

Broodmare

Fountain Lake is honored for the accomplishments of her first foal, Free House

by DEBRA GINSBURG

John Toffan and Trudy McCaffery have raced quite a few California-breds through the years, but they have not been the horses, by and large, that built the couple's earlier prominence in Thoroughbred racing. These natives of British Columbia, Canada, who now spend most of their time at their small Eskay Creek Farm in Bradbury, Calif., have campaigned the likes of such stakes winners as turf specialist Bien Bien, three-time San Bernardino Handicap winner Del Mar Dennis and the filly Pacific Squall. While all these did their best running in the Golden State, they were Kentucky-breds.

Toffan and McCaffery found their way into the national spotlight quite early in their involvement with Thoroughbreds. It came in 1991 with Mane Minister, the only horse to finish third in each of the Triple Crown races.

Sometimes forgotten is the fact that Toffan and McCaffery's first Thoroughbreds were Cal-breds. Among these was a minor stakes winner named Fountain Lake, who has helped to remind everyone of her owners' California accomplishments. Fountain Lake produced classic-placed Free House and has been voted California's Broodmare of the Year for 1997 by members of the California Thoroughbred Breeders Association.

Horse lovers all their lives, Toffan and McCaffery decided to invest in Thoroughbreds shortly after John's investment in a mine in Northwest Canada paid off with the discovery of

gold. They attended the inaugural Barretts March 2-year-olds in training sale in 1990 and came home with a pair of Cal-bred juveniles, namely Smokester and Fountain Lake, the future sire and dam of Free House.

Smokester, a son of Never Tabled, won two of four starts and earned just a little over his purchase price of \$35,000 before recurring foot problems cut his racing career short. He was retired to stud in 1993, standing first at Rio Vista Rancho in Atascadero and later at Cardiff Stud Farm in Creston.

Fountain Lake, a gray filly by 1978 Santa Anita Handicap winner Vigors, was bred in California by Don Everett and foaled at Madera Thoroughbreds. She brought \$9,500 as a yearling at California Thoroughbred Sales' Northern California mixed sale at Vallejo and was pinhooked into the Barretts March sale the following year at 2, where she brought a final bid of \$40,000 from Toffan and McCaffery.

"She was a very good-looking 2-year-old," Toffan recalled of Fountain Lake, "well-conformed and very, very correct."

Fountain Lake broke her maiden in her sixth start, a six-furlong race at Bay Meadows on Oct. 14, 1990. She won two more races from 16 starts, includ-



Fountain Lake

ing the 1991 Fleet Diver Handicap against Cal-bred fillies at the Bay Meadows fair meeting, for career earnings of \$57,778. Fountain Lake also retired in 1993 and was one of the first mares bred to Smokester during his first year at stud.

"We didn't quite know what to do with Smokester," McCaffery said. "Nobody seemed to want to breed to him, so we didn't even set a stud fee. He covered only nine mares that first year, six of which were ours."

Fountain Lake foaled a gray or roan colt by Smokester at Longdale Farms near Los Alamos on March 22, 1994. Even as a baby, he had a presence about him.

"I saw him when he was three days old and he stood out even then," Toffan said of Free House. "He was tall

Robert Furge photo

of the Year

and gangly, but he had that certain look about him."

Free House finished second in his career bow at Del Mar on Aug. 31 and broke his maiden in his second start, running wire-to-wire to win a six-furlong sprint at Fairplex Park on Sept. 13.

The Norfolk Stakes at 1½ miles at Oak Tree was the next stop for Free House. Overlooked at odds of 9-1, Free House used his tactical speed to challenge favored Swiss Yodeler, a multiple stakes winner of five of six races, through brisk early fractions of :22½, :46½ and 1:11. He put that one away at the top of the stretch.

Finding himself alone on the lead in the homestretch, Free House's lack of experience caught up to him. He raced greenly, switching leads at the wrong time, gawking, ducking and almost hitting the rail. But he did manage to pull off a 3½-length victory in 1:43½ to collect a check worth \$120,000.

Free House could not find the winner's circle again the remainder of his juvenile season. Off-the-board finishes in the California Cup Juvenile and the Hollywood Futurity cost the colt a California-bred championship and temporarily labeled him a one-race wonder.

Free House's 3-year-old bow resulted in yet another unplaced effort in the Golden Gate Derby, but back at Santa Anita for the San Vicente Stakes he appeared a much more settled horse than he had in the past. He finished a good second in that seven-furlong contest to Silver Charm and gave his connections every reason to believe he truly was a Derby horse.

"He's a very talented colt, but he's like a big kid," Toffan said. "He's always clowning around, never keeping his mind on business. I call him rubberneck because of the way he likes to survey the scene around him."

Free House met Silver Charm for a second time in the San Felipe Stakes. Running amazingly straight and true,

the Cal-bred collared that rival in mid-stretch and kept right on going to post a narrow, but impressive victory.

Round three against Silver Charm came in the Santa Anita Derby, and it was very much a rerun. Sitting right off a hot pace set by the filly Sharp Cat, Free House made the lead in mid-stretch and held off late surges by Silver Charm and Hello (Ire) to win by a head in the third fastest Santa Anita Derby ever run.

The two California-based grays took their rivalry east in their quest for Triple Crown glory.

The Cal-bred ran third behind Silver Charm and Captain Bodgit at Churchill Downs, but he was forced to break from the extreme outside post and may have used himself up far too soon. It was on to Baltimore for the second jewel of the Triple Crown and round five in Free House's rivalry with Silver Charm.

A couple of sterling works made Free House co-favorite with Captain Bodgit as the Preakness field went postward. Kentucky Derby hero Silver Charm was the third betting choice at 3-1.

The stretch run saw Silver Charm and Free House hooked up on the lead again with Captain Bodgit coming up fast on the outside. For a short while, it appeared as if Toffan and McCaffery would get their classic win with their homebred hero, but Captain Bodgit's late bid pushed Silver Charm to one last, desperate surge. He pushed his head in front of Free House's right at the wire. Captain Bodgit was another head back in third.

The Cal-bred finished third in the Belmont Stakes, but he became somewhat of a spoiler of Silver Charm's



Fountain Lake won the 1991 Fleet Diver Handicap.

Triple Crown bid because his big gray body shielded the threatening presence of Touch Gold. Gary Stevens and Silver Charm caught sight of Touch Gold when he already surged past them on his way to victory and it was too late to do anything about it.

Toffan and McCaffery credit their trainer for helping the big gray find himself at the right time.

"Paco has done an incredible job with this horse," said Trudy. "He tries your patience because he's got all that ability."

It was largely because of Free House's accomplishments that Smokester stood to a full book of more than 80 mares in 1997, and more than 170 applications were received from mare owners.

Fountain Lake has also made tremendous strides by her first offspring. After dropping a full brother to Free House in 1996, she produced a filly by Bien Bien this year and is confirmed in foal to A.P. Indy.

She has also joined a very select group of mares, whose membership includes the likes of Miss Snowflake and Iza Valentine. Like Fountain Lake, they were voted California's Broodmare of the Year for the accomplishments of their first foals, too—foals with the names of Snow Chief and Fran's Valentine. 🐾