

South African Import Bless My Stars ‘On The Muscle’ For Pegasus Filly & Mare Turf

The 6-year-old mare owned by Team Valor was on the first plane of exports from South Africa when the ban was lifted

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It's been 38 years since Barry Irwin struck gold with the very first horse he syndicated when Political Ambition captured the Hollywood Derby (G1).

Still going strong at age 81, the pioneering leader of Team Valor International hopes to add another jewel to the stable's long list of major triumphs when Bless My Stars takes part in Saturday's \$500,000 Pegasus Filly & Mare Turf Invitational (G2) presented by Sir Davis American Whiskey at Gulfstream Park.

The fourth running of the 1 1/16-mile turf event for fillies and mares 4 and up is the fourth of seven graded-stakes on a blockbuster 13-race Pegasus World Cup Day program that offers a total of 10 stakes worth \$5.625 million in purses. First race post time is 11 a.m. (EST). The Filly & Mare Turf is carded as Race 10, with a post time of 3:45 p.m.

“The best thing about our partnership, from the day we started it until today, is that 25 percent of our horses have been stakes winners,” Irwin said of an outfit that has syndicated 760 horses since its inception. “Not many people can say that.”

Back when Irwin teamed with Jeff Siegel to form Clover Racing Stables, later to become Team Valor, he said there were just two large syndicates: Cot Campbell’s Dogwood Stables and Don Little’s Centennial Farms. Nowadays, syndicates dominate the racing landscape while the number of single-entity owners has dwindled.

The reason, Irwin said, is simple: economics.

“For one individual to own a big outfit, the cost is enormous,” Irwin said. “Few people are willing to do it.”

The upshot, Irwin said, are racing partnerships like his own Team Valor in which the risks and expenses are spread out among groups of owners, creating greater purchasing power.

“The more purchasing power you have, the more shots you can take and the better the chances you’re going to be successful,” he said. “It’s a numbers game any way you look at it.”

Irwin estimates anywhere from 2,500 to 3,000 different individuals have owned horses with Team Valor through the decades, with many celebrating in such signature triumphs as the Breeders’ Cup Turf (G1) with Prized in 1989, Arlington Million (G1) with Star of Cozzene in 1993, Florida Derby (G1) with Captain Bodgit in 1997, Santa Anita Derby (G1) with My Deputy in 2000 and Kentucky Derby (G1) with Animal Kingdom in 2011.

Team Valor’s distinctive green and red silks have also made their mark globally, winning major group stakes in Ireland, France, Great Britain, Dubai and South Africa, among others.

“We have raced in so many different jurisdictions around the world and we’ve had champions in many different locales,” Irwin said. “I find foreign racing more interesting. The best filly we ever had was bred in Zimbabwe – Ipi Tombe. She won the Dubai Turf, a \$2 million race, and topped the Tattersalls sale for \$1.9 million. We’ve had several South African fillies over the years that we sold for a bunch of money.”

Irwin is hoping Bless My Stars follows suit. Bred in South Africa, the 6-year-old mare was purchased by Team Valor and Gary Barber after a successful career in her home country in which she won five of her 16 lifetime starts, including Group 1 and Group 2 stakes.

“We were able to get her for a very good price – we were able to buy her in a depressed market – and I told people the day we bought her that if she never even ran, we would make a profit,” he said. “We got a group of horses on a plane and brought them over here, the first flight from South Africa to [the U.S.] since I did it back in 2007. We want her to race this year and either sell her as a racehorse or put her in a sale as a racehorse/broodmare prospect.”

Bless My Stars made her U.S. debut Dec. 21 at Gulfstream, finishing a fast-closing sixth, beaten less than two lengths, in the Suwannee River (G3). She is one of 14 horses entered for the Pegasus Filly & Mare Turf and will be ridden back by Irad Ortiz, Jr. for Hall of Fame trainer Todd Pletcher.

“She missed the break and came flying,” Irwin said of the mare’s U.S. debut. “That race really woke her up. She’s trained great since then. She’s on the muscle. She looks good. She wants to go.”

Just as the sport itself has evolved, so has Irwin’s thinking and approach with the partnership he created. Never keen on buying unraced 2-year-olds or yearlings at auction, though he has made a number of exceptions over the years, Irwin said he’ll continue to focus on acquiring horses domestically and abroad, typically ones with one or two races under their belts.

“Most of the people that are attracted to our horses are people that are risk averse, and they lack patience,” he said. “They want to buy something today and run it tomorrow. If you buy a yearling, to play that game, you have to have people that are patient and people that are risk takers. Our guys want less risk, more action.”

Irwin himself plans to switch gears, spending more time in Europe and scoping out horses for possible purchase.

“I’ve always liked finding horses,” he said. “I enjoy that as much as racing. Most of our horses we source abroad. And me being here and not being able to see them puts me at a disadvantage. I plan to spend half the year abroad. I think our horses will improve because of it because I’ll be able to see the horses rather than buy them off videos and photographs.”

Irwin said he’ll eventually turn over U.S. operations to Fred Heyman, a Baltimore attorney with a deep background in racing.

“I’ve raced here for more than 50 years,” Irwin said. “I’ve done everything a guy can do. And I like a different new horizon.”