



Jay HOVDEY

## As the winner's circle turns

By JAY HOVDEY

INGLEWOOD, Calif. - That silvery gray smear of bone and muscle hurtling down the Hollywood Park stretch last Saturday to win the \$350,000 Jim Murray Memorial Handicap answers to the name of Runaway Dancer: In a parallel life, however, he serves as the honorable carriage horse to a weighty cargo of personal dramas, all of them worthy of their own Oprah moment.

His jockey, Garrett Gomez, was riding Runaway Dancer for the first time. But then, in his current remission from substance abuse, Gomez feels like he is experiencing a lot of things for the very first time - things like family, friends, health, and the respect of his colleagues. No one is riding better than Gomez right now, and his name at the top of the local standings proves it.

Runaway Dancer's trainer is Dan Hendricks, who used to win races like the Jim Murray all the time, but never from a wheelchair. Hendricks lost the use of his legs on July 7, 2004, making a motocross move he had survived hundreds of times before. Barely a month after the injury, Hendricks was back at the track, determined to make the best of a bad situation.

Then there are the owners, Michael and Katie Kennedy, a brother-sister act that goes by the name of RL Stables. Runaway Dancer is not only their first major stakes winner - he took the 2003 Carleton F. Burke at Santa Anita as well - he also represents the real life legacy of their late stepfather, Robert Lee Dudley.

Dudley, who made his fortune owning television stations, was a lifelong racing fan who waited until his late 70's to establish his own stable in the San Francisco Bay Area. His only prior experience was as a member of a Dogwood Stable syndicate in the East.

Going solo was not a pleasant experience for Dudley and his family, as Katie Kennedy will recall, until racing consultant Gayle Van Leer came into their lives to turn the stable around. With a new set of trainers and a fresh business plan in place, RL Stables began winning races, and Bob Dudley was on top of the world.

On April 12, 2000, Dudley was torn between watching his filly Carson Jen run at Golden Gate Fields or making the flight that kicked off a Mediterranean cruise to Istanbul with his wife. He chose the flight. Carson Jen won without him.

"While he was in Istanbul, he had heart problems," Katie Kennedy recalled. "When we finally got him back home, about a month later, and they were prepared to operate on his heart, it was discovered he had pancreatic cancer. A little over a week later, he died."

That was May 21, 2000. Dudley was 80 years old. In his honor, the family held a memorial at Golden Gate Fields.

"He hated funerals," Kennedy said. "So it was like a big party. We had a race named for him, and we even entered a horse, named Gold Is on Time.

"She won" - by 11 lengths, no less - "and everybody bet. He would have loved it."

As signs go, an 11-length winner is pretty strong stuff. Still, the harsh reality was more complex. By then, Michael and Katie were becoming convinced that horse ownership could work. Their mother and Dudley's two blood daughters, however, viewed the maintenance of a 20-horse stable as risky business, and it was their call. The RL Stable runners were consigned to a Barretts sale for dispersal.

What happened next tends to work only in the most civilized of extended families. Michael and Katie proposed to take possession of the horses for the equivalent cost of the inheritance taxes involved. Patricia Dudley loaned her son and daughter the money to make such a payment. In addition, Patricia Dudley and Bob Dudley's two daughters agreed to pay the penalties for removing their horses from the sale. RL Stables was reborn, under new management.

In early 2003, Van Leer recommended the purchase of a 4-year-old son of Runaway Groom who had been competing with modest success in northern California allowance company. The price was \$50,000.

Transferred to Hendricks, Runaway Dancer won 3 of his first 5 starts for the new team - including the Burke - then went on an eight-month losing streak before Hendricks, now training from his wheelchair, sent him to the farm. He returned in April with a solid effort to Singletary in the one-mile Arcadia, a perfect prep for the Murray.

"I'm a firm believer that horses need rest, that they do get burned out," Kennedy said. "In the time I've spent around the track, I'm constantly amazed how much of a pounding their legs and feet have to take. Giving them a break only makes sense."

Along with her mother, Katie Kennedy was on hand from the Bay Area last Saturday for Runaway Dancer's performance.

"That was the first time I'd seen Dan since his accident," Kennedy said. "It never entered my mind or my brother's to move the horses anyplace else. My only thought was, 'How are we going to get Dan back.' "

For their faith - in each other, in the horse, and in the stable founded by Robert Lee Dudley - the Kennedys and Hendricks were rewarded with the biggest prize of their lives.

"I was walking around in a daze," Kennedy said. "I thought of the Academy Awards, and how people go up and make total fools of themselves. Now I understand."