

HITTING

Evelyn Benoit's special bond with Star Guitar

THE RIGHT NOTES

BY GARY McMILLEN

It all started as child's play. For a surprise on Evelyn Benoit's fifth birthday her father had five Shetland ponies delivered to the family's backyard in Houma, La. Putting her dolls aside and wearing a tutu, the little girl would feed, groom, and ride each of the ponies on a daily basis.



Evelyn Benoit with a Star Guitar display at Fair Grounds Race Course & Slots in New Orleans

“From that day on I was horse crazy,” Benoit admitted. “I told myself that someday I would own a real racehorse.”

The secret childhood promise continued into her teenage years. Invited to the races by a prominent owner and his family, Benoit (pronounced ‘Ben-wah’) witnessed Diplomat Way win a stakes race. “From the time I saw Thoroughbreds in competition, I was hooked,” she said. “I admired them so much that someday I knew I was going to be in the horse business.”

On a high school summer field trip for girls, part of the tour was a visit to Churchill Downs in Louisville. While walking in the infield, Benoit stole a moment to write a sentence and her signature with a felt-tip pen on one of the furlong poles: “I am coming back here and win a race.”

Concept, theory, and long-winded discussions hold little interest with Benoit. With a combination of passion and persistence, her preference is turning “someday” into reality. Years after the high school field trip, the first horse she ever started at Churchill Downs was a winner.

After Gateway to Heaven was led out of the winner’s circle, Benoit asked if she could go out to the infield and see her old marking on the pole. “I was politely informed that the maintenance crew paints over all the poles every year,” Benoit said with a laugh.

Benoit’s wild run of success began as quietly as buying a lottery ticket. The first horse she ever owned—Roaring Fireplace—won several races for Benoit before becoming a broodmare. With little recognizable pedigree, Roaring Fireplace produced Minit Towinit. Keeping the sequence of success on a roll, Minit Towinit (mated to Quiet American) dropped all boys, and one of them turned out to be Star Guitar. That’s him, Star Guitar, up there on the billboards, magazine and television advertisements, and record books of all the racetracks in Louisiana.

The criteria for the selection of Quiet American to cover her peasant mare are another example of how Benoit’s common sense trumped complicated breeding theories.

“The idea was to go out and find a stallion that had raced for over five years, raced up until age 7, straight forelegs, and all black hooves,” said Benoit, who harbors a dislike for the color white on any corner.

By any standards Benoit’s homebred Star Guitar had an outstanding career. From age 2 to 7, the bay son of Quiet American won 24 of 30 starts and earned \$1,749,862. For five years Star Guitar was the headline performer, dominating the competition at all distances and on all surfaces, while winning stakes at every racetrack in Louisiana.

“It might have looked easy on paper, but everybody was gaming for him,” Benoit said with fierce pride. “He was the target. Jockeys tell me today how they did everything possible to try to beat him. They just couldn’t do it.”

The horse that would become the top money-earning Louisiana-bred in history was born March 11, 2005. After standing and nursing, Benoit knew she had bred the perfect foal that needed a perfect name. Her oldest son, Tab Benoit, is a gifted guitar player, a four-time winner of the B.B. King Entertainer of the Year Award.

“That baby colt was a dream come true. There was something about his head and eyes that I was crazy about,” Benoit said. “I knew I had to do something to honor the dedication and enthusiasm that Tab brings to his music.”

The name Star Guitar was submitted to The Jockey Club.

Once breaking and training began, Star Guitar did not disap-



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Benoit and Star Guitar at Clear Creek Stud near Folsom, La.; the son of Quiet American stands for \$4,000

point. The exercise rider was calling Benoit on a weekly basis with reports of the horse’s talent and speed. Benoit and her husband, Maurice, were present at the Evangeline Downs training facility for Star Guitar’s first workout.

“We got up at 4:30 in the morning and drove out to Lafayette,” she remembered. “It was just so fast it was electric. I called my trainer Al Stall Jr. the same day and told him I was sending him the greatest racehorse that I had ever bred.”

Catastrophe seldom gives a warning. Star Guitar was being aimed for his 2-year-old debut on Thanksgiving Day at Fair Grounds when Benoit’s life was interrupted.

“It was Nov. 6, 2007,” she remembered. “I was in the kitchen cooking, waiting for my husband to come home, but he was not answering his phone.”

There would be no dinner that night. A tractor-trailer parked on the side of the road with no lights on had pulled out into traffic. The rear-end collision peeled off the top of Maurice’s car, puncturing his lungs, crushing and paralyzing his legs, and leaving him in a coma that lasted for weeks.

All of a sudden Benoit had her hands full. It was fight or flight. Mother to five and grandmother to six, she was thrust into managing the 160 employees of her husband’s oil and gas business, which produced pipe-threading accessories for deep water drilling in the Gulf of Mexico. But don’t let the image of the high school beauty pageant queen



Star Guitar won 24 of 30 starts and earned \$1,749,862 along the way; below, Benoit with jockey Corey Lanerie, trainer Al Stall Jr. and her son, Tab (far right)



LOU HODGES JR.

fool you. Without skipping a beat, Benoit took command of the business along with the daily responsibilities of operating Brittlyn Stable.

"I haven't had much go smooth in my life," Benoit declared. "This was just another steep hill to climb. The breeding business is very competitive and it is mostly men. These guys have high energy and high goals, and I had to keep pace. These horses don't talk. We have to figure it out. One day you're up and one day you're down. You leave the barn at night and your horse is ready for a big race; then you wake up the next morning to a phone call that a horse has been injured. You just can't let it get to you. In the beginning I would brood and didn't want to leave the house. Now I have learned how to deal with adversity."

While Benoit was back and forth between hospital and the racetrack, her beloved Star Guitar had back-to-back wins and was named Louisiana champion 2-year-old male. Benoit hung a makeshift banner of Star Guitar's winner's circle photos across her husband's recovery bed. The pic-

tures were the first thing he saw when he came out of the coma.

"I asked him to tell me what he saw," Benoit remembered. "He pointed and said, 'That's a horse...a special horse.'"

Trained by Stall, Star Guitar became a stakes-winning phenomenon. A fan club developed. People sent Benoit mementos, photographs, drawings, and paintings.

"After his races, people would come up and ask me for a hair from his mane or tail," Benoit



Benoit with recent purchases Penelope Plum, left, and Roan Inish, who was a \$500,000 buy at the Keeneland January sale

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said. "They came in limousines and bus loads to see him race."

The four-time Louisiana-bred horse of the year meant a lot to a lot of people, but his most memorable fan was a little boy who was dying from a brain tumor with only weeks to live. The child's parents asked permission for the family to visit the backstretch barn at Fair Grounds.

"I don't want to say his name, but the boy was losing his vision," Benoit remembered. "Al held Star, and I held up the boy so he could rub Star's nose, touch his ears, and rub his neck. Star was a stallion in training, but he stood still as a statue." Star Guitar now stands stallion duty at Clear Creek Stud near Folsom, La., and the spacious farm is where Benoit keeps the majority of her broodmares. Ac-

quiring top-quality mares to send to Star Guitar is the next “someday” for Benoit, who has 25 horses currently in training. Never putting a price tag on accomplishing her dreams, Benoit paid a cool \$500,000 for Roan Inish at this year’s Keeneland January sale. The 9-year-old daughter of Elusive Quality won the Woodbine Oaks Presented by Budweiser and the Princess Elizabeth Stakes. Out of two-time Canadian champion grass female Inish Glora, by Regal Classic, the session-topper could take Star Guitar to another plateau of siring grass runners loaded with class.

“Star Guitar gave me his guts race after race,” Benoit said. “Now it’s time to put my money where my mouth is and give him the best opportunity to show that everything I say about him is true. I can’t depend on luck anymore. I have to go out and find the best mares that are available.”

Benoit has been taking the rubber band off the bankroll to secure an elite band of broodmares that she has assembled at Clear Creek Stud. Persuading, Desert Rose Drive, Wild About Marie, Charged Cotton, Penelope Plum, and Saintly Joan are other big names available to produce talented runners. Benoit makes three to four visits a month to Clear Creek, where she looks out into the paddocks and can identify her mares by sight.

“With this group I want to make a giant step for Louisiana,” she said.

When asked what individuals made the biggest difference in her successful journey, Benoit does not hesitate.

“Of course, there are so many that have supported me, but Al Stall and Val Murrell and his staff at Clear Creek come immediately to mind,” she said. “Tom Early has bought horses for me. After my husband’s accident, Louie Roussel has stood by me with legal advice. Then there is Victor Arceneaux, who broke Star Guitar, and trainer Ron Faucheux. They have to be at the top of the list. It’s just an honor to have people like this in my life.”

The only way to keep what you have is to give it away. Benoit’s public image of a glamorous socialite traveling in charter jets and having expensive taste in clothes is widespread. But her generosity to complete



Benoit on racing: “Right now my everyday focus is on trying to save a sport.”

strangers is not common knowledge. Observant and sensitive to those in need, Benoit has been known to hand out \$100 bills to families in the grandstand and/or to grooms and hotwalkers on the shed row.

“When I see somebody that works real hard and somebody that deserves it, then I am going to reach in my purse,” Benoit said. “These people on the backside are up at 4 o’clock in the morning. They ride bicycles in the rain and freezing cold to get to the barn. They give

themselves the speed, color, and excitement. I love to bring kids back to the barn and to the track and let them pet and touch the horses.”

Trials, tribulations, and joys continue to shadow the force that is Benoit. She lost two homes on the Mississippi Gulf Coast after the tidal surge during Hurricane Katrina. Her husband still requires around-the-clock nursing care. A great-grandchild is a new addition to the family tree. She continues her passion for restoring historic homes and mansions in New Orleans. And, as always, there is her immeasurable enthusiasm for horse racing.

“Right now my everyday focus is on trying to save a sport,” she insisted, pointing to an oil painting of Star Guitar. “That’s my new ‘someday.’”

“You see everybody on their cell phones and computers and staying home and watching the races on television. Those gadgets are not going to last. It is the horses that are real and precious. If you don’t get out there and enjoy life, it is going to pass you by real quick.” **BH**



Benoit is trying to give four-time Louisiana-bred horse of the year Star Guitar his best shot at stud