



MAKING OF A MIRACLE

BY LENNY SHULMAN

Neither owner Rick Porter nor trainer Richard Mandella is a stranger to winning top-shelf races. Under his Fox Hill Farms banner, Porter has campaigned such grade I winners as Horse of the Year Havre de Grace, Hard Spun, Jostle, Joyful Victory, and Round Pond, among others. Mandella, enshrined in the Hall of Fame for having scored in virtually every major race on the Southern California circuit, won four Breeders' Cup races in one day in 1993.

So what caused the emotional celebration in the winner's circle after the Brazilian import Bal a Bali took the American Stakes (gr. IIIT) May 9 at Santa Anita Park wherein Porter said, "Mandella gave me such a hug I thought he broke a few of my bones."

Why were veterinarians across the country on pins and needles awaiting that race's outcome, some too nervous to watch?

Bal a Bali is a horse that has touched many hearts in his lifetime, including those of his caregivers who, in the past year, brought him back from the brink, a case of laminitis so dire that Dr. Vernon Dryden, a podiatry specialist at Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital who helped treat him, said, "It's miraculous that this horse came back as good as he did and won that race."

Miracles are in short supply, both inside and outside the world



Bal a Bali's comeback from laminitis

© BENJIT PHOTO; ANNE M. EBERHARDT (INSET)

of Thoroughbreds, a fact appreciated in that hug between Porter and Mandella in Arcadia, Calif., a continent away from where Bal a Bali's story began in 2010.

Julio Bozano is a Brazilian banker routinely listed by *Forbes* magazine as one of the world's wealthiest men. His Haras Santa Maria de Araras raises Thoroughbreds on farms in Argentina; Ocala, Fla.; and Brazil and has bred graded stakes winners such as Anh Duong, Wallenda, Strong Contender, and Safari Queen. The operation imports shuttle stallions and in some cases buys stallions outright. Bozano bought the mare In My Side out of a dispersal sale from Stud Rio Aventura, and bred her to Put It Back (Honour and Glory—Miss Shoplifter, by Exuberant), a North American runner Bozano had brought to Brazil to stand stud.

The result of that mating was a solid colt that Bozano's wife named Bal a Bali. The weanling's conformation was eye-catching, according to Dr. Joaquin Alda, a veterinarian who helps raise the farm's young horses and oversees their sales prep. Bal a Bali had a calm, serene personality and was easy to handle and, along with the farm's other colts, was offered for purchase at the operation's annual yearling sale.

There, Bal a Bali was purchased by Alvaro Novis and broken at his Stud Alvarenga. Novis is a successful Brazilian businessman who owns a sizable stable of Thoroughbreds in Brazil but doesn't race outside the country. He found a good one in Bal a Bali, who won his first race at 2, won a stakes event in his second race, and a group III in his third race. From January—March 2014 Bal a Bali won the three group I races that compose the Brazilian Triple Crown, then added the Grande Premio Brasil Stakes (Brz-I), a Breeders' Cup "Win And You're In" race.

"The horse did everything he could do in Brazil. After the 3-year-old season, the purse money isn't much and it gets to a point where it makes sense to move the horse along," said bloodstock agent John Fulton. Fulton has spent 45 years in the horse business as a groom, trainer, breeder, owner, and agent, and has been doing business in South America since 1983. One of his partners, Alberto Figueiredo, was well-acquainted with Alvaro Novis and the three men met at the Grande Premio Brasil.

"Mr. Novis confirmed that he was willing to sell the horse, who had added value being that he was Breeders' Cup eligible," said Fulton.

Fulton and Porter had done business on several occasions, so when Fulton told the owner he had a horse that was off the charts, Porter was anxious to see the tapes of Bal a Bali's races.

"I've bought horses from John for a long time, and I trust him completely," Porter said. "When I asked him the price on this one, he told me to watch the tapes first. The horse

was impressive, but so was the asking price: \$2.5 million, which I wasn't going to pay."

Fulton called Porter subsequently to tell him that Novis had a deal with Besilu Stables for Bal a Bali that looked solid, but involved an exchange of some 2-year-olds. Porter thought that arrangement could blow up, which it did. Then Team Valor International got involved in negotiations for Bal a Bali, but those, too, never came to fruition.

"The saga continued for awhile," Fulton said. "This was not an easy deal. In the end Rick stepped up and made a very fair offer."

"I told John I'd give the man \$1.5 million straight up," Porter said. "He called me back five minutes later and said, 'You've got a deal.' So that was that. The deal was made July 16 (2014), and he was shipped to the

antique facility in Florida, he had a scrape on a hind leg that was swelling. Fulton called Dr. Scott Hay, whom he had known when Fulton was training at Hialeah in the 1970s, and Dr. Hay sent Dr. Heidi Thomas to the quarantine station to look at Bal a Bali.

"The horse was standing and didn't want to move," Fulton said. "I've been in the business long enough to know what that means, so we got a doctor to him right away."

Said Dr. Thomas, "He was not in distress but was starting to have feet issues when I first saw him. There was a pulse in the foot, and he was showing signs that laminitis was about to happen. I felt that critical care was important at that point, and so we had him sent under quarantine conditions to Palm Beach Equine Clinic (in Wellington, Fla.) to get him 24-hour care so that we could try and



COURTESY WESTON DAVIS

At left, Bal a Bali winning the May 9 American Stakes at Santa Anita in his North American debut; inset, Dr. Vernon Dryden of Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital; above, Bal a Bali in his cold water spa at the Palm Beach Equine Clinic

United States July 30."

The financial deal may have been over, but the saga of Bal a Bali in North America was just beginning. Porter brought in his friend Anthony Mangano, owner of Siena Farm near Paris, Ky., "for a leg," or one-quarter, of Bal a Bali. The two men had become good friends, developing initiatives they believe can help the Thoroughbred industry. But their dream of seeing Bal a Bali in last year's Breeders' Cup ran out immediately.

When Bal a Bali arrived at the quar-

antine facility in Florida, he had a scrape on a hind leg that was swelling.

Fulton credited Dr. Thomas for that crucial decision that helped save Bal a Bali.

"That was a telling moment," said Fulton. "Getting him to that clinic was key to a positive outcome. At Palm Beach Equine they picked up the ball and ran with it, doing an unbelievable job of staying on top of it and doing what was best for the horse. And my hat is off to Rick Porter. He did everything he could and spent whatever it

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took, not knowing if the horse would race again or even live. This is a testament to an owner who really cares for the horse. You want to give a horse like this every chance, but he went above and beyond.”

Dr. Wes Davis, a surgeon with experience working on foot problems, caught the case at Palm Beach Equine Clinic. Bal a Bali was still under quarantine conditions, so the clinic had to set up a makeshift quarantine facility in an isolated corner of a barn.

“He wasn’t too bad when he got here, but he got progressively worse in the next few days,” Dr. Davis said. “He was in pain, and so we got aggressive in his care in the initial phases. He got anti-inflammatories immediately.”

Up at Siena Farm, Manganaro reacted quickly to the bad news. Several months earlier he had installed a cold water spa at the farm and was impressed how much it was helping his horses.

“We talked to Dr. Dryden at Rood & Riddle about putting Bal a Bali in the spa and he thought it was a good idea,” Manganaro said. “I started calling across the country and luckily found one in Florida that they were able to move to the clinic.”

Said Dr. Davis, “We stood him in that, doing continuous cryotherapy on him for three solid days when he was at his worst.”

Dr. Dryden was called in to assist from the outset.

“At first presentation he seemed uncharacteristically dull for a colt,” said Dr. Dryden. “By the next day he was in a full-blown laminitic episode. We got him in the cold water spa for eight hours at a time over the next 72 hours. I think that played a huge part in helping him out.”

“We also injected him with several doses of stem cells into the bone marrow, and harvested and grew more for further injections. He had coffin bone displacement and rotation, the coffin bone rotating in a downward direction away from the hoof wall. It was pretty serious. I opened a big abscess on the bottom of his foot and saw the outline of his coffin bone. We treated that with sterile maggots to prevent him getting coffin bone sepsis. He also had some medical issues with his kidneys and dorsal colitis. He had a gamut of issues and was a pretty sick boy for a while. He was definitely a lucky guy to get through it.”

All the while, Bal a Bali’s story was being documented through the Fox Hill Farms’ website and Facebook page.



Bal a Bali eating while recovering from his bout with laminitis



Dr. Wes Davis and Dr. Carla Muñoz with Bal a Bali at the Palm Beach Equine Clinic

“For the past decade Rick has been very forthcoming with fans through social media and the website,” said Fox Hill’s Victoria Keith. “We had already posted about Bal a Bali’s purchase and arrival in the States. We knew people would start asking about him at some point, so once we knew we had a significant issue, we posted about it. I think the fans really appreciated the frequent updates and knowing that we were doing everything we possibly could for the horse.”

In September, after more than two months at Palm Beach Equine, Bal a Bali’s doctors determined him to be free of any signs of active laminitis. Sound at the walk, he was released and vanned straight to Siena Farm, driven at night when it was cooler. By all indications, he was a bright, healthy horse and began to thrive at Siena under Manganaro and general manager Ignacio “Nacho” Patino.

“I was expecting him to be in bad shape, but he wasn’t,” said Patino. “He was pretty sound and didn’t appear to be sore. There was a hole in his hoof from abscesses, and his sole was very thin. Dr. Dryden came once a week and took the maggots off so we could put him in the spa twice a day. He was walking sound enough to where we turned him out in a small pen so he could get some grass. We also put him on a vibration plate to help with his circulation and with sole thickness.”

Bal a Bali was turned back to one spa treatment a day to give his sole a chance to harden. Gradually, his exercise was increased. Another dose of stem cells was injected into him; he was re-shod and then put on a walker. He was given weight, which reached up to 80 pounds, to carry while on the walker in order to build muscle.

Mandella, who was contacted by Fulton to see whether he had interest in training Bal a Bali for the partnership, made his way to Siena to check out the horse and consulted on his recovery. Mandella has conditioned such stalwart South American imports as Siphon, Sandpit, and Gentlemen, and liked what he saw.

“Bal a Bali was a standout to look at; a beautiful horse,” said Mandella of his first impression. “John had sent me the tapes of his races, and I didn’t need to spend a lot of time deciding whether I wanted to get involved. The work they were doing on him was terrific and seemed successful. The acute stage of the laminitis was over, but then you still have to grow the foot out and clean up the damaged tissue. You still have to care for it.”

In late December the decision was made to send Bal a Bali to WinStar Farm near Versailles, Ky., which has a training track on the grounds.

“It would have been too stressful on the horse and too big a jump to bring him to the racetrack after he had been on the farm,” said Mandella. “We thought it was better to get him started at WinStar. Richard Budge does a great job there, and he couldn’t have been in better hands.”

SOME PROGRESS TREATING LAMINITIS, BUT A LONG WAY TO GO

When talking with researchers and clinicians who have targeted laminitis, sometimes called founder, there is optimism about progress in understanding and treating the condition, but there also is acknowledgment that they're facing a very complicated disease.

Laminitis refers to inflammation of the laminae, the soft tissue structures that exist between the hoof wall and underlying the coffin bone. Failure of the lamellar attachment results in loss of suspension of the coffin bone within the hoof capsule, which can be very painful for the horse.

Some of the treatments used on Bal a Bali—cryotherapy (ice, or cold therapy) and stem cell applications—are delivering results when applied early.

"I do think that progress has been made from a research standpoint, and I think definitely progress has been made in research models," said equine internist Susan Eades of the Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine. "The question everybody bats around in their minds is how that information applies clinically. On the research we still have a long way to go. But where we have to go even further is with how that relates to the clinical situation."

Rustin Moore, executive director of the Veterinary Medical Center at The Ohio State University, said because laminitis can be triggered by multiple initiating events—colitis, inflammation, injury, and overload, to name a few—it has been a challenge to conduct research.

"Over the last decade a lot of advances have been made in our understanding of the disease based upon multiple approaches to doing research with the various types and models of laminitis," Moore said. "There's a lot still to learn because there are multiple types of laminitis or things that initiate it."

Moore said both experimental and clinical studies have shown that using cryotherapy, both in pre-treating or treating quickly after an initiating event, has helped not only prevent the signs and progression of the disease but has prevented many of the inflammatory and pathologic changes that occur in the laminar tissue.

"I would say from a clinical perspective that may be the most significant thing that has been determined in the last few years supported by research," Moore said. "Of course, it's not a new thing from a concept, although I think the way it's done and the manner in which it's delivered and how long the feet are kept cold probably have changed in the way we manage

them. It's pretty intense to do, and therefore the effect of it is better than when something similar was tried in the past."

A problem is recognizing which horses are at risk or have developed the initial stages of laminitis so that treatment can be started early.

"If we could reliably predict it, at least the inflammatory type, and we could intervene with cryotherapy, we might be able to prevent it," Moore said. "But many times it's not recognized by the owner or anyone until it's already down the road. By that time, cryotherapy is probably not the thing that's going to stop it. It's probably better used for prevention."

Laminitis can follow inflammatory or infectious types of diseases, including diseases that can cause colitis. Grade I winner Paynter was treated for severe colitis and early signs of laminitis. Horses that colic can be at risk, especially if the colic is severe. In the field, overweight horses can be susceptible. And, as well-documented in the Barbaro saga, horses that suffer an injury can develop laminitis through over-support on their other limbs.

Eades agreed that one of the biggest challenges is determining when a horse is at-risk and when treatment needs to begin.

"It may not be economically feasible enough to give to every horse on the pasture. How do you target the situation to where it's most important to intervene and treat? That's what all of us wonder," Eades said. "We've made a lot of inroads, but we have a long, long way to go, and we need a lot more money applied to the disease."

Top minds are on the job. Just some of the research currently being conducted includes the American Association of Equine Practitioners wrapping up a study on pasture laminitis. At the clinical level Rood & Riddle is using stem cell treatments on severe laminitic patients that have not responded to other treatments.

"There are a number of groups and people doing laminitis research, and there's probably never been better collaboration around the world in terms of doing that, but it requires money,"

Moore said. "It's not inexpensive to do laminitis research."

It has become clear that there will be no magic bullet to cure laminitis, meaning steady progress in a variety of areas is needed.

"We can start to extract more from clinical cases and meld together what we know from the research model," Eades said. "It's a slow process because of lack of funding on these types of things. It takes us five years to get funding for one of these types of studies and then a long time before more funding comes. It makes it a slow process."

By Frank Angst



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

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RUSTIN MOORE



Co-owner Rick Porter with jockey Flavien Prat in the winner's circle following the American at Santa Anita

Budge said the horse was in "excellent shape" upon his arrival at WinStar. "We basically legged him up, tack-walked him, jogged him, and then finally gave him a week of easy gallops," said Budge, a former racetrack trainer. "He is a good-feeling, beautiful horse, and a character. He handled it all very well."

"Once he started galloping we were pretty excited," said Dr. Dryden. "Most of the stretched lamina had grown out. Radiographically you couldn't tell that he had rotated and foundered. He had perfect alignment and everything looked nice and tidy. We were pretty impressed with his comeback, and so after a month there he was sent to California to start training with Dick (Mandella)."

Mandella, grateful for all the help that Bal a Bali had received along the way, now was charged with getting him back to the races, hopefully at a level approaching what the horse had accomplished in Brazil.

"Everything went well from the time he got out to California," noted Mandella. "He'll train as fast as you want or will go as easy as you want. He's just a classy horse with a good personality. We watch his feet real closely. We keep a glue-on shoe on him that helps. His feet aren't perfectly normal, but they're pretty dang close. He trained unbelievably up to the first race."

On May 9, a contingent of nervous owners and their associates converged on Santa Anita. Eleven months after his previous start Bal a Bali broke from the gate in the American Stakes and assumed a tracking position in the one-mile contest. On the second turn he was in tight behind a wall of horses, and then seemed stuck between horses in mid-stretch. But he burst clear, quickened late, and took a length decision over Talco in 1:35.69.

"It was an unbelievable feeling to win that race," Porter said.

Manganaro added, "It was very emotional with what this horse had been through the previous 11 months. He's a neat horse, and he's like one of the family."

Mandella felt a mixture of satisfaction and relief.



Bal a Bali's co-owner Anthony Manganaro

"You do a lot of work on horses, and sometimes it works out and sometimes not. This came out very well. It's always a nice feeling when you win a stakes, but in this case everyone was so tied on and involved with him and doing everything they could to help him."

In Florida, Dr. Heidi Thomas watched the race, having put Bal a Bali in her virtual stable.

"He is a special horse to get through this and come out the other side and be able to run the way he has," she said.

Added Dr. Wes Davis, "He is a special case. A lot of them get back to the races but at lower performance levels as they struggle with foot pain. He's a super athlete, a cool horse who had a happy outcome."

In Kentucky, Dr. Dryden knew the race was happening but stayed away from his TV.

"I couldn't watch it; I didn't want to watch it," he said. "Then I got a text message from Richard Budge and went in and watched the replay and got pretty excited."

Added Budge, "We were thrilled for the owners and thrilled for the horse, after all the trials and tribulations he went through. Kudos to everyone involved; the faith they put in this horse was well-placed."

Bal a Bali returned to the races a month later in the Shoemaker Mile Stakes (gr. IT). Poised to make a winning run turning for home, he flattened out and finished last of five, three lengths off winner Talco. After the race a tiny chip was discovered near one of his ankles. As a result Bal a Bali is currently undergoing treatment that entails pulling blood from him, spinning it, and then injecting it back into him as an anti-inflammatory agent.

"It sounds worse than it is," Mandella said. "We have them happen all the time, and you don't have to do a lot with it. He's fine. We're looking at the (Aug. 23) Del Mar Mile (gr. IIT) and then hopefully the Shadwell Mile (gr. IT) at Keeneland."

"Richard (Mandella) is happy with him, and we're going easy," Porter said. "If things work out, we still have the fancy possibilities in front of us."

That there remains the possibility of two Triple Crown winners showing up at the Breeders' Cup this year is a credit to the owners of Bal a Bali, the horse himself, and the team of doctors who worked diligently on him.

"The doctors worked their asses off for this horse," said Porter. "They were there every hour of the day and night to make sure nothing went wrong. Anthony (Manganaro) and I are of similar mind when it comes to this: If a horse has the potential, I will do whatever it takes to make him sound and healthy again. If it's a horse that won't make it back all the way, I'll take him out of training and keep the papers and give him away as a riding horse. I won't bring a horse back to have some nitwit claim him and break him down."

"We worked hard, the doctors worked hard, and this has been the greatest team effort I've ever seen on a horse. The doctors wanted to win this one. If we ever get a grade I with Bal a Bali, I'm bringing all the people in that played a part and throw one big shindig to celebrate. I have a lot of dreams and some have come true. Hopefully, this one will."

To many, it already has. **BH**

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