

Euro-Breds Reign Over SoCal Turf

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BELVOIR BAY captures the Monrovia to account for Team Valor's 300th Stakes Victory

Benoit photo

By Ben Massam

Just as the popularity of turf racing in America has increased markedly in the past two decades, so has the arrival of imported runners from overseas who often possess a class edge and a unique training foundation. In recent years, Southern California has particularly become a hotbed for European-bred imports achieving graded stakes success on the lawn.

Various ownership groups and syndicates have become increasingly attuned to identifying horses who can move forward over the firm local turf and reach the highest level—a trend that was on full display over Memorial Day weekend, where all four graded stakes races contested over the Santa Anita turf were captured by horses who began their careers competing in Europe.

Saturday's GI Gamely S. served as a case in point, as six of the eight original entrants were European-breds. When all was said and done, D P Racing's **Sophie P (GB)** (Bushranger {Ire}) notched a nose victory over Slam Dunk Racing's Madam Dancealot (Ire) (Sir Prancealot {Ire}).

In the aftermath of Sophie P's breakthrough score, trainer Jim Cassidy—who has conditioned numerous other European-bred graded stakes performers—reflected on the process of adapting a horse to American training and racing.

"There are a lot of adjustments you have to make, and I've been fortunate enough to get along with most of them," Cassidy said. "One thing I've seen with Europeans that I haven't seen with American horses is that they don't work much, or on the slow side. You kind of question yourself, 'Did I buy one that just can't run?' But then you go over there and put the tack on them in the afternoon and the ears come up and the eyes brighten up. They know what it's all about."

The entirety of the three-day weekend seemed to confirm the exceptional turf ability of European-breds, with **Itsinthepost (Fr)**(American Post {GB})'s Saturday win in the GII Charlie Whittingham S. and **Hunt (Ire)**'s hard-fought GI Shoemaker Mile S. victory added to the list Monday.

The final graded stake of the weekend, the GII Monrovia S. at 6 1/2 furlongs over Santa Anita's hillside turf course, was captured by Team Valor International and Gary Barber's English import **Belvoir Bay (GB)** (Equiano {Fr}). Team Valor founder and CEO Barry Irwin, who has enjoyed Grade I success in

America with imported European turfers such as Euro Charline (GB) (Myboycharlie {Ire}) and Becrux (Ity) (Glen Jordan {GB}), said he believes that European horses have a superior foundation that allows them to excel upon their arrival on American shores.

“Those guys just know how to train better than us,” Irwin said bluntly, adding that he firmly believes that English racing has the best overall form in the world. “They know how to develop horses from a young age. I would rather have any grass horse I can buy in Europe as opposed to buying a domestic one. We don’t have the facilities or the horsemanship they have over there—that’s their game and their specialty. I’ve always thought the best way to win over here with a grass horse is to tap into the source.”

Belvoir Bay made five starts in England as a 2-year-old in 2015, with Team Valor acquiring the filly after her fourth appearance. She was subsequently shipped across the Atlantic and ran away with Santa Anita’s one-mile Blue Norther S. in her second stateside race in December 2015. Over the past 2 1/2 years, the four-time graded stakes winner has found her niche in turf sprints, most recently reeling off a pair of wins in the Apr. 29 GIII San Simeon S. and Monday’s Monrovia.

“It’s hard to find a horse that’s under the radar—the trick is to find one that’s not exposed yet,” Irwin continued. “To buy a proven horse over there, it’s very expensive. The other huge edge that’s been proven over the years—by people like Whittingham and [Bobby] Frankel—is that the horses that come from over there are much fitter than our horses. They have better facilities to train them on and they can let them down in training. It’s very difficult for an American trainer to let a horse down on the grass, fully. We’re always training around soundness. In Europe, they have soundness issues, but it’s not a daily thing they worry about.”

To that point, Irwin suggested that the greatest challenge in managing an imported European turf horse is to find a way to maintain their initial fitness edge. A dearth of turf courses dedicated specifically to training in America stands in sharp contrast to European facilities in Chantilly, Newmarket and Ballydoyle, where horses can work out over fresh, perfectly maintained gallops.

In Southern California, according to Irwin, the situation becomes even trickier because turf workouts are not permitted at Santa Anita. Belvoir Bay, nevertheless, has been able to maintain her form over a longer period of time competing primarily in sprints for trainer Peter Miller.

“I’ve seen horses come here from over there and win first time out like a freak. And the second time, they do it again, but not as impressively,” Irwin added. “Those guys deserve a lot of credit in Southern California for being able to train grass horses out there—they’re behind the eight ball. We don’t have the luxury of having any extra grass anywhere [to exclusively train on].”

While acknowledging that each European import requires a different approach depending on their temperament and willingness, Cassidy explained that his training often allows horses to produce a top effort in their second or third start in the States.

“Personally, I take it quiet with them and give them plenty of time to acclimate when they get here,” Cassidy said. “I probably walk them two or three weeks before I even take them to the track. I start from the bottom, much like I would with a horse who just got into training. I usually give them a race, and then second or third time out, they usually show you what they’re about.”

Cassidy reeled off a lengthy list of American training components that European horses must learn to incorporate—anything from walking with a chain over their nose to adjusting the sights and sounds of the Santa Anita backstretch. Half the battle, according to the veteran trainer, is keeping them healthy and on a gradually adjusted feed program. In any case, Cassidy agreed that older horses naturally have a ready-made fitness edge.

“With horses that have run before, it’s easier to get them fit again, rather than a horse who’s never had any training,” Cassidy said. “What I’ve noticed in the past is that some people go to Europe, buy horses and go right to training them—just like they would with an American horse. That usually doesn’t work out. It blows their mind.”