



ELLEN JACKSON PHOTOS

BY JACK SHINAR

A BUDDING VENTURE 25 YEARS AGO, VICTORY ROSE THOROUGHBREDS HAS BLOSSOMED

Ellen Jackson knew there would be plenty of thorns when she launched her aptly named Victory Rose Thoroughbreds, a dilapidated former cattle ranch in Solano County. Now, 25 years and many lessons later, the Northern California horsewoman is enjoying the fruits of her labor.

Starting out with little more than the will to try, the farm owner and trainer saw potential in the overgrown and abandoned 63-acre property where others saw only problems. Now, Victory Rose ranks among Northern California's busiest full-service Thoroughbred farms.

Near Vacaville, about 45 miles east of Golden Gate Fields, Victory Rose is home to such graded stakes-winning stallions as Bold Chieftain and Idiot Proof, both California champions, as well as three lesser known sires with great bloodlines. Jackson feels confident that over time, stallions Indian Evening, Many Rivers, and Gig Harbor will all prove themselves.

"Yes, it's definitely the best as a stallion group (I've had)—there isn't a dud in the bunch," said the irrepressible Jackson, who at 62 retains the vigor and physical



Ellen Jackson has transformed the Victory Rose property from abandoned to abundant

stamina of a much younger individual.

Few women have been as successful in what she does, a combination of services for all things Thoroughbred. From breeding shed and foaling to breaking, training, and racing, as well as lay-ups off the track and retirees, Jackson takes care of horses at all stages of their lives. She owns many of the 170 horses that usually populate the grounds herself or in partnership, and keeps 22 more on the regional racing circuit.

It wasn't a cinch that the business would work out as well as it has. Jackson acknowledges the mistakes she's made along the way, the poor choices in breeding stock, the older runners she shouldn't have claimed. In the early years she trained her horses by running them over the nearby hills and across creeks, then shipped in for races at Golden Gate Fields and elsewhere.

"It wasn't very successful but it was all part of the learning curve," said Jackson, who has 239 training victories with limit-



Victory Rose Thoroughbreds is a full-service facility, caring for horses of all ages and in all stages of life, from foals to retirees

ed starters since she began in 1991.

Along the way, she's built a strong relationship with the world-renowned University of California, Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine, which is near the farm. The vet school often makes use of her horses for groundbreaking studies in the care and breeding of Thoroughbreds. In 2013 the school awarded her with its Distinguished Service Award for her contributions to research studies. Over the years Victory Rose has established a niche in the breeding industry for working with sub-fertile stallions and mares that have difficulty conceiving.

"We do help each other out," Jackson said. "I work really closely with them. I also contribute a lot of retired horses that they can use for studying things like drug withdrawal times. They've done studies



Two deep natural wells keep the Victory Rose pastures lush and green even in the summer

on dummy foals, on clenbuterol, body mass. . . anything that comes up that they need a herd of horses for. I've got a herd of horses."

UC Davis veterinarians also jump in when Victory Rose horses have unusual issues.

"Like this year, a particular bug went through that was giving babies diarrhea at 48 hours," said Jackson, noting UC Davis' quick diagnosis and resolution. "It was a bug we haven't had for maybe 20 years. It could have wiped out my entire breeding season."

Jackson built her business by taking chances. A divorced mother of two, she started with a small lay-up facility at a farm, Circle Z Ranch, she was partially leasing in Grass Valley, located in the Sierra foothills east of Sacramento. After five years she was paying the bills but seeking a better way to make a living in the horse business. An associate advised her to diversify.

"A really smart man told me that if you try and make it just in one area, you're never going to make a go of it," Jackson recalled. "If you just have lay-ups, when they leave, that's gone. If you have a stallion, you'll have mares come. And if you have mares, you'll have babies. And if you have babies, you'll have horses to train. And if you have horses to train, well, that's just the circle of life. And he was so right."

Jackson took the advice. A breeder she befriended provided her with a couple of stallions, and she began to branch out.

She came across what would become Victory Rose Thoroughbreds while dropping off a couple of rehabilitated horses at a neighboring farm. The property was long neglected and in foreclosure. Squatters had stripped or destroyed nearly everything. Cattle had flattened the fences.

Her horse client, a land broker, strongly advised her against



Victory Rose Thoroughbreds

pursuing the farm. But she prevailed upon him to take a closer look at the acreage.

At the time, Jackson owned little more than an old Chevy pickup and a two-horse trailer, but they eventually arranged a Small Business Administration loan.

“The bank ended up giving me a second to put as a down payment—that’s how badly they wanted to get rid of it,” she said with a laugh. “I have been so lucky. I think it cost me \$760,000, which doesn’t sound like a lot. When you own nothing, that’s a huge amount of money. But I knew I could make the payment.”

Suddenly, Jackson was a ranch owner.

“I sent a crew in, got the fences built, the water working. One

The broodmares spread out across seven spacious pastures. Covering more than 50 acres, the farm’s lush grassland in summer stands in marked contrast to the nearby brown hills. Two deep natural wells keep everything green despite California’s long-running drought.

The farm includes a half-mile training track, a large indoor arena for training during inclement weather, a six-horse freestyle Equicizer, more than 100 stalls, and 60 individual covered pens.

But you won’t find many roses at Victory Rose Thoroughbreds. “When I was trying to develop my business a million years ago, a smart friend of mine said don’t give the business some cutesy name that you’ll hate in a few years. He said, ‘Think of something that summarizes your goal in business.’ Well, what better than as a goal to someday run for the roses? So I settled on Victory Rose and have always been happy with the name.”

Jackson takes a different approach to racing than many other trainers. For instance, she brings her horses back to the ranch for a few days of rest after each of its races. She believes that contributes to their career longevity.

“I’ll let them eat a little grass, get their stomachs in order,” Jackson said. “And the other thing is that when a horse is at the track, they have so much adrenaline, they don’t show you the little problems. After they’ve had a little time to relax, you’ll notice things you wouldn’t at the track.”

She also isn’t big on typical pavilion-style auctions. While she does provide sales preparation for clients, she prefers to sell her own horses off the track.

“For sales you have to have what’s popular at that moment,” she said. “Plus, you have to have two bidders.”

Victory Rose’s stallions, all acquired in the past few years, came with back stories. Most had talent but weren’t very commercial.

A case in point is Idiot Proof, winner of the 2007 Ancient Title Stakes (gr. I) and runner-up in that year’s TVG Breeders’ Cup Sprint (gr. I). He earned nearly \$1.3 million for owner/breeders Pam and Martin Wygod. The son of Benchmark—Perfectly Pretty, by Bertrando, was an Eclipse Award finalist and two-time California champion, entering stud in 2010. His first three crops consisted of 26 named foals, according to the California Thoroughbred 2016 Stallion Directory.

“I’d been begging them to sell for two years—‘I wanna buy this horse, I wanna buy this horse!’ And finally one day they said okay. So our partnership bought him, and then the next year his babies finally started running.

“To me, he’s got the genetic profile of a super, super sire—99.8. That’s the highest genetic stallion marker I’ve ever seen.”

Indian Evening, purchased from Vinery Stables when it was selling off its American stock, was another overlooked stallion prospect, Jackson felt. The solidly built bay boasts an impressive 98.9 genetic stallion marker.

“They just kept trying to sell him, and I came along at the right time,” Jackson said.

The only son of Indian Charlie now standing in California, Indian Evening entered stud in 2014. His first foals are currently yearlings.

Out of the Unbridled Song’s mare Unenchantedevening, Indian Evening ran only three times, all at 2, breaking his maiden



ELEEN JACKSON PHOTOS

A familiar sight at Victory Rose: a mare and foal enjoying some muscle-building exercise in one of the spacious pastures

day we moved in 70 horses, got them all in. At the time it looked like I had all kinds of room. Now I’ve got 170, and I wish I had more room.

“It just incrementally kept getting better. As with anything, if you love something, you’re going to learn. And really, I knew nothing. I read everything I could; I learned everything I could. Now I know a little bit about the business. As you learn more, you make better decisions.”

Now she owns the place outright, a giant step on her way to lifetime security.

Still single and living in a cozy rebuilt house designed by her son, a contractor, Jackson has six other families and a single man living on the ranch. She runs the operation and manages the stallions with the able assistance of Jose Rubalcava, her stallion man and the go-to guy when things break. She keeps an assistant trainer, Jose’s brother Alberto, in charge of her horses at the track.

“Pretty much everybody lives here,” Jackson said. “Everyone here is great. A lot of them are related, so it’s really nice. They all help each other.”

Jackson breeds 150 mares annually and has 70 to 80 mares living on the farm year-round. She owns about 30 of them herself.



Jackson has formed a symbiotic relationship with University of California's Davis School of Veterinary Medicine



UC Davis vet school often makes use of Victory Rose horses for groundbreaking studies in the care and breeding of Thoroughbreds

in his debut before running third behind future Belmont Stakes (gr. I) winner Union Rags in the 2011 Saratoga Special (gr. II). Indian Evening easily won Woodbine's Swynford Stakes before an injury sidelined him. Jackson's partnership considered returning him to racing but was tantalized by his potential at stud.

"I hope we made the right decision," Jackson said. "He really stamps them, and over the years I've found the ones who stamp their babies are always good producers."

Bold Chieftain, winner of 14 stakes, including the San Francisco Mile (gr. II) and two editions of the California Cup Classic, earned more than \$1.6 million. He is a sire who landed on Jackson's doorstep. The giant son of Chief Seattle—Hooked On Music, by Seattle Dancer, raced until he was 9 and was destined for Applebite Farms near Stockton when that facility was unexpectedly closed.

"Northern California breeders love him," Jackson said. "They've all followed him racing for so many years. You can't imagine how many people come out here just because they want to pet him and feed him carrots. He does bite, though, and he thinks he's top dog."

"Some of his babies can be quick, but they are big—really big—and should be

better as 3-year-olds. All of his babies, that I've seen anyway, have been really sound, just like papa. How much more can you ask? A racehorse that likes to go long and can last until they are 5 or 6 or 7."

Jackson also has high hopes for Many Rivers and Gig Harbor.

Many Rivers was an unsuccessful racehorse for Hall of Fame trainer Jerry Hollendorfer due to a throat-paralysis condition known as a "double flapper" that stops maximum airflow into the trachea.



Some of the 170 Thoroughbreds that call Victory Rose home

The son of Storm Cat out of the Affirmed mare Christmas in Aiken is a half brother to \$3.6 million earner and successful sire Harlan's Holiday.

Hollendorfer retained a part-interest in the stallion while turning the rest over to Jackson. She sees Many Rivers as a logical

replacement for Globalize, another Hollendorfer trainee who was pulled from stud service due to infertility after the 2015 breeding season. Globalize is in retirement at Victory Rose.

"Many Rivers can stand side by side with Globalize and they look like twin brothers," Jackson said. "When Globalize became sterile, (Hollendorfer) began breeding to Many Rivers. They've been running like crazy, so it has really turned out to be a good thing. People say, 'I want to breed to the one Jerry is breeding to,' because they see how good the babies look and how good they run."

Gig Harbor was a stakes winner at Golden Gate at 3, but the son of City Zip was injured in a collision on the track, Jackson noted, and had a spotty race career afterward while victorious in five of nine lifetime starts. His owner, construction company boss Daniel O'Neill, is standing Gig Harbor, whose first foals are currently yearlings.

"Mr. O'Neill just loves this horse," Jackson said. "I told him it's difficult to prove a stallion—you're going to have to shell out some money. He said, 'I don't care. I want to give this guy a chance.' He bought seven or eight mares, put his money where his mouth is. (The foals) came out beautiful—they just look like the real deal. I sure hope so. Danny's doing it the hard way and I really admire that."

After all, that's the way Jackson did it, too. **CTB**