An Excellent Choice

by DEBRA GINSBURG

John Mabee rarely pays huge prices for unproven horses, so there must have been something special about the Smarten—Northern Sea filly at the 1987 Keeneland summer yearling sale that made him dig out $110,000 for her. She had Northern Dancer as her maternal grandsire and seemed to come from a solid stakes-producing family. Only the year before, a half brother, Southern Halo, ran second to Melair in the Silver Screen Handicap at Hollywood Park, and was also placed in several other stakes around the country to earn $344,875.

The Mabees named the filly Excellent Lady and she was indeed something special, although it took her awhile to prove it. She won or placed in eight of 13 starts and just barely missed earning back her purchase price with a bankroll of $108,600. Her best stakes effort was a deadheat for fourth behind Gorgeous in the 1990 La Canada Stakes. These days, Excellent Lady is the dam of 1999 Cal-bred 3-year-old champ General Challenge and current juvenile filly sensation Notable Career. Their accomplishments earned her the vote as California's Broodmare of the Year.

Excellent Lady's first foal was the 1992 Habitony (Ire) filly Lady of Mischeif (spelling is registered with the Jockey Club), who ran unplaced in two starts for Golden Eagle Farm, but then died in 1996. The Mabees sold her next two foals at auction and both were quickly forgotten. Her 1993 Habitony filly Habitony Blue made three starts without a win and earned $5,700, while her next produce, an Avenue of Flags filly named Excellent Half, won once from five starts and earned $40,200.

Excellent Lady shares a moment with her valuable foal of 2000, a full brother to multiple grade I winner General Challenge.

The mare finally hit paydirt with her next foal, Red Velvet, an Avenue of Flags filly foaled in 1995. The Mabees raced her themselves and she rewarded her breeders with a pair of third-place finishes, in the Mountain View and San Jose Stakes at Bay Meadows, for earnings of $72,480.

In 1996, Excellent Lady foaled a colt that would make her name known from coast to coast. Her first son was a strapping chestnut by Golden Eagle's hot stallion General Meeting. He looked as if he had been plopped feet first into four tubs of white paint. In addition to four long stockings, he had a wide blaze running down the center of his face.

"He was a spectacular baby," Betty Mabee recalled. "Some horses do stand out, there's no question. When you're around them a lot, you can almost pick out those that have a little more moxie. I was amazed with his flashiness and cockiness. You know he wanted everybody to look at him. A little ego, if a horse can have an ego."

Gelded early to curb both his rapid growth and cockiness, Excellent Lady's flashy son was registered as General Challenge and moved into Bob Baffert's barn. There, he earned the nickname of 'Rodman', in homage to the eccentric basketball star who has his own set of colorful markings and the agility of a gazelle. It was a moniker that was well-earned, because General Challenge would run brilliantly in one race only to throw in the towel in the next. He became a constant source of exasperation.

He won his first three starts on his home turf, which included impressive scores in the California Breeders' Champion and grade II Santa Catalina Stakes. Put on a plane for Fair Grounds and his first big test in the Louisiana Derby, General Challenge shipped badly and performed worse, running erratically to finish fifth. Back home and equipped with blinkers, the gelding cruised to an easy grade I Santa Anita Derby victory and earned the favorite's role for the 125th Kentucky Derby. He was caught in close quarters around the clubhouse turn and almost fell. He lost interest and ran 11th.

General Challenge returned to California and scored an easy win in Hollywood Park's Affirmed Handicap. In the Swaps Stakes, however, he refused to pass Cat Thief in the stretch and had to settle for second. Blinkers went back on for the grade I Pacific Classic at Del Mar, and the gelding became the first 3-year-old to capture the $1 million test, since the Mabees' popular Best Pal won the inaugural running in 1991.

Final Standings in the Voting (Top 5)

1. Excellent Meeting
2. Cee's Song
3. Image of Super
4. Theresa's Pleasure
5. Miss Fuddy Duddy

General Challenge was narrowly beaten in a memorable battle with fellow Cal-bred Budroyale in the Goodwood Breeders' Cup Handicap at Santa Anita in October. Then in the Breeders' Cup Classic at Gulfstream, General Challenge languished in the rear as Cat Thief outdueled Budroyale for the top money.

It took another erratic performance in the San Fernando Stakes before Baffert had General Challenge figured out. Let the big guy have his head! Corey Nakatani did just that in both the grade II Strub Stakes and grade I Santa Anita Handicap, and the gelding responded with similar late rushes to swallow the respective fields with his ground eating strides. Then General Challenge decided to throw in another clunker in the San Bernardino Handicap. This time, though, he had a good excuse; an exam revealed an ulcer and an entrapped epiglottis and General Challenge was sent to the sidelines for throat surgery.

During the gelding's convalescence, his connections took the opportunity to unveil Notable Career. Sired by Avenue Flags and a full sister to Red Velvet, she lost by a nose in her debut on May 3 and then came back on May 28 to break her maiden by 12 lengths. The grade III Landaluce Stakes on July 8 was her stakes debut, and Notable Career posted a four-length victory as she boosted her bankroll to $108,040 after just three races. As focused as General Challenge is enigmatic, Notable Career has the best mindset of any 2-year-old filly Baffert has ever trained.

The Sempra Energy Hollywood Gold Cup on July 9 was General Challenge's first race back, and he was trying to become the first horse since Affirmed to win the Santa Anita Handicap and Hollywood Gold Cup in the same year. He grabbed a brief lead at the top of the stretch, but Early Pioneer blew right by him to win at odds of 25-1. General Challenge held on to second, boosting his career earnings past the $2.75 million mark. He is expected to be his old self when he defends his title in the Pacific Classic later this month.

Meanwhile, John and Betty Mabee are currently looking forward to racing two other siblings to General Challenge and Notable Career. Excellent Lady dropped a full sister to the filly in 1999, and earlier this year foaled another chestnut General Meeting colt, who bears a striking resemblance to General Challenge. The mare has been bred back to General Meeting this year.

"I couldn't love her any better," said John Mabee of Excellent Lady. "She's given us two wonderful horses, and the colt she has by her side this year might turn out to be the best of the bunch."

Ron Mesaros photos

Excellent Lady
California Broodmare of the Year

California's Broodmares of the Year (1955 to 2000)

YEAR	WINNER
1955	Iron Reward
1956	Feather Time
1957	Flying Choice
1958	Paradise
1959	Honeymoon
1960	War Whisk
1961	Dama II
1962	Miss Larksfly
1963	Candy Dish
1964	Djenne
1965	Fleet Diver
1966	Mrs. Rabbit
1967	In Regards
1968	Mother Wit
1969	Red Curtain
1970	Bell's Lark
1971	Our Cricket
1972	Mama Mouse
1973	Fleet Judy
1974	Solidity
1975	Seems a Queen
1976	Cool Snooze
1977	Soft Snow
1978	Fluffy Thought
1979	Procne
1980	Golden Shore
1981	O'L Clementine
1982	Good Thought
1983	Available Miss
1984	First Time Out
1985	Iza Valentine
1986	Melrose Nugget
1987	Miss Snowflake
1988	Variety Queen
1989	Careless Notion
1990	Chickadee
1991	General Store
1992	Ubetshedid
1993	Fagers Charm
1994	Star Gem
1995	Cheyenne Birdsong
1996	Symbolically
1997	Fountain Lake
1998	Forumstar
1999	Rare Lady
2000	Excellent Lady