

Trainer Sheppard up to his old tricks

by Terry Conway

The name says it all.

On a sun-splashed afternoon Forever Together came flying to catch the leader in the final strides to win the \$500,000 Grade-1 Diana Stakes last Saturday at Saratoga Racecourse.

Forty years after they first joined forces, Chester County trainer Jonathan Sheppard and owner George Strawbridge, Jr. are still taking home the big pots.

Two weeks earlier Strawbridge's homebred Palmilla roared past the 1-5 favorite in mid-stretch and rolled to a 3 ½-length victory in the \$300,000 Robert G. Dick Memorial Handicap (Grade-3) on the turf at Delaware Park. The Sheppard trainee scored at odds of 20-1.

Sheppard was just launching his public stable when Strawbridge handed the trainer a pair of timber horses. Gaddo followed. An Irish-bred runner, Gaddo won 21 races in his career. It was the beginning of a dynasty for steeplechasing's all-time leading trainer, and its leading owner, racing as Augustin Stable.

Increasingly the two men's attention turned to the flat: in the early 1970s they campaigned Mo Bay, who won or placed in nearly 20 mid-Atlantic stakes races. Focusing more on turf racing, they've been rolling up scores of victories ever since.

"George has given me free rein with my program," said Sheppard, a native of Ashwell, England. "If they look like they're not quite right physically or mentally for the rigors of racing, I don't push them at age two or three. I guess I could be guilty of being too patient."

"Don't I know," laughed Strawbridge, who lives in Cochranville. "Jonathan has produced so many good horses for me. He cares so deeply about all of his horses. He spends as much time with the bad ones as he does with the good ones."

Sheppard has viewed the racing game like any other business, you spot a niche that is weak and you go after it.

"In America there is too much emphasis at a young age," he explained, "so we've focused on older horses and I think our program has done well."

Sheppard's headquartered is Ashwell Stables outside West Grove. He arrives at his barns before the first sliver of sunlight. It's a full day every day, on call every night. Vacations rarely happen.

Taskmaster of a team of high-strung, half-ton athletes, Sheppard's work requires a watchmaker's patience, interspersed by moments of maddening frustration brought on by illnesses and injuries.

Inside his brick farmhouse the Hall of Fame trainer kicks off his mud-caked boots and takes a seat in a cozy living room.

"Horses are very much like children," insisted Sheppard, who has two children of his own. "Some blossom right away, others you need to coax along.

"My mentor, Burley Cocks, explained to me that he could get inside a horse's mind. Rather than force them, he would work around a problem, always looking for a horse's best qualities and tendencies. His credo was that you have to see the best in a horse to get the best out of a horse."

Sheppard has an intuitive feel that tells him he's looking at something special.

"I was at his training track one day to watch a few of my young horses and I was just taken by a striking bay named Crowd Pleaser," Strawbridge recalled. "Well, Jonathan says, 'he's nice but he's better suited for heading into battle centuries ago. The one you need to pay attention to is that gray, he'll be one of your best horses."

The colt was With Anticipation. In a career that spanned seven years the remarkable gray gelding scored 15 victories including five Grade-1 stakes on the turf. These days huntsman Ivan Dowling sits atop the snow white horse during the Cheshire foxhunts in Unionville.

Two decades ago Sheppard tutored Storm Cat, a precocious two-year old speedball who was beaten by a head in the Juvenile Breeder's Cup Race. The recently retired stallion once commanded the highest U. S. stud fee-- \$500,000 for each breeding session.

Sheppard wrote his own name in lights by saddling six champion steeplechasers who combined to give him ten Eclipse Awards. During the mid-'80s he also had his hands on a dream horse named Flatterer. The bay gelding earned Eclipse Awards as America's top steeplechase horse an unprecedented four years straight.

What's Sheppard's secret? A couple of time-tested adages come to mind.

"Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. And, the harder I work the luckier I get."

The running gag around Sheppard's barns is that one of these days he's going to stay put. A confirmed workaholic and incessant traveler, the trainer commands divisions at his Chester County farm and Delaware Park in the summer, at Camden, S.C., and Gulfstream racetrack in South Florida during the winter.

His training style revolves around being kind, patient and trusting in what the horse is trying to say.

Fair Hill trainer Graham Motion was one of Sheppard's young lieutenants in the 1980s. Today, Motion is one of America's top trainers having earned nearly \$4 million this year.

"Jonathan has an extraordinary ability to get horses to relax in their training," noted Motion. "Jonathan gets his horses ready to run without racing them, just on their training. Not many people can do that."

As for Forever Together, her three-quarters of a length victory in the 1 1/8-mile Diana Stakes punched her ticket for the \$2 Million Breeders' Cup fillies & Mare Turf in October. She has now won five of 11 lifetime starts and earned \$575,300. The first eight were on dirt.

"She was doing so well on dirt (winning a Grade 2 race) it makes no sense to switch them over unless we see a good reason," the trainer explained. "We always felt she'd like the grass and once she began running poorly (on the dirt) we gave her a try on the turf earlier this spring."

What's next? Sheppard needs to stretch Forever Together out heading into the 11 furlong Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Turf in late October, so the trainer is looking for a 1 1/4-mile race. The Flower Bowl (Grade-1) on Sept. 27 at Belmont Park could be it.

The Sheppard/Strawbridge combo has some history. They won it with Trevita in 1982.

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