Investing in the Future

The Gregson Foundation honored the Oak Tree Racing Association at its annual dinner that raises funds for scholarships.

The dinner took place at the Grand Del Mar, and Oak Tree President John Barr spoke during the festivities, which were emceed by Joe Harper.

Children of Southern California backstretch workers are heading into just about every field of study that higher education offers, whether it’s law, biology, criminology, nursing, veterinary medicine, linguistics, or architecture. The Gregson Foundation sees to it that these kids get a leg up on their education with scholarship help, and no entity has supported the foundation in its mission more than the Oak Tree Racing Association.

A consistent supporter of the Gregson Foundation, named for the late trainer Edwin Gregson, Oak Tree and its directors believe in these kids’ future. When the Gregson Foundation began its annual dinner to raise funds for these scholarships, Oak Tree was front and center with whatever was needed.

Past dinners have honored worthy individuals, but for 2011 the Gregson Foundation chose to spotlight Oak Tree as an association. It was an opportunity to recognize the many charitable contributions Oak Tree has made, not just to the backstretch workers through the Gregson Foun-
dation, but through many other organizations such as the Winners Foundation and the California Thoroughbred Horsemen’s Foundation.

Oak Tree’s support of equine health and research was also lauded at the Aug. 8 dinner held at the Grand Del Mar. Those in attendance honored the organization as well as the men who serve on the board—Chairman Jack Robbins, Executive Vice-President Sherwood C. Chillingworth, President John H. Barr, and Directors Rick Arthur, Thomas R. Capehart, Richard Mandella, Warren B. Williamson, and Robert W. Zamarripa Sr.

Joe Harper, president of the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club and an early executive vice president of Oak Tree, emceed the festivities.

“Oak Tree was founded by leaders of the industry in California,” said Harper. “They did it for no money. They decided to start a racing association

**Dr. Joe Cannon, Esme Gregson, Mark McCreary.**
and give all the money to the industry where it’s needed. They’ve done an incredible job.”

In a video produced by Amy Zimmerman and Stephen Nagler of HRTV shown at the dinner, many people spoke eloquently about the importance of Oak Tree.

“If I actually took the time to mention all of the things that Oak Tree has supported with funds from their meet, we wouldn’t have time to do this interview,” said former trainer Gary Jones.

“Without Oak Tree, the Southern California Equine Foundation would not be in existence,” said Dr. Jeff Blea. “Due to their benevolence and generosity, they provide three ambulances to the racetracks of Southern California, and they provide funds for a lot of equipment that we use in the hospital.”

Thoroughbred owner Mace Siegel, who was
honored at the Gregson dinner in 2008, spoke this year, commending Oak Tree for its support of the industry. He singled out Chillingworth and Harper as “the kind of people who make this game great. These are people who give of themselves, who do the right thing because it’s the right thing to do.”

Jay Hovdey, executive columnist for Daily Racing Form, noted several of the young people who have benefited from Gregson scholarships.

“You can reach out and touch a lot of the things that the Oak Tree Racing Association has been responsible for,” Hovdey said, “state-of-the-art equine ambulances, landmark veterinary studies, five successful Southern California Breeders’ Cups, a fully funded backstretch cafeteria and recreation center.”

Oak Tree is the largest single supporter of the Gregson Foundation, Hovdey noted. In the Foundation’s 10 years, more than 300 grants have been awarded to help young people further their education.

“Of all the things horse racing can do, this has got to be one of the best,” said Hovdey. “And for that, the Oak Tree Racing Association deserves our thanks, and the Edwin J. Gregson Foundation deserves our applause.”

Chillingworth in his remarks thanked trainer Jenine Sahadi, president of the Gregson Foundation and organizer of the dinner along with Angie Carmona, the Gregson secretary.

“I’ve had three prior careers, and my career with Oak Tree has been the most satisfying,” said Chillingworth, “because you’re not competing with anybody. You’re not trying to get the upper hand. You’re just trying to help people. For many years we have taken the greatest pleasure in being able to assist not only individuals, but institutions that do things for the horse racing business.”

—Mace Siegel
high on

Through its contributions to the Southern California Equine Foundation and the University of California at Davis, Oak Tree has made a difference in equine health.

BY JACK SHINAR
trainer Jenine Sahadi was sitting in her customary spot in the grandstand overlooking the finish line at Santa Anita early on the morning of May 28, 2004, when it happened.

Annabelly, a 4-year-old filly she was preparing for a stakes race in Northern California, had just completed a blazing six-furlong drill in 1:10 2/5. Sahadi was fuming at jockey Alex Solis, who was aboard Annabelly, muttering to an associate seated next to her as she watched.

“She worked unbelievably, but I was [miffed] because I don’t like to work my horses fast,” she said.

Annabelly had finished her jog afterward and was making her way back to the barn near the seven-eighths pole when she suddenly went wrong.

Sahadi knew immediately something was amiss. “It was a horrible, horrible breakdown, just an awful thing to watch,” she recalled.

Rushing toward the scene, she used her cell phone to call her veterinarian, who phoned for the track ambulance. By the time Sahadi got to the injured horse, Solis had dismounted and was holding Annabelly up, keeping her off the injured left front leg.

Using the specialized horse ambulance that arrived a few minutes later, they were able to load Annabelly aboard without further stressing the damaged limb. Sahadi and her assistant trainer held the filly in place, and they returned to the trainer’s barn to evaluate the damage. Annabelly, her vet said, had suffered a displaced condylar fracture of the cannon bone and a broken sesamoid bone.

It was decision time. Annabelly’s racing career was done, but there was a slight chance she could be saved as a broodmare. With surgical facilities available right at Santa Anita through the Southern California Equine Foundation (SCEF), a major beneficiary from Oak Tree Racing Association donations, Annabelly had a better prognosis than most in that situation.

Sahadi noted that while veterinarians felt Annabelly would likely come through the surgery fine, they were concerned about the recovery period, when dangers such as laminitis loom.

But Annabelly, a barn favorite, held a special place in Sahadi’s heart. Not only was she owned by a top client, Richard and Sue Masson’s Green Lantern Stables, she was out of the dam Crissy Aya, a good sprinter during her racing career. Crissy Aya, Sahadi said, was the smartest horse she ever trained.

Sahadi had purchased Annabelly, who was by Royal Academy, for Green Lantern for $150,000 at Barretts as a select 2-year-old.

“I couldn’t believe it when I saw her for the first time,” Sahadi said. “She was like a carbon copy of Crissy Aya.”

Although reasonably well bred and a stakes-placed winner of four of seven starts, “it was not a slam dunk” to try to save Annabelly, Sahadi said. “It wasn’t like she was going to be a $2 million broodmare.”

Owners Richard and Sue Masson (center) and trainer Jenine Sahadi (glasses) were able to save Annabelly because of Oak Tree’s donations.
Oak Tree provided most of the funding for the Santa Anita and Hollywood Park equine hospitals, much of the hospital’s specialized equipment, and three equine ambulances.
But she made the call to the Massons, who agreed to the surgery.

The following day, Annabelly was moved to the racetrack hospital on the backstretch operated by the SCEF. Dr. Rick Arthur, now the California Horse Racing Board’s equine medical director, performed surgery to repair the breaks.

Under the watchful care of Sahadi, Annabelly was a good patient and completed her recovery, despite a few close calls during a 10-month recuperation period, when the filly nearly developed laminitis. Annabelly, accompanied by Sahadi, soon boarded a plane for Kentucky to begin her new life.

Annabelly now lives near Keeneland Race Course at the Massons’ Golden Age Farm. She has delivered five foals to date, including two starters who are both winners.

It’s a dramatic story, one with a happy ending. And quietly in the background, Oak Tree has played an important role.

The not-for-profit charitable organization provided most of the funding for the hospital dedicated at Santa Anita in 1981 and for the building of a similar facility a few years later at Hollywood Park. Oak Tree is responsible for much of the specialized equipment needed to furnish a surgical suite and X-ray room. And it paid for three ambulances, at a cost of nearly $80,000 apiece, that include a hydraulic system that lowers the loading ramp to ground level, a laterally moving wall that can hold an injured horse upright, and a winch that can assist loading a horse that cannot rise on its own into the trailer.

Dr. Jack Robbins, one of Oak Tree’s founders, and Dr. Greg Ferraro, among others in the equine medical fraternity, saw that an onsite equine hospital could be instrumental in saving lives, said Karen Klawitter, the administrator for the SCEF. They approached Oak Tree and the California Horsemen’s Benevolent and Protective Association.

Santa Anita management gave the go-ahead to build the hospital on the backstretch, and “Oak Tree stepped up with the promissory note,” said Klawitter, who started as a technician and has been associated with the facility almost since it began.

Arthur, who is a member of the Oak Tree board of directors, said he got his start as an equine surgeon at the Santa Anita hospital and that veterinarians there have done hundreds of condylar surgeries such as the one he performed on Annabelly.

“The hospital was originally intended for emergency purposes,” Arthur said.

Oak Tree’s involvement in equine health did not begin with the SCEF. It has provided close to $5 million for the Center for Equine Health (CEH) at the University of California at Davis. The university and Oak Tree initiated a partnership in 1973 aimed at solving the racing industry’s equine medical problems through research and development. The SCEF, which was founded in 1976, has been a long-time collaborator.

“Simply put, there would be no Center for Equine Health if not for Oak Tree,” said Ferraro, who is the director of the CEH. “They were our sole support at the time.”

Like Annabelly and her offspring, thousands of horses likely owe their lives to advances in equine health and safety supported by Oak Tree’s Hal Ramser and Herman Smith flank Dr. Greg Ferraro in front of the Santa Anita equine hospital (far left). Dedicating one of the equine ambulances paid for by Oak Tree are Smith, Oak Tree co-founder B.J. Ridder, Mary Jones Bradley, Ferraro, Ramser, and Oak Tree co-founder Lou Rowan.
Oak Tree Racing Association

to fund research and development projects that were directly related to racing issues.

Further studies in orthopedic research led to drastic reductions in the number of knee slab fractures, uncovering the inherent dangers of longer toe grabs, and the use of nuclear scintigraphy to diagnose tiny stress fractures in bones that often lead to serious breakdowns when not given proper time to heal. Working with the SCEF, the CEH also called to attention the need for trainers and veterinarians to recognize and treat suspensory ligament inflammation, Ferraro said.

Oak Tree also has provided U. C. Davis with funds for the Dr. Jack Robbins Endowment, which allows faculty members to acquire specific training in specialized areas such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRIs) and acupuncture.

Ferraro said Oak Tree provided unrestricted support of the center until the mid-1990s. As the program became more self-sufficient through other funding sources—for instance, through legislatively mandated funding as part of the satellite-wagering bill of 1987—Oak Tree asked to fund research and development projects that were directly related to racing issues.

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Ferraro and Dr. Roy Dillon, a track veterinarian, were responsible for developing the improved horse ambulance, which was built by Kimzey Inc. The same company built the Kimzey Leg Saver Splint, a simple device that has proved to be
instrumental in stabilizing shattered limbs to prevent damage to delicate blood vessels. Both inventions are now in widespread use around American racetracks.

“It certainly has withstood the test of time,” Arthur said of the splint.

Arthur notes that Oak Tree was one of the original supporters of the Racing Medication Testing Consortium in its pursuit of drug research, model testing rules, effective withdrawal times, and rule uniformity.

“Oak Tree has always been there for us,” said Dr. Scott Stanley, who directs the Kenneth L. Maddy Equine Analytical Chemistry Laboratory, the CHRB’s official drug-testing facility at U. C. Davis. “They have been a staunch supporter of the laboratory and have supported various projects. They were very proactive in pushing the legislation [which made the Maddy Lab the state’s official drug-testing facility] forward initially.”

In addition, Oak Tree has been a longtime steady supporter of the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation, according to Ed Bowen, Grayson’s president. Oak Tree has provided funds that have supported laminitis and equine herpes studies, as well as the work at U. C. Davis on racetrack surfaces and California’s well-regarded equine necropsy program.

Ongoing studies at Davis on hoof impact are expected to achieve a safer horseshoe and better racing surfaces as well.

Dr. Jeff Blea, president of the SCEF, says he hopes people in the industry understand the benevolent role Oak Tree plays.

“Obviously, I’m a big proponent of Oak Tree,” he said. “People in racing have taken it for granted. I don’t think they realize the scope of Oak Tree’s contributions, both to racing and to the community.”