BERNIE & ERNIE’S
EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

Bernie Schiappa and Ernie Moody enjoy Game On Dude and plenty of fun

BY TRACY GANTZ

Top, Ernie Moody and Bernie Schiappa at Moody Creek; above, Schiappa leads in Game On Dude after one of his many stakes scores
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– ERNIE MOODY

Officially they are Bernard Schiappa and Ernest Moody, two prosperous Las Vegas businessmen and part owners of multiple grade I winner Game On Dude. Put them in a room together, however, and they quickly become Bernie and Ernie, two good friends who enjoy telling racetrack tales.

“Ernie has the most unusually named horses of anybody in the world,” said Schiappa. “He takes so much time with it.”

Moody tried to deny the claim before admitting that he recently tried to name a horse Lennay Kekua after Notre Dame football player Manti Te’o’s imaginary girlfriend.

“I submitted the name, and I got a note back from The Jockey Club saying that they needed written permission from Lennay Kekua to name a horse after her,” said Moody. “Maybe I’ll have Lennay Kekua write a fictional letter giving permission.”

Moody and Schiappa were swapping stories at Moody Creek Farms, a 500-acre facility Moody owns near Bonsall, Calif. Schiappa runs the farm for Moody, and they maintain it as a lay-up and training center for their horses. Currently more than 30 2-year-olds are learning their early lessons from Richard Fuller, who heads up the farm’s training team.

Because several of the youngsters don’t yet have names, Moody, with the help of his longtime partner, Mercedes Vila, still has several more to get approved by the breed’s registry. Moody named his Mercedes Stable after Vila, who enjoys the racing, though she focuses more on breeding Chinese crested dogs.

As Moody and Schiappa sat in the farm’s meeting room and Moody explained his naming procedures, Vila walked in amid several small, friendly dogs, each eager to sit in laps and receive attention. While acting like any family pets, they are also show dogs. One of them, Butters, had just taken Best of Breed at the Westminster Kennel Club All-Breed Dog Show in New York City under his official name of GCH Crestline Butters Scotch.

While the horses may not receive monikers on quite that grand a scale, Moody and Vila look for appropriate names. For example, a 2011 colt by Sky Mesa—Mettle, by Silver Deputy, has been named Unobtainium.

“You have to be careful because sometimes the horse responds to his name,” said Moody. “We had named a horse Photo for Show, and she always seemed to be in a photo for show.”

Neither Moody nor Schiappa can take credit for Game On Dude’s name because they bought him after he broke his maiden in his second start at Gulfstream Park in 2010. Schiappa has a knack for finding horses early in their career, ably aided by Hall of Famer Bob Baffert, who trains Game On Dude and many other Schiappa and Moody runners.

“I watch all the races on TV, and this one impressed me,” said Schiappa.

Baffert was in Florida and was able to inspect Game On Dude in person. He approved the purchase of the gelded son of Awesome Again—Worldly Pleasure, by Devil His Due. Schiappa brought in Moody and another good friend, Terrence Lanni. Game On Dude’s first grade I victory for the partners was the 2011 Santa Anita Handicap, a race that will always be special to Schiappa because Lanni, who died of cancer four months later, was able to witness it.

“Being a Southern Californian, I think winning the Santa Anita Handicap is the most important race you can win,” Lanni said at the time.

Schiappa carried a picture of Lanni with him March 2 when he watched Game On Dude score his second Big Cap victory.

Schiappa and Moody grew up in New Jersey not far from each other, though they didn’t meet until years later in California. Schiappa’s first interest in horse racing came via Standardbreds, and he...
owned harness horses in the East beginning in the mid-1970s.

“I loved the harness horses,” said Schiappa. “I got a qualifying license and drove in some qualifying races.”

Schiappa, Lanni, and Moody all ended up in Las Vegas, Lanni as a major casino executive, Moody as an entrepreneur in the video poker business, and Schiappa as an executive with Fletcher Jones Imports, a national Mercedes-Benz sales company.

Schiappa met Lanni by selling him a car in the late 1980s. The two became good friends, especially after they partnered on Ladies Din with Mike Sloan. Schiappa picked out the gelded son of Din’s Dancer—Ladies Double, by Kris S., from a maiden race at Del Mar in 1997, claiming him for $32,000. Ladies Din won the race at more than 15-1, and Schiappa bet enough on him in various combinations to pay for the claim.

Ladies Din went on to earn nearly $2 million. Trained by Julio Canani through most of his career, he won such stakes as the 2002 Shoemaker Breeders’ Cup Mile (gr. IT) and 2000 Eddie Read Handicap (gr. IT).

Schiappa and Lanni also owned 1999 Breeders’ Cup Mile (gr. IT) winner Silic with Ken Poslosky, Claudine Williams, and Avis Jansen. They bought him privately in France and began running him in Southern California in late 1998. In addition to the Breeders’ Cup, Silic twice captured the Shoemaker and also won the 1999 Oak Tree Breeders’ Cup Mile Stakes (gr. IIIT) under Canani’s tutelage.

“Terry was by far the most honest, loyal, and fair person that anyone could be,” said Schiappa. “He made me a much better person. He was a very generous person. He did a lot for many charities, really quietly.”

Other horses Schiappa and Lanni owned together included Shining Energy. Bred in Kentucky, Shining Energy first ran in France. In Southern California with Canani training, she won the 2006 Gamely Breeders’ Cup Stakes (gr. IT), 2005 San Clemente Handicap (gr. IIIT), and two other stakes.

The Game On Dude partnership eventually expanded to include baseball’s Joe Torre, who races horses in the name of Diamond Pride.

“I met Joe Torre at a Mercedes-Benz golf championship in Hawaii,” said Schiappa. “I got teamed up with him. I had some horses running that day. As soon as I told him about the horses, he wanted to bet them.”

The horses won, and Schiappa eventually brought Torre in as an owner, first with a European import named Cellamare. Owned by Schiappa, Lanni, and Torre, the filly won the 2003 Carmel Handicap at Bay Meadows.

Schiappa met Moody at a birthday party that Madeleine Paulson held for Moody in Southern California. Madeleine Paulson (now Madeleine Pickens) was the widow of major Thoroughbred owner Allen Paulson, who died in 2000. Moody bought some of the Paulson horses and campaigned 2005 Santa Anita Handicap winner Rock Hard Ten with Madeleine.

The Paulsons owned much of what is now Moody Creek, calling it Brookside West. Moody bought it and has added a parcel of land across the street to bring it to its current 500 acres. In tribute to the Paulsons, he has left in place a small stained-glass window in the main barn/office building of their red, white, and blue silks, the same colors that adorned two-time Horse of the Year Cigar.

One of the first Schiappa and Lanni horses that also included Moody was Sinister Minister, winner of the 2006 Toyota Blue Grass Stakes (gr. I). They bought the son of Old Trieste—Sweet Minister, by The Prime Minister, privately after he broke his maiden at Santa Anita. It was the first horse Baffert trained for Schiappa.

“My hat’s always been Bob down at Del Mar,” said Schiappa. “He beat Ladies Din right at the wire with Joe Who in the (1999) Eddie Read. He was always kibitzing.”

Sinister Minister not only gave the group a grade I victory but sparked one of Schiappa’s favorite stories. As Bernie tells it, the trek to Kentucky for the Blue Grass included Bernie and his wife, Sonja; Ernie and Mercedes; Ernie’s son, Austin; and one of Mercedes’ dogs. Schiappa recalls that their group watched the early races on the card from the stately Lafayette Room at Keeneland. Keeneland had a no-dog rule. Vila snuck the dog into the Moody Creek also has a panel walker that is useful for lay-ups.
racetrack in a fashionable bag, which she discreetly kept under a table. She might have gotten away with it except that Baffert walked up to the group during the day and loudly asked, “Where’s the dog?”

Even then the jig wasn’t completely up. They managed to keep the dog in the bag through the trip to their box to watch the Blue Grass, down to the winner’s circle, into the media interview room, and up to the director’s room.

“We were going to have one drink and leave in 10 minutes,” said Schiappa. “But a lady comes over to Mercedes, and she says, ‘That’s a nice bag—what do you have in it?’ Mercedes said, ‘My dog.’ The lady says to let the dog out. So now the dog is running all around the director’s room, and we’re there for two and a half hours drinking.”

Word of the incident reached Churchill Downs, another track with a no-dog rule. Here, Moody took up the story.

“Churchill Downs called Baffert the next day and said, ‘That dog better not be coming to Churchill Downs.’”

As Bernie and Ernie encountered more excellent adventures owning horses together, they developed not only a friendship, but also a good working relationship. Eventually, Moody asked Schiappa to help him run Moody Creek, as well as his breeding operation, which was threatening to overflow with too many horses.

Schiappa has overseen the renovation of the six-furlong training track at Moody Creek, bringing in veteran race-track superintendent Dennis Moore. Schiappa has also put together a solid training program under Fuller.

Moody keeps most of his breeding stock in Kentucky and was shipping the youngsters out in the fall of their yearling year. Schiappa began bringing them out in the summer to allow Fuller’s team to start working with the horses earlier and to save boarding costs in Kentucky.

Before they break the yearlings in round pens and move them into the training barn, the babies spend time at a secondary barn that has several outdoor pens nearby.

“We take the horses out to the pens and then bring them back in every day,” said Schiappa. “The horses are handled three or four times a day.”

The farm has a panel walker to help leg up the horses that is also useful for lay-ups. Moody and Schiappa send any of their racehorses needing a break to Moody Creek, and Baffert occasionally sends some of his other clients’ horses there as well. The number of horses on the farm varies throughout the year, but as the 2-year-olds were being prepared in February, Schiappa and Moody had just over 50 horses on the property, including older lay-ups.

By the fall, when breaking begins, the yearlings are so immersed in the program that learning to wear saddle and bridle is a natural next step. They can receive a good foundation on the training track and even school in the four-stall starting gate. If Schiappa and Moody want, they can get recorded works on the horses at nearby San Luis Rey Downs.

Most of the young horses will eventually go to Baffert or trainer Tim Yakteen, a former assistant to both Baffert and Charlie Whittingham.

“It’s fun to watch the horses grow up at the farm,” said Schiappa. “You see them in stages. It’s like watching a baby. Before you know it, they’re teenagers.”

Many of the 2-year-olds currently at Moody Creek came from yearling sales. Unobtainium, for example, was purchased for $350,000 at the 2012 Keeneland September sale. Moody also has several homebreds by Rock Hard Ten and other stallions in whom he has shares or seasons.

“We’re working to get the broodmare band down to a quality bunch,” said Schiappa. “My goal is about 16 mares.”

Moody breeds primarily in Kentucky, but he has a couple of mares at Running Luck Ranch near Fresno. One of those, the French Deputy mare Truly Blessed, has produced graded stakes winner Notional and 3-year-old Tiz the Truth, a youngster Moody and Schiappa think will develop into a stakes-caliber horse. They also have a 2-year-old colt out of the mare by Rock Hard Ten at Moody Creek named True Ten.

Comebacking Hall of Fame jockey Gary Stevens rode Tiz the Truth to a 7 3/4-length maiden victory at Santa Anita Feb. 2. Schiappa thought so highly of Tiz the Truth that as soon as Truly Blessed produced a colt by Unusual Heat early this year in California, he was making arrangements to ship her and the foal to Kentucky to breed her back to Tiznow, the sire of Tiz the Truth.

Schiappa has been overseeing Moody’s operation for a couple of years, the two of them building an arsenal of well-bred horses that can take over after Game On Dude retires, hopefully years from now.

“We’re trying to make it a first-class racing stable by sizing down and getting quality instead of quantity,” Schiappa said. 