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Premier Thoroughbreds: The New Kids On The Block



by RUDI GROOTHEDDE
Photos by RON MESAROS

Phil Lebherz's Premier Thoroughbreds represents a new force in the local Thoroughbred industry, offering both a breeding and boarding facility under its own name, as well as a state-of-the-art horse rehabilitation operation under the Premier Equine Center banner of Pat Grohl and Amie Allen. Previously the Valley Oak Ranch for Quarter Horses built by the renowned veterinarian Dr. Jerry Black about 15 years ago, the now 70-acre location in Oakdale is already home to four promising young stallions even though Lebherz only purchased it about six months ago.

"We only bought this farm in August, and look how it is now," said Phil, a native of San Diego who lives a little over 100 miles west of the farm in Portola Valley. "Pat and Amie have done a great job. It was a lot for them to move everything. They had to come out of their old place and then they have done so much to make it even better. We're all real happy to be in Oakdale."

Phil's background in Thoroughbreds goes back to his purchase of a share in Just Plain Fancy who placed in two stakes races for him as a two-year-old of 1994, but he was involved with horses prior to that. "I lived on a horse ranch in the Bay Area for many years," he said, "but my wife Sharon is really the horse expert; I'm just the finance guy." The 60-year-old owner of successful health insurance companies for some three decades explained further, "I used to go with my brother Rick to Bay Meadows (Racecourse)

every Wednesday, so one day I asked someone how all of it worked and the next thing I knew, I had purchased a twenty-five percent share in a filly for \$2,000.

"If it's not fun, I don't want to do it. This work is fun for me, trying to solve problems and get the process down, as well as having a really good time. The challenge for me, more than the actual racing, is to educate on the processes, management and finances, to get everything to make sense and work. Then out comes the product. If we get a product that wins, everyone is going to say that Lebherz is the luckiest guy who ever lived. They always say that, and my answer is that I have always been lucky. The harder I work, the luckier I get. I stick with things."

Phil then explained the history of his relationships with trainer Jeff Bonde and bloodstock agent Mersad Metanovic, who is now also handling all the bookings for the stallions at Premier Thoroughbreds, as well as Pat and Amie. "When Jeff and I went to the yearling sale in Washington where we ended up buying Smiling Tiger, we met Mersad because he had also been sent over to inspect the horse. He saw how we operated and so he hung around and the next thing you know, he's on our team. Mersad's been terrific, as he goes to the sales and sits through the whole thing, waiting until that one horse comes up. He's also been great for Jeff, bring-

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ing in a lot of new owners. Mersad's just a great public relations guy. I met Pat and Amie because Jeff had them taking care of my horses. They were doing great work. I mean world class." Amie said, "We had been loyal to him for a very long time. Before he even knew us, we were taking care of him."

Young Guns

Just like the farm, the four-strong stallion roster at Premier Thoroughbreds is brand new. Smiling Tiger is standing his first season at stud this year, Sway Away and Twice the Appeal covered their first mares in Oakdale in 2013, and Sierra Sunset has relocated there after standing his first two years at Rancho San Miguel.

Smiling Tiger

As a three-time grade I winner, including two of those victories as a three-year-old when he was a finalist for the Eclipse Champion Male Sprinter award, Smiling Tiger offers local breeders an exceptional opportunity to breed to a runner of the highest order. Furthermore, the \$1,480,704-earner is a three-quarter-brother to the 2013 Eclipse Champion Two-Year-Old Filly, She's a Tiger, the winner of the Del Mar Debutante Stakes (grade I) who was disqualified from first to second in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies (grade I).



Smiling Tiger

Seven of Smiling Tiger's eight black-type wins came in graded stakes company, led by the 2010 editions of the Del Mar Thoroughbred Club's grade I, \$250,000 Bing Crosby Stakes and Santa Anita Park's grade I, \$245,000 Ancient Title Stakes and the grade I, \$250,000 Triple Bend Handicap at Betfair Hollywood Park in 2011. Also third in the Breeders' Cup Sprint (grade I) in both 2010 and 2012, he closed out a 23-9-2-8 lifetime record, that included a grade I-placed stakes-winning juvenile campaign and 18 black-type wins or placings overall, with a victory in Hollywood Park's grade III, \$100,000 Vernon O. Underwood Stakes during December of 2012.

Retired completely sound, Smiling Tiger won from four to seven furlongs on dirt and all-weather and recorded nine 100-plus Beyer Speed Figure efforts, including a 112 rating for his Triple Bend win over Eclipse champion Amazombie.

The seven-year-old son of European champion two-year-old Hold That Tiger and the stakes-winning Cahill Road mare Shandra Smiles traces back to the like of the sire Love That Mac, a grade II winner who also placed second in the Metropolitan Handicap and Vosburgh Stakes, both grade I events.

The 16.1-hand chestnut, originally purchased for \$40,000 during September of 2008, is owned by Lebherz in partnership with Alan Klein and will stand for \$5,000 Live Foal in 2014. "We are getting phone calls like crazy," said Phil, while Pat added, "What has amazed me are the people who usually don't breed mares who want to breed mares to him."

Among the approximately 30 mares whom Phil owns either by himself or with partners are a couple of standouts who are going to be mated this year to Smiling Tiger, namely Proposed, both a graded stakes winner and producer, and the grade I-placed stakes winner Erica's Smile.

Phil said, "Smiling Tiger is put together right and was able to run 23 races at the highest level without having any orthopedic problems; that's something I want to breed into. The fact that he did all of that without getting hurt; that's huge." Amie added, "He's got some good bone on him" and Graham Bell, the farm's Breeding Manager, said, "He's going to peak at the right time. He's one tough guy." Phil concluded, "We're hoping to breed 75 mares to Smiling Tiger this year, and if there is a surge at the end, then maybe 100. That's a lot for California. We'll see."

Sierra Sunset

Using his tactical speed, Sierra Sunset won five races during three seasons of racing, including the grade II, \$300,000 Rebel Stakes on Oaklawn Park's main dirt track while on the 2008 Triple Crown Trail. The 2005 son of Eclipse champion Bertrando, California's leading sire and leading sire of two-year-olds on a total of four occasions, earned \$459,696 while posting victories at distances ranging from 4 1/2 furlongs to 1 1/16 miles.



Sierra Sunset

In eight races at two, the 16-hand bay's three wins included an eight-length triumph in the \$72,310 Bay Meadows Juvenile Stakes at six furlongs and a victory against a dozen opponents in the \$125,000 California Cup Juvenile Stakes, the latter of which was contested at 1 1/16 miles on the all-weather at Santa Anita. As a sophomore, Sierra Sunset prepped for the Rebel Stakes with a runner-

up finish to Denis of Cork in the grade III, \$250,000 Southwest Stakes at Oaklawn in Arkansas.

At four, he defeated grade II winner Bold Chieftain by five lengths in the \$57,000 Alamedan Handicap and retired one start later with a record of 14-5-3-1 before covering 42 mares in 2012 and 35 mares in 2013. Sierra Sunset is out of the dual stakes-placed, two-time winner Toot Sweet, a Pirate's Bounty full sister to not only grade I winner Private Persuasion but both the dam of 2008 Belmont Stakes (grade I) victor Da' Tara and the granddam of aforementioned Denis of Cork.

The 2014 stud fee for this 16-hand bay is \$2,500 Live Foal. A \$40,000 purchase at the CTBA Sales' Northern California Yearling Sale in Pleasanton during September of 2006, he is owned by Lebherz in partnership with George Schmitt. Sierra Sunset's first foals are yearlings of this year. "Bonde thinks his foals are beautiful," said Phil. Pat added, "Bonde is a conformation man and he is really high on Sierra Sunset's babies. We're hoping for 35 mares this year." Phil continued, "This guy was ranked fifth for the Kentucky Derby when he got hurt after winning the Rebel." Graham concluded, "He's a nice looking horse and he's a character. He had a great race record and he is a very fertile."

Sway Away

The first foals by Sway Away are being anxiously awaited by Lebherz who last year bred 15 of his own mares to this six-year-old son of Afleet Alex, the 2005 Belmont Stakes (grade I) winner and Eclipse Champion Three-Year-Old Male. Sway Away's 10-start race record included grade II placings at two, three and four, as well as a debut maiden special weight win at Pleasanton in 2010 and an allowance victory at Hollywood Park in 2011.



Sway Away

He defeated the like of grade I winners Amazombie, Comma to the Top, Sahara Sky and The Factor while earning \$206,800 during his three seasons of racing. Out of Seattle Shimmer, an unraced daughter of 1977 Triple Crown winner Seattle Slew, Sway Away boasts a pedigree that includes the graded stakes victor Irish Joy and the grade I-placed stakes winner Fleet Valid.

A 15.3-hand bay, he is owned by Phil and is standing for

\$2,500 Live Foal in 2014. "He's got that big, long reach," said Phil, "and I hope his babies come out beautiful." Amie replied, "They will; I have absolutely no doubt. He was impressive last year because he had really just come off the track. We got some later mares but considering what we got done with him, just coming off the track two months prior, was very good." Graham added, "He has a great walk. He's also got plenty of bone and he's pretty correct, so I think he'll throw good looking babies."

Twice the Appeal

Also expecting his first foals in 2014 is Twice the Appeal, a 2008 son of Successful Appeal who defeated subsequent Belmont Stakes (grade I) winner Ruler On Ice to win the 2011 running of the grade III, \$800,000 Sunland Park Derby in New Mexico just two starts after winning consecutive races at Santa Anita. From a 16-3-3-2 record overall, including a start in the Kentucky Derby (grade I), he earned \$476,060 while also placing in both the \$75,000 Fifth Season Stakes and \$100,000 Essex Handicap at Oaklawn Park in Arkansas as a four-year-old.



Twice The Appeal

Out of the Cormorant mare Double Boarded, Twice the Appeal is a half-brother to the grade III-placed dual stakes winner Board Eligible, while his pedigree page also includes the graded stakes performers Cologny and Selective. The 2014 stud fee for this dark bay, who stands 15.2 hands, is \$1,500 Live Foal. He is owned by Rusty Brown and Victor Flores, while Graham commented, "He's kind and has a great demeanor."

Premier Equine Center

"We started this when I was 25 and Amie was 21," said Pat of the couple's Premier Equine Center that had previously been based at another location in his hometown of Oakdale since May of 2008. At their new facility, Pat and Arcadia native Amie have built a compact operation that features a new swimming pool, an Aquatred underwater treadmill, a vibration plate stall, a cold salt water spa, one six-horse and two four-horse covered Eurocisers, a turnout and 60 stalls, eight of them located in the farm's stallion barn.

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Thoroughbred Farms In California Cont'd.

"All the stalls have fans and misters as it does get warm up here," said Pat. "We also have the place set up to build 20 more stalls for the summertime when it gets busier with two-year-olds then in training. We don't just pull from the Thoroughbreds, we also have six vet clinics that refer their clients to us; cutters, reiners, rodeo horses, dressage, English, the whole deal."

The swimming pool is 40 foot in diameter and 15 feet deep. Pat said, "It's worked out great for us. A lot of trainers now just want to give horses breaks of three to four weeks. The time in the pool all depends on the horse, how they swim and what kind of fitness level they're at. The Thoroughbreds can do up to fifteen laps. If they swim fast, we take them out to give them breaks. Jose (Robledo) ran the swimming pool at Kenny Arnold's farm, so everybody at the racetrack knows him because it was *the* farm for a long time for this type of stuff." Amie added, "We use it a lot more for conditioning and the Aquatred is used more or less for rehab, but we do combine the two a lot."

Pat then explained the importance of the vibration plate. "This science was invented by NASA for use on their astronauts when they returned from space, to build bone mass and density. For the horses, it also does a good job of getting circulation down to their feet. We use it a lot with

the horses on stall rest who can't really do a lot. It at least gets them out of their stalls a couple of times a day."

Of the 35-degree temperature level in the salt water spa, Pat said, "It's a deep, deep icing. It can be used on anything you want to remove inflammation from, such as post-surgical stuff and hot knees, ankles and feet. A daily session for three weeks will remove any kind of inflammation."

"With the five acres that we lease here, we've been able to expand," said Pat. "We are more of a post-surgical and conditioning facility, controlled rehab, as compared to a lay-up farm. What kind of makes Amie and I different as far as the rehab goes, is that we are the ones doing the work day in and day out. We might not swim all the horses every day, personally, but when those horses start in the pool or start in the Aquatred, we're there. We do a lot of our own hauling for our clients and for our vet clinics, including two in Nevada, so when the horses go to be rechecked, we're there. We can tell them what's going on, it's us they're talking to. For the Thoroughbreds, we talk a lot with the trainers' vets and ship radiographs back and forth." The couple, who met about 10 years ago while competing at a rodeo as students of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo when he was a team roper and she was a barrel racer, also have six employees to help them with the horses, which number about 50 right now.

Pat then explained how he and Amie have got where they are today. "Jack Owens set us up with the veterinarian



Kim Kuhlmann and then Terry Knight started sending some horses over. I had a mutual friend with Jeff Bonde who told me to go and talk to him. I was driving to the racetracks once a week. I just kept showing my face. After I met Jeff, I kept after him. Eventually, he sent us Twice the Appeal after the Kentucky Derby. That went well, so he sent us others. We can now have fifteen to twenty horses of his here at a time. A few years ago, Amie and I were struggling to make a living but now we are trying to keep up with the business in the summertime. We've come a long ways in a short time." Amie added, "We've been very lucky by having a lot of high-caliber horses around here, but our success is really due to us customizing every horse's program."

Successful graduates of Premier Equine Center also include Smiling Tiger, Sway Away, the 2009, 2010 and 2011 stakes winner Excessive Passion, the 2013 graded stakes winner Majestic Stride, the \$665,960-earner Unusual Way and Weewinnin, winner of the \$251,500 California Cup Turf Classic Stakes on Jan. 25.

"If Premier Equine Center keeps growing, especially with some of the tracks and farms closing down south, we'll just grow right with it," concluded Pat. "Even though we wouldn't like to have more than 80 stalls, you don't turn down business in this industry; you figure out how to accommodate the extras. What really helps us too is that we have those other non-Thoroughbred outlet. When we got the Thoroughbreds, though, we started making a living. They made all the difference. I have been at all the Thoroughbred sales the last two years. We're really trying to

expand our clientele down south as we are so much more affordable up here to keep horses and the shipping up here is not a big deal. That's one thing that is pretty unique about Amie and I, not that we're that young anymore, but there is not a lot of young blood like us in the industry."

Phil concluded, "I love the rehab center facility. Pat and Amie were running out of room and also saying they could do way better if they had a swimming pool so this place was for sale and I knew I wanted to do some breeding. Pat built this place. He has done a beautiful job. So we bought this and put in a pool to help attract more clients and to help us with our own horses. They are great people who do a really wonderful job with our horses."

A Premier Place

Besides its 12-stall stallion barn, Premier Thoroughbreds' breeding center features a new breeding shed with padded walls, ground up rubber floor and teasing chute, three sets of mare palpation chutes with foal catches, a full reproduction laboratory, stalls for mares under lights and a foaling barn with a dozen units. Six to seven employees work on this side of the farm, but that number should swell this breeding season.

"They have done a lot since I got here," said Graham, who only started working for Premier Thoroughbreds in November. A native of Liverpool, his career in England, Germany, France and the United States as a jockey, trainer and farm manager, most recently at Adena Springs in Florida, stands him in good stead. "We were just really lucky to be

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Thoroughbred Farms In California Cont'd.

able to get Graham," said Phil. "He's a terrific guy. Very experienced, knows what he is doing." Also well respected, especially for his previous work at Applebite Farms, is the farm's Stallion Manager Oscar Munguia who, along with Pat, Amie and Jose, lives on the property.

Located about an hour from Pleasanton and less than two hours from Golden Gate Fields, Premier Thoroughbreds also has six pastures ranging in size from four to eight acres and a huge round pen that was originally used for reining horses. Amie said, "With the alleyways, the pastures are set up really well for everything to run smoothly."

A single well on the farm provides sufficient flood irrigation all off just one pump and Pioneer Equine Hospital is just two miles down the road, while A.J. Pantoja is the farrier for the Thoroughbreds.

Pat concluded, "Phil is looking at purchasing another 40 acres down the road which has some pastures to move some horses to. We don't have a lot of turnouts here, and the ones we have are full of broodmares. He would also like to build a spot there to move the stallions in the summertime." Phil explained, "When they are done with the breeding season, they'll have a nice place to get away from it all, where they can just relax and graze."

Phil's Philosophy

To conclude, Phil talked about his approach to the Thoroughbred business that has included him being the co-owner of 1999 graded stakes winner Epic Honor and co-breeder of 2003 graded stakes winner Standard Setter.

"You learn a lot in this business. One of the things I have done is stick with Jeff Bonde. He's been my trainer the whole time. We've had a lot of fun, and success, together. With Epic Honor's career, I got my baptism; when things can go wrong." On the racetrack, the Bonde trainee went from finishing fourth to the Kentucky Derby winner Charismatic down to the claiming ranks while his stud career proved moderate despite siring the multiple stakes winner Epic Power. "I think people either quit right there or

it makes them try harder," Phil continued. "For me, trying harder is not throwing money at it but understanding it better. So I started to study it more and talk to Jeff a lot and put together a philosophy.

"The philosophy is a lot like the movie 'Moneyball.' We look for athletes as we don't have the capital or don't want to pay big money for horses who have already run good races. To me, the joy comes from the challenge of discovering raw talent and then developing it all the way through. It's almost like raising your children. But not everyone's like that. Others just want to win right away. Don't get me wrong, it's not easy but it's *easier* if you're buying horses who have already shown talent, even though they still have the same chances as any other horse of getting hurt.

"For me, it's about finding the diamond in the rough. It's going through the whole process; going to the sales, doing what we call our 'underwriting.' We have a method of deciding whether or not we are going to buy a horse. You have to be very disciplined on the money side or you can get crushed, and I've been crushed. However, things turn around quickly in this game as your best horse is always the one who hasn't run yet. But it remains a tough business. You've got to have to want to do it. You can't just have great expectations, you've got to follow up the process. You've got to do the best you can and then you've got to hope for the best. You've got to have racing luck, you've got to have breeding luck, you've got to have all kinds of luck. Part of it is attrition. It all boils down to one horse or two.

"We're now ready to succeed," concluded Phil. "Pat and Amie have done a terrific job helping us get established. We work as a team, but we're also independent. The business they're in is way different to the business I'm in. It's our first year, so we're starting kind of late. We expect to not be perfect but we are not going to be not perfect because we chintzed on anything important. We're going to learn as we go, but with Pat, Amie and Graham's experience, I am relying on them. With Jeff and Mersad, we have the full system. We'll breed them, take care of them and break them, train them and run them. We have the whole package. Before we had just one piece, but now we are going to give this our best shot here." ■

PREMIER THOROUGHBREDS FACT-FILE

Owner: Phil Lebherz

Breeding Manager: Graham Bell

Stallion Manager: Oscar Munguia

Address: 1600 West Hillsdale Blvd., San Mateo, California 94402

Telephone: (650) 653-1259

Fax: (650) 348-1474

Web Site: www.SmilingTigerStallion.com

E-Mail: smiling.tiger.stallion@gmail.com

Services: Breeding & Boarding

Stallions:

Sierra Sunset (<i>Bertrando</i>).....	\$2,500 – Live Foal
Smiling Tiger (<i>Hold That Tiger</i>)	\$5,000 – Live Foal
Sway Away (<i>Afleet Alex</i>)	\$2,500 – Live Foal
Twice the Appeal (<i>Successful Appeal</i>).....	\$1,500 – Live Foal

PREMIER EQUINE CENTER FACT-FILE

Owners: Pat Grohl & Amie Allen

Address: 10940 26 Mile Road,
Oakdale, California 95361

Telephone: (209) 602-8702 or
(916) 616-1897

Web Site: www.PremierEquineRehab.com

E-Mail: Leteroll@wildblue.net

Services: Rehabilitation & Lay-Ups

