Northwest and Tom – *Making a good match*

By Robert Geller

Washington-based trainer Tom Wenzel does not have your typical horseman profile. If you're looking for cowboy boots you won't find them or the rattle of his saber. This softly spoken, mild-mannered individual has, since the inception of Emerald Downs, been very much the quiet achiever. Never one to overstate his accomplishments, at a youthful 45 years of age, Tom has really come into his own, heading what is arguably the most elite barn on the grounds.

This year his stable numbers, up slightly from the previous, hover in the low 30s, over a third of which are 2-Y-Os and 13 3-year-olds.

"Last year, I had told owners that with so many young horses, it's going to be a little slower. I've always had a tendency with 2-Y-Os to wait with them and with the cheaper stock to move them along at the claim box just from an economic standpoint."

Such patience has continued to pay dividends for his loyal owners, in particular Northwest Farms. The sparkling maiden special weight win by 2-year-old first-time starter, Exclusive Diva, a daughter of Bernadini and the feature race success that same day, July 9, of 3-year-old filly Rossi Reserve, her third win this campaign, helped cement Tom as the Longhorn Barbecue Trainer of the Week award winner. It was an honor that could just as easily been bestowed upon him two weeks prior, given the performances by his Northwest Farms stakes runners, Elusive Noise and Rainier Ice on Emerald Downs' Irish Day, June 26.

In the $50,000 Irish Day Handicap, Elusive Noise showed her metal by wiring other 3-year-old fillies, turning the tables on hot favorite Class Included on their initial stretch-out to the mile. She fended off a double-pronged attack from the top of the lane to prevail by a half length. Class Included nosed out the plucky and promising For You My Heart for second.

Elusive Noise lifted her record to three wins from four lifetime starts. It was Tom's 13th Emerald Downs stakes win and 13th win for the season from 38 starters, his 34.2 win percentage and 68.4 in-the-money percentage, the highest of any trainer. Her stakes victory was especially gratifying given that this season, long-time owner and breeder Jerre Paxton who heads Northwest Farms, has entrusted him with more of his high-priced stock.

"When Bob McMeans was slowing down, I think Jerre was looking for a couple of trainers. He gave Doris (Harwood) some and me some. She had a little more success with them early on than me. Then I got a few, some decent, some second tier and last year a few more. His horses, they all have decent pedigree to them. You can spend a lot of money on a horse and still not get a good runner but it's just a matter of managing those types of horses and getting them in the spots where they can be successful, no matter what their pedigrees are."

Northwest Farms captured the Irish Day Handicap two years ago with Elusive Horizon, trained by Doris Harwood so the win by Elusive Noise drew immediate comparisons since she is by the same stallion, Elusive Quality. Tom knew his filly was bred to go long but her conformation left him thinking there were distance limitations. Elusive Horizon wasn't a great sprinter yet oozed strength and power in routes. Elusive Noise, however, has been quite the fireball in sprints.

"Juan (Gutierrez) set reasonable fractions. She ran pretty darn well. They had their chance to get her down the lane and again late in the lane."

A mere two races later, male counterpart, Rainier Ice appeared to have pulled off a similar feat in the second of the double stakes header, the $50,000 Pepsi-Cola Handicap, overpowering rivals in a blanket finish where less than a length separated the first five horses home.

"I didn't know from the pan shot that we'd come over that much. It seemed that Gallyn (Mitchell) was reaching to hit him right-handed when he ducked into his left lead that stacked them up at the wire. I'm not entirely certain, even though the second horse had momentum that we would not have fought back."

After lengthy deliberation, the stewards ruled the interference by the winner significant not only to the runner-up Zayda but also to others to their inside caught up in the chain reaction, disqualifying Rainier Ice from first and relegating him to fourth behind the favorite Winter Warlock and Auburn Stakes winner, Showme Yourfriends, denying Northwest Farms a prized stakes double.

Just over half-way through the Emerald Downs season, Tom Wenzel has the hottest barn on the grounds.

Tom concedes that his rising star is still shaking off the cobwebs from a late start to his career.

"He was a May colt last year and was a little bit immature. He looks kind of Northern Dancer. He is almost like a spider with legs that travel easily going in any direction."

His raw talent was evidenced in his debut win as a 2year-old last September with a nine length romp in a $20,000 maiden claimer at 6 furlongs and by a sparkling come from behind score almost eight months later in a $25,000 waiver claimer at the same distance.

"To be able to waive the claim and not have to run against the best horses immediately allowed me to take a few shots with him and develop him. I knew he was a very good colt but did not want to be too hard on his shins."

The shin soreness appeared to raise its head again in his most recent stakes bid, the Seattle Slew Handicap (1-1/16miles). Rainier Ice attempted to overcome a wide post by laying a lot closer than normal and taking the lead inside the 3/8 pole but weakened out of the money in the final furlong on a track that had been rain-affected. It was a tough day for the barn as earlier in the card, Elusive Noise also appeared to fall victim to a change of tactics in the

equivalent stakes race for fillies, the Kent Handicap. In her case, it was the reverse scenario whereby the effort to try and rate, found her wanting in the home stretch and out the money.

Not one to panic, Tom applies himself well under adversity. His placid, even-keeled demeanor has proven an asset in an industry that swings from highs to lows in a heartbeat.

"I internalize things pretty quiet. I'm not much of a rah-rah-rah type when I win or down-in-the-dumps when I lose but I probably spend more time than I should trying to fix things or correct something that doesn't go so well."

Tom will now take a wait and see approach to both Elusive Noise and Rainier Ice before deciding on whether they take to the field the weekend of Aug. 13 and 14 for the Emerald Oaks and Derby respectively.

With a string of top-notch owners that include Dave and Jill Heerensperger and track President Ron Crockett, for whom he won the 2007 Longacres Mile with The Great Face, Tom remains selective and precise in everything connected to his operation.

"I'm not a control freak by any means but I want things organized. The chart I make every night is very structured. I know who is icing and what time they are going to gallop in the morning. You get surprises all the time. Things happen to horses, they get banged up so you have to be prepared. The lucky part is most of my guys have been with me a while now and so I don't have to do a lot of baby-sitting. They know what I expect."

An integral part to the Wenzel team is his two exercise riders Juan Madrigal and Jose Silva. They are both helpful to Tom in assessing the ability of his young horses.

"I'm probably a better pedigree person than I am a horse trainer. I'm still learning what works as far as conditioning and what doesn't. Every year, you never stop learning. Clint Roberts told me that. As soon as you think you've got it all figured out, you're going to be scratching your head when one runs poorly. It makes you wonder, what am I missing here?"

Tom combines his academic smarts with years of experience at having handicapped the game. Importantly, he came up through the ranks with old school trainers such as Tom Burlingame and Jerry Bosequette who really understood the value of leg work.

"I've been out on my own since Emerald opened in 1996. I was Tom Burlingame's assistant his last two years in Seattle and he was my mentor as far as showing me the ropes. He slugged it out with the mid and lower claimers. To be real honest, in learning how to train horses, trying to get the cheaper horses to run is way more challenging than getting the good horses to run. The good horses, they will run for most anybody. Trudging through the bottom claimers and learning how to work with those horses, is kind of paying your dues."

"When I was younger, I hung around a couple of trainers in Yakima. I got to know Benny Harris and his family really well. My barn was right next to him in Yakima and I would always be picking his mind. Jerry Bosequette, was another old-timer that befriended me. He was out of Spokane and has since passed away but I spent a lot of time with him at Longacres as well as Yakima. He was around the racetrack before vets were even on the grounds. He was really old school as far as legs and what to do. I was taught stuff that a lot of guys probably don't get to see anymore."

Talking to Tom about his horses, you can see the wheels turning, bringing up the anatomical visual in his mind. He concedes that he was already half-way through his communications degree at the University of Washington before the racing bug had truly caught him.

"Looking at it now, it's much clearer to me. I would have probably gone to Washington State and tried to be a veterinarian. I always liked animals but was just a little bit more into sports than I was into animals at that time. We went racing in high school a few times but I got way more interested in college when I was at UW. I started working the backside my first year out of college."

Like every trainer, Tom has had his share of disappointments. The abrupt end to the promising career of 2010 Top Juvenile Filly, Lady Golightly, came as a shock to us all. No sooner had the brightest star of Matty G added the Diane Kern (6.5f) on WA Cup Day to her Barbara Shinpoch Stakes (1 mile) success, than she was fighting for her life with complications from surgery to clear up a major respiratory infection. Her situation was touch-and-go for a while and Tom personally worked on her every day to nurse her back to health. Though she will never race again, she is stationed on the grounds under his scrutiny with an eye on her future as a broodmare.

Surgery and recovery also formed part of the story of 2007 Longacres Mile winner, The Great Face. High on him as a 3-year-old, Tom was forced to put his expectations on hold the following season as his budding star was sidelined for much of it, first with an entrapped epiglottis and later with a deeply bruised hoof.

"I struggled with him as a 4-year-old - we only started him twice - and so it made him a very fresh horse as a 5-year-old. We were considering the Mile and when we put him in the Mount Rainier, he was able to steal away, able to relax well and keep to his task. A lot of horses have spring-boarded off of that race and done well, especially speed horses into the Mile. It is now history that The Great Face rallied the length of the stretch to prevail by a head in a thriller over the Junior Coffey trained Raise The Bluff, providing owner Ron Crockett with a rare first and second place finish in the calendar's premier race.

The Great Face fit the profile of previous and subsequent Longacres Mile winners.

"You don't usually get a horse like No Giveaway that closes like he did. It tends to be more of a Sabertooth, Edneator, The Great Face, Flamethrowintexan, Noosa Beach - horses that have great tactical speed. They can go to the front if they want to or lay just off and they can move at any time. They are the horses that have tended to do continually well and been successful in the Mile."

A regular at the WTBA sales and at times, Keeneland, Tom writes notes on every horse and takes a leaf out of the book of veteran horseman Bud Klokstad whose 2-year-olds dominated in the early years at Emerald Downs and who trained the mighty Ropersandwranglers.

"Bud never said too much. He never gave out too many secrets at all but he had a sharp eye for a horse. He just continually bought horses that could run and so I would make all my notes at these sales and I'd watch the horses Bud bought. What was it about those types of horses locally here that appealed to him? Eventually I was able figure a few things out. There were a few things in my notes that I would continually write about a horse that kept showing up in pretty fair racehorses."

Tom remains focused on the local scene but is not adverse to a winter stint or pitching a class horse against the big guns. He campaigned successfully in the winter of 2002/03 at Turf Paradise in Phoenix.

"We took down about 15 to 18 horses and ran them in the right spots."

Ironically, his king-pin colt at the time, Slew Of The Night with whom he had hoped to pick off a few stakes wins, was shipped to California in a change of heart by the owner mere days after Tom had already arrived in the Southwest.

"They shipped him to Mike Harrington the next week. No, he did well. He was a good horse but one of those unfortunate things. I just ended up trading dollars and trading out a certain group of horses for here down there. The thing is if I'm going down there, I want to go with at least five to 10 minimum and with one horse that I think can really tear it up and make it worth my while to run two households and travel because it's hard enough to make money as it is in this business and it has to be the right type of horse to be able to do that. Many of my horses run most of the season and then they get a good break."

Winters off are not only kinder on the horses but on relationships too. Tom and his wife Melissa are very happily married. The youngest of five siblings - two older brothers and two sisters – Tom enjoys his Northwest roots. Growing up in Tacoma may well be part of what has made him so humble and down-to-earth.

"I've always operated on the principle that I want the horses to do the talking for me."

With an in-the-money strike rate that towers over his competitors and a win tally into the second half of the meet that exceeds that of his previous season total, who could possibly argue with that?

Robert Geller has been the one and only voice of Emerald Downs since the track's inception in 1996 and has also been track announcer at the highly successful Sunland Park Racetrack & Casino for over a decade. Prior to moving to the US, he served 6-1/2 years as the English commentator for the Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club and learned his craft in his hometown of Melbourne, Australia. His articles have appeared internationally in magazines such as Racetrack and Racing World.

Bill Walmsley named National HBPA's 2011 Industry Service Award winner

Lexington, KY – July 27, 2011 – At its recently concluded convention in Seattle, Wash., the National Horsemen's Benevolent & Protective Association (NHPBA) presented its 2011 Industry Service Award to Arkansas HBPA President and National HBPA Secretary-Treasurer and past president Bill Walmsley to recognize, honor, and express its gratitude to him for his active involvement, outstanding contributions, and wise counsel to the National HBPA over the past two decades. During that time, Walsley has served at different times as NHBPA's President, Vice President for the Southern Region, Secretary-Treasurer, and a Board member. He also has served as the NHBPA's representative on the National Thoroughbred Racing Association (NTRA)'s Board of Directors.

Walmsley is always quick to credit his wife, Janis, for her help and support in his efforts to serve the HBPA and the thousands of horsemen and women it represents over the years.

"Bill's selfless dedication, efforts, and wise counsel to the National HBPA over the last two decades have been instrumental in uniting and strengthening the organization and raising its prominence and level of respect within the industry. It has been an honor and joy to serve alongside him on behalf of the National HBPA," said current National HBPA President and Chairman Joe Santanna.

Born in Bald Knob, Ark., Walmsley attended Arkansas College, where he served as Student Council President and earned a scholarship as part of the basketball team. Walmsley went on to earn his law degree from University of Arkansas.

After practicing law for five years, Walmsley launched a successful campaign for a seat on the Arkansas State Senate. He served as a state senator in Arkansas for 12 years.

In 1993, Walmsley was elected president of the Arkansas HBPA. Two years later, he was also elected president of the National HBPA, a position he held for four years. Walmsley served as Arkansas HBPA President from 1993 through 2003, and he currently holds that office which he was re-elected to in 2009.

According to the formal resolution of the NHBPA Board of Directors presented to Walmsley, "During Bill's tenure as National HBPA president, he was able to unite competing factions within the organization and restore the National HBPA's reputation within the Thoroughbred industry. Bill was an early proponent of the NTRA and due to his exceptional persuasive skills was able to secure a seat on the initial NTRA Board for horsemen."

The resolution went on to say, "The Board finally wishes to recognize that Bill continues to be a voice of reason as a current Board member able to find viable solutions to the most complicated issues and in large part because of his experience and wise counsel, the National HBPA, as an organization, continues to achieve national recognition as a Thoroughbred industry leader."

The National HBPA is the largest horsemen's representative association with over 30,000 affiliated horsemen across North America. Big Dee's Tack & Vet Supplies, Equineline.com, and Horseman Labor Solutions proudly sponsor the National HBPA.