



The Grade California-Breds

by CRAIG HARZMANN

At times, Sky Jack has been flat-out sensational. His courageous triumph by a nose in the 2002 Hollywood Gold Cup (grade I) and his record-breaking runaway in August's grade III Longacres Mile Handicap are convincing enough.

There have also been times, however, when things have gone south for Sky Jack, and few have had a closer view of it all than Jeanne Davis. As ranch manager at Ren-Mar Thoroughbred Farm, the 40-acre Temecula spread of Rene and Margie Lambert, Davis has had a ringside seat for all of the peaks but many of the valleys, as well. Yes, she was there last fall, helping to rehabilitate Sky Jack through his second knee operation. She was there, too, the first time that knee called for surgery, when a routine convalescence nearly turned tragic for the California-bred gelding. Davis saw him through all his early breaking, through those awkward teenage years when he was growing in all sorts of directions.

Her long-running attachment to Sky Jack, in fact, dates back to the mid-'80s, to her days just down the road at Jack Klugman's El Rancho de Jaklin.

"Sky Jack, he's a one-of-a-kind. Of course, I felt that way about his dad, too," admitted Davis, fondly remembering the late stallion Jaklin Klugman. "He was a wonderful horse to be around. Those of us who knew the stud were always looking for that big runner. It's nice to see a horse as good as we thought he'd produce."

Sky Jack, it turns out, was one of the last—and irrefutably the best—of the Jaklin Klugmans to hit the track, said

Davis, who sees in the son many of the father's qualities. Jaklin Klugman was a standout himself—a four-time stakes winner, he once ran third in the Kentucky Derby—yet Sky Jack seems to be cut from an altogether different cloth. His resilience, according to Davis, is a mystery not even his bloodlines can explain.

What Sky Jack has weathered so far would have stopped lesser horses much

gical procedure did the trick, and for several weeks, his recovery went without a hitch. That April, however, things took a drastic turn. Twice within a week Sky Jack was stricken with colic, and two consequent surgeries to correct his twisted intestines simply drained him. His weight dropped dramatically thereafter, and the once healthy gelding was now a shadow of his former self. Doug O'Neill, Sky Jack's trainer, would later compare him to a starved greyhound.

"And he didn't see him when he looked his worst," Davis said. "Physically, he just went downhill. He probably looked worse than he was because he's a big, tall, kind of gangly horse anyway. Just from the way he's built, it made him look gaunt. I've never, never seen that horse look like that."

Amazingly, Sky Jack returned from the near-dead to become one of California's top handicap competitors. The list of those who've managed to keep him together over the years—from vets to farm hands and beyond—is quite long and distinguished. Above all, though, his remarkable career has only been possible through the unwavering patience of the Lamberts.

"If he didn't recuperate the way they thought he should, he just wouldn't go back," explained Davis. "They would rather him come home and retire than ever win another penny. They don't care if he runs another race.

"The goal really wasn't to get him back to the track. The goal was to keep him in one piece," she added, recalling that scary summer. "You hope he goes back. Because he's shown how good he is, you'd like to see him have a chance. I'm telling you, he's probably the toughest horse I've ever dealt with. I don't think I'll ever run across another one like him."

Grade III Longacres Mile Sunday, August 24, 2003

Sky Jack's mid-August excursion to Emerald Downs is one experience Doug O'Neill won't soon forget. "Oh, it was incredible. It was kind of like *Seabiscuit*," said the trainer, recalling the paddock atmosphere prior to the track's marquee event, the grade III, \$250,000 Longacres Mile Handicap. "The people were hanging over the railing, you know, going nuts over him. It seemed like they had a hundred thousand people there. It was packed."

Sky Jack didn't let them down, either. The fast-paced gelding made a meal out of the competition on Aug. 24, delivering a performance unmatched in the history of the Longacres Mile. His 6 1/4-length margin of victory was the race's largest ever, while his final time, 1:33, set a new Emerald Downs track record. To top it off, the 7-year-old son of Jaklin Klugman, bred and owned by Rene and Margie Lambert, became the 34th and latest California-bred to surpass the million-dollar mark in earnings.



sooner, and his off-track tribulations started quite early on. The homebred was just an infant, in fact, when he went under the knife the first time, needing treatment to repair a hernia. He reached a nadir, though, midway through 2001.

It had begun as an innocent lay-up really, one designed to restore Sky Jack's chronic right knee trouble. A simple sur-