew and some of the other horses I've had. They come out of the blue and they would amaze you. People, - they like the horse."

Although he remains true to his roots and keeps his stable small, Billy Turner has grown. Like his onetime friend and mentor, trainer Jim Maloney, nothing would please him more than to have a handful of stakes winners or a Champion in his care. That's why you'll find him at Barn 44, each and every day. Thirty-two years have passed since he and Slew marched into the paddock at Churchill Downs to claim what was theirs, yet he still receives cards and letters from appreciative fans who remember. No matter how many years go by, it seems his career will always be associated with the 'big horse.' And though he deserves such recognition for orchestrating the campaign that produced the only undefeated Triple Crown winner the world has ever seen, he's not too big to share the credit. Asked what he'd say to Slew if he was still around today, Billy paused, then cocked his head to one side and with a furrow of the brow, simply replied, "Thanks, Old Man."

Postscript:

And who is Billy's pick for this year's Derby? "Quality Road's the one horse that's run against the clock." Said Billy. Yet now that Jimmy Jerkens' horse has been scratched, "I'd say, Pioneerof the Nile. If he likes the dirt as much as reported, he'll be tough."

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