

A HORSE TALE



Jockey David Shepler, left, and trainer Kevin Carden volunteer their time working with Arabian racehorse Juan de Lin at Manor Downs to help the Darden Hill Ranch School. Staff photos by Taylor Johnson.

You don't
look a
gift horse
in the
mouth —
what you
do is get
him back
on track

By Dave Pego
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The makings of a good movie are all there. Imagine a former college track athlete who becomes a horse trainer, then applies what he was taught about running to racehorses in his care.

Then imagine a kind-hearted horse breeder who donates a struggling gray Arabian racehorse to a home for troubled teens.

Skip ahead, and imagine the trainer teaching the Arabian racehorse that he can be a winner if he only learns to pace himself. And imagine the racehorse trotting proudly to the finish line after winning his first race. Imagine the smiles on the troubled teens' faces as

they learn that even losers can change their luck. Then imagine the troubled teens turning their lives around and taking jobs in the racing industry, maybe as successful jockeys and trainers.

The movie could be based on a true story. So far, the only thing imaginary is the last reel. And don't bet that won't happen, either. The troubled teens are getting a good dose of horse sense, and for the first time many of them are looking toward the future.



"I would have been happy if they had just gone to the races and done well, but he won and they got a blanket," says Les Crane, kindhearted horse breeder.

Crane, who owns Longhorn Dental Centers in Austin and has been instrumental in introducing Arabian horse racing to Texas, had donated horses to the Darden Hill Ranch School before. But the 5-year-old, gray Arabian, named Juan de Lin, was the first racehorse he ever gave to the facility for troubled teens.

"He had done fairly well in California, but he had a little trainer trouble," says Crane. "I moved him to different trainer and that didn't



Darden Hill Ranch School co-founder Charles Campise, at Manor Downs, says horses play an important role in helping troubled teens turn their lives around.

See Gift, D4

Gift horse's track record improves

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work either. Sometimes they click and sometimes they don't. So we brought him back to Texas."

After being given to Darden Hill Ranch School, the horse was put under the care of former college track athlete K.C. Carden, a young horse trainer. Carden says Juan de Lin has come a long way in their five months together.

"He just needed more time," Carden says. "He didn't know anything about running."

In the beginning, the feeling was somewhat mutual. Carden didn't know a lot about Arabians, who handle a bit differently than the quarter horses and thoroughbreds to which Carden was more accustomed. Arabians are superior long-distance runners.

But Carden brushed up on the breed a little and soon both he and Juan de Lin were on track toward improving the racehorse's performance.

Carden says his main concern was getting the horse not to run himself out at the beginning of a race. The gray Arabian typically went out too quickly, then would slow as fatigue overcame him.

Carden knows quite a bit about race strategy. He was a standout track athlete at Dallas Roosevelt High School, and he ran for Oklahoma State University for four years in the late 1980s. Naturally, when he fulfilled a childhood dream to become a horse trainer, he decided to teach them a few of

his own tricks.

"I wanted to train them like I was trained," Carden says. "I just transfer it over to the horse."

The daily training sessions with Juan de Lin began to pay off. He placed second in an Aug. 15 race for Arabians at the Gillespie County racetrack, then on Aug. 23, he came from behind to win his first race.

"Oh yeah, it was a beautiful sight," says 11-year-old Bill, one of the handful of ranch residents who was on hand to see the victory. "We were screaming and hollering. I was just screaming so hard because I was so happy."

The gift horse has not only thrilled the boys, but its success has given a financial boost to the Darden Hill Ranch School, a nonprofit facility starting its 20th year. The school is located in the Driftwood community, about 20 miles southwest of Austin.

"We cleared over \$1,000 in two races," says ranch co-founder Charles Campise.

The money was nearly all profit. Carden volunteers his time as a trainer, and the horse has not been charged stall fees by officials at Manor Downs, where it has been training. The horse's jockey, David Shepler, doesn't charge the ranch unless Juan de Lin claims a share of the purse.

"The money the horse wins is money they can use to help the kids," Carden says. "I figure by doing this for these kids I can help one or two of them better their lives. It seems like

this is something special. Maybe we can help these kids."

Campise says he has no doubt that the racehorse's success will have a positive effect on many of the ranch's residents. Horses have long been played an important role in helping troubled teens turn their lives around at the Darden Hill Ranch School.

Boys regularly ride horses that have been donated to the ranch and also are responsible for taking care of them. For some, it is the first responsibility they have been asked to shoulder. All of the boys receive a horsemanship merit badge through the ranch's Scouting program.

"We feel the horses are a primary reason why the children don't run off," Campise says. "These are children who have bombed out of a dozen other places. We're one of the few places in the state that takes the really tough kids."

Campise believes so much in the stabilizing influence of the horses that he took Juan de Lin's winnings and purchased another horse.

"We bought a 10-year-old black horse — a small one," Campise says. "Adults can ride him, and so can 6-year-olds. And we also bought two saddles."

Campise thinks several of his boys will wind up finding work someday in the growing Texas horse-racing industry.

"They're making acquaintances with people who are making a living as jockeys and trainers," he says. "We have

boys for the most part who aren't college material, but we're telling them they can be an assistant veterinarian or a groom. We're telling them they can go to a technical school and get a two-year degree. Some of the racing associations are giving scholarships. The boys are seeing an avenue to an occupation they can do when they grow up."

That's the case with 13-year-old J.D., who has been at the ranch about seven months.

"I want to be a jockey," J.D. says. "I think it would be fun to ride horses for a living."

J.D. is so interested in the profession that he sought out Juan de Lin's jockey and asked him where to begin.

"He said there's a lot of hard work involved," J.D. says. "But when you win, it all pays off. I've learned you've got to work hard before you have fun."

And as for Juan de Lin?

Well, that story is far from finished. He's not going to rest on his laurels.

"Now that we've won a race, we're going to go against some tougher competition," Campise says. "We're waiting for the right race. He'll probably get a month's rest, then will run again."

"We're figuring he can run eight to 10 races a year for several more years, as long as he's healthy. "We're not going into the racehorse business, but this is something nice that people have done for us."