

A FAMILY TREE HAS ROOTS AT MONMOUTH

Ninety-nine years ago, Joseph Sacco arrived in New Jersey and laid the footers for a Thoroughbred stable. Now, grandsons Gregg and Rick are building the additions. by Ryan Goldberg

When Monmouth Park closed its backstretch last autumn, Gregg Sacco was one of the last trainers to leave. By mid-December, the track nearly had to force him out. He jokes that he had to pry open the gates to depart.

Like so much of the Sacco family's racing legacy, this development bears tradition. It happens after almost every New Jersey racing season.

"I'm the last person out of there," Gregg says, laughing. "They literally have to tell me, 'We're turning off the water. We know you like it here Gregg, but you have to leave.'"

Sacco gets sentimental because Monmouth Park is home; more pointedly, his family history is inextricable from the place. Gregg, 43, and brother Rick, 42, are third-generation New Jersey horsemen. Their father and three of his brothers were trainers and breeders; one was a jockey. The Saccos have been at Monmouth since it opened in Oceanport in 1946 and have trained a winner every decade.

The family's Jersey roots date to 1910, when patriarch Joseph Sacco emigrated from Italy to West Long Branch. This spring, when the red Sacco colors arrive at Monmouth, the family will begin its centennial year in the Garden State. Adding new chapters to family history motivates Gregg and Rick and ever guides them.

"I think of my father and uncles when I'm there," Gregg says. "It's where it all started for me and my brother. It's my favorite track and my brother's favorite track. I get choked up thinking about it."

So when Monmouth Park reopens its backstretch this month in advance of the 2009 racing season that begins May 9, Sacco's horses will be among the first on the grounds. As such, he is Monmouth's version of a gym rat—first to arrive, last to go.

Gregg has trained horses since 1988, when, at 22, he took the reins from his father, Bill. Rick originally handled the stable's business affairs, left for a management job at the John Brunetti-owned Hialeah Park in

1992 and reunited with Gregg early this decade by overseeing horses at Brunetti's Red Oak Farm in Ocala. Rick recently founded RWS Bloodstock and still works closely with Gregg, who trains about 50 horses, half of those for principal client Brunetti and a lesser number for natural gas magnate Bill Schettine.

Gregg's ability to forge a large and sturdy barn, in a sense, reflects his pedigree. Grandfather Joseph (born 1892) was a poor teenager when he arrived in West Long Branch with his wife, Barbara. A builder, Joseph established a construction business and expanded it through the decades; several buildings in town stand as testaments to his handiwork. Joseph also put up three houses on his property for his sprawling family—a daughter and six sons—and later adorned the land with useful props for their budding avocation.

When sons Vincent, Sam, John and Bill weren't applying dad's construction blueprints, they were making hoof prints.

Farmland then predominant in Monmouth County, the Sacco boys honed their horsemanship in varied ways.

There hadn't been Thoroughbred racing in the state for decades. The original Monmouth Park, opened in 1870, had closed in 1893 on the eve of a statewide moratorium on horse betting. Still, the brothers ventured: Bill and John took part in matches at the West Long Branch polo grounds, Bill becoming an accomplished player; Vincent and Sam worked with show horses at close-by Kilkare Farm. (A community center now occupies the polo grounds, and Monmouth University the former Kilkare spread.)

On his 100-acre farm, Joseph built for his sons a 10-stall training barn, and later a five-eighths-mile track, 20-stall broodmare barn and four-stall stallion barn, Rick said. They called it Monmouth Stud.

Bill, the first to train race horses, got his license in Maryland in 1943 at age 21. But World War II was raging, and he and all his brothers



ADAM DOGLANESE

Gregg Sacco (left) began training horses in 1988 at age 22; brother Rick was the stable's business manager and recently founded RWS Bloodstock.

but John (deemed too small) engaged the enemy. Bill joined the Army's mounted cavalry and became a skilled sharpshooter, fighting in Burma. All returned home safely—one brother with a Purple Heart—and horsemanship skills were reapplied in a new genre.

Thoroughbred racing was about to return to New Jersey, breathing new life into dormant Monmouth Park. By the time Monmouth reopened in 1946 in Oceanport, close to its original location in Long Branch, the Saccos were ready.

Bill had stalls on opening day at Monmouth, as did Sam and John. Vincent stayed at Killcare Farm with the show horses; he later started training Thoroughbreds. John became a jockey and rode for about six years, often for his brothers, then managed a string of horses for Bill in New England in the 1960s and '70s. Even after Gregg took over from his father, John assisted his nephew.

For four decades, Monmouth Stud stood as the family's training and breeding center. Sam and Vincent bred their horses there. Bill sent horses there to rest. They broke yearlings there. Bill used the Monmouth Stud moniker as his stable name; today, the horses Gregg owns race under the same name.

Like Vincent and Sam, Bill trained mostly New Jersey-breds but had a decidedly wealthier clientele that included Charles Johnson, the Botany 500 clothing manufacturer; Marian Jergens, the soap and lotion company heiress; and New Jersey restaurateur and farm owner Joe Lacottello. Johnson and his wife bred horses at Bernadotte Farm in Colts Neck and sent them to Bill for more than 30 years. Together they won New Jersey Futurities with Kapitor, Kapihan, Table Turner and Racing Kap. (In 1981 the Johnsons sold the farm to Bob Brennan, who renamed it Due Process.)

Bill was the leading trainer at Monmouth in 1962. These were the halcyon years of New Jersey racing, the circuit encompassing the "Golden



Triangle" of Garden State Park, Atlantic City Race Course, and Monmouth. Horsemen moved south to Hialeah Park in the winter. Celebrities and professional athletes mixed with trainers and jockeys.

Bill cut a striking figure: He wore a suit to the races, kept his dark hair slicked back, drove a Cadillac. Rick remembers hearing how his father once pulled into Hialeah in a flashy yellow convertible.

"Dad loved to dress well," Rick says. "He was a Cary Grant type of guy. He always respected the game and told us to always wear a tie to the race track."

Bill kept his stable immaculate too, frequently receiving the best barn award at Hialeah. An avid golfer whose regular foursome included jockeys Eddie Arcaro, Walter Blum and Mickey Solomone, Bill maintained a four-hole putting green outside his barn as a casual hub for riders and trainers. After the races, they would watch Frank Sinatra perform at the Fontainebleau in Miami Beach.

In 1964, Bill married Maureen, whom he had met at Hialeah. Gregg was born in 1965, Rick in '67. They spent much of their early childhood in Miami Beach, where their father trained in winter, but every summer Monmouth Park beckoned. The family returned to West Long Branch and rejoined relatives at Monmouth Stud.

Before they entered grade school, Gregg and Rick had become eager apprentices at the farm and race track. They started so young, Gregg says, he remembers walking under the webbing. Rick recalls how they were put on young horses at the farm to break them. They baled hay with Uncle Vincent and mucked stalls.

"I thought every kid mucked stalls after school," Gregg says now, laughing.

After the races, the extended family often gathered for large Italian dinners. Before he died in 1981 at age 89, Joseph made wine in his basement.

As Gregg and Rick grew older and attended middle school in New Jersey, the summer meant more shifts at Barn 8 at Monmouth, the one their father had occupied since 1954. As grooms, 5 in the morning was call time at the barn, and the afternoon brought a second shift at the farm.

"We did that every summer for as long as I could remember," Rick says.

He and Gregg bear an expansive knowledge of that era and the horses their father and uncles campaigned. Gregg remembers standing at the gap at Monmouth during training hours, watching trainers Bowes Bond, Charlie Sanborn, Harry Wells, Oscar White, Stanley Reiser and, "of course," Jimmy Croll.

"These were superior horsemen, and greatly respected," Gregg says.

As to what he learned from his father then, Gregg says, "He could pinpoint ailments. He would put leg paint on with a corn cob [to enhance the effects]. He made his own leg paint. I'm still using that today. . . He always kept his help happy. And he was a stickler for going to the barn every day for feed time. He said, 'Even if you get a lot of horses, try to keep it under one barn.'"

Gregg and Rick took different paths during high school after their parents divorced in 1977. Gregg moved to Los Angeles with his mother; Rick stayed in New Jersey with his father. Gregg attended Santa Monica High School—his sixth school since kindergarten—encountering such classmates as Robert Downey Jr., Rob Lowe, Sean Penn, each a budding actor. Downey became a close friend of Gregg, and later Rick. Several years later, dining one night at the Meadowlands' Pegasus restaurant, Gregg and Rick arranged for Downey and then-girlfriend Sarah Jessica Parker to present a post-race trophy.

Gregg briefly considered acting as a career. "I took a couple of acting classes," he says. "I sort of liked it. Robert and his friends were living an avant-garde lifestyle; I could see why they were artists. I saw my art was with horses."

He naturally found his way to Hollywood Park and worked as a hotwalker for trainer Dale Landers before school. Back



TURFOTOS (2)

Bill Sacco (opposite left) drives a team at Hialeah Park in 1957. Above left, a happy gathering in the Garden State Park winner's circle after Slystitch takes the 1965 Trenton Handicap, Garth Patterson up; Bill, with matching sons Greg (left) and Richard, shop at the 1975 Fasig-Tipton Sale at Hialeah.

As to what he learned from his father then, Gregg says, "He could pinpoint ailments. He would put leg paint on with a corncob [to enhance the effects]. He made his own leg paint. I'm still using that today."

east, Rick regularly joined his father at Garden State and the Meadowlands. The brothers compared notes. Rick recalls, "He would talk about West Coast training, and I would talk about East Coast training." They reunited every summer at Monmouth.

Gregg and Rick switched places after high school. Rick attended UCLA, and his brother returned to New Jersey and became a serious understudy to his father. Bill, recognizing his 20-year-old son's horse-training destiny, sent Gregg to Hialeah the winter of 1986 with six or seven horses.

"They had a mixed bag of problems," Gregg says. "He knew that, but I didn't know that. I worked on those horses all winter, and then we ran them in the spring, and a few did well. I had one hotwalker, and I was the groom. He taught me a lesson, that's it not so easy, and you have to work hard. He didn't spoon-feed me a bunch of runners."

By the spring of 1988, Bill Sacco deemed 22-year-old Gregg ready for succession. It was a smooth transi-

tion, Gregg says, because his father remained by his side, as did Uncle John. Bill eventually became a racing steward before retiring in 1998.

Rick got a business degree from UCLA, joined his brother and managed the stable's business operations, recruiting new owners, attending sales. They found immediate success, finishing among the top 10 in the trainer standings that first summer at Monmouth Park. They were young, energetic, well-dressed and articulate—one newsletter called them the Richard Gere and Al Pacino of racing. And their barn was spotless.

Their first stakes winner was Never My Love (1989), whom Gregg picked up for \$5,500 at a Garden State sale. Then came Majesticant, a nickel claimer until she became a turf-sprinting sensation, once besting Klassy Briefcase.

Following these successes, Rick set out for new owners, engaging Brunetti in 1989. Without hesitation, he and Gregg call it the most important event of their careers. Rick clearly recalls the first Red

Oak 2-year-olds entering the Monmouth barn in the summer of 1989, and the accordant exultation.

"The owner of a great track is sending horses in," he says. "It was almost like, my dad had Bernadotte Farm for 35 years. Here is our Bernadotte Farm."

Like the Saccos, the Brunettis were longtime fixtures in New Jersey and Florida racing. Joe Brunetti, John's father, had been a real estate magnate and Thoroughbred owner in both states from the 1940s. In a story that rings of a bygone time, Joe Brunetti purchased half of the accomplished Vertex in the mid-1950s at Atlantic City Race Course. The deal, effected an hour before Vertex raced, was consummated on a napkin. Vertex won 17 races, the Pimlico Special and eight other stakes among them, and earned nearly a half-million dollars, a formidable figure at the time. Brunetti eventually laminated the napkin and kept it in his wallet.

In the late 1960s, Brunetti built Red Oak Farm in Ocala, Fla., and began breeding race horses. He passed his business

and love for Thoroughbreds to John, who acquired Hialeah Park in 1977. The Brunettis and Saccos were friendly, traveling in the same circles.

One of John's sons, Steve, was a driving force in hiring the Saccos. Like his father and grandfather, Steve Brunetti became actively involved in breeding and buying horses. At the time, he was fresh out of Florida State University and a few years younger than Gregg and Rick.

In 1991, Steve Brunetti purchased a 2-year-old filly for \$40,000 at the Ocala Breeders' Sale and named her Enjoy the Silence after a Depeche Mode song. She was the first horse he bought, and the first he turned over to Gregg. She won six stakes, including three in a row at Hialeah in 1994, and \$267,751.

"I made him look good," Brunetti says of Gregg, "and he made me look good."

Through this initial success, Steve Brunetti says, "I ended up having a sense of loyalty with them." Gregg, for his part, calls Enjoy the Silence his favorite horse.

In the mid-1990s, John Brunetti hired Rick to work at Hialeah. Rick, then raising his young son Kai, had been searching for a steady job. In 1999, at age 31, Rick became the youngest general manager of a major race track, a position he held until Hialeah closed in 2001.

He went on to manage the 252-acre Red Oak Farm, where he again worked closely with Gregg, and the 262-acre Good Chance Farm after John Brunetti acquired it in 2005. Rick Sacco and Steve Brunetti also have partnered in buying and breeding the last decade.

"Rick and I are very dear friends," Steve Brunetti says. "He's got an excellent eye for horses. He is very patient, and a detailed guy."

At the end of last year, Rick left the farms to concentrate on his bloodstock business and move his younger daughter, Lauren, and fiancée, Barbara, from Ocala to Miami, where Kai plans to attend college. But he still consults with Gregg and Steve on Thoroughbred

prospects and fancies heading a track-buying investment group should the opportunity arise.

Gregg, stabled at Gulfstream Park over the winter, says he is eager to return to Monmouth for the upcoming meet with his wife, Kate, son William, 8, and daughter Sydney, 6. Wide-eyed William regards racing as his father had at that age.

"He is too interested right now," Gregg says, with equal parts gravity and jest. He marvels at his son's precocity and reveals a small measure of paternal pride.

"He is very attuned to the race. He says things like, 'The horse is holding his head up high. Is that why you put the shadow roll on, dad?' Or, 'Dad, that horse didn't switch leads today.' He says things that blow my mind for someone his age."

The possibility of a fourth-generation Sacco horseman lies with William. His grandfather and namesake is 87, the last of the original Sacco trainers and a New Jersey racing trailblazer.

"He is probably one of the last of the horse men to have opened Monmouth Park," says General Manager Bob Kulina.

The torch well passed, Gregg has trained five stakes winners the past four years; he'd trained six stakes winners the previous 17 years. In Aqueduct's Fort Marcy Handicap-G3 in 2006, Foreverness, a durable and consistent New York-bred turf by Island Whirl, delivered Gregg's first graded stakes victory. The gelding retired in 2008 at age 9 with earnings near \$400,000.

It's a big vacancy, but Gregg thinks a wave of young talent can fill it in time. He has great aims for Red Oak's Gun Slinger Girl, a comely, well-packaged, unraced 3-year-old with an impeccable, if poignant, pedigree. The Mineshaft filly is out of Strolling Belle, a Grade 3 winner of \$631,785 who finished second in the Alabama Stakes-G1 and third in the Coaching Club American Oaks-G1. Neither of Strolling Belle's previous two foals raced, and the mare died in 2007.

The Essence of Dubai filly Unbridled Essence finished second in a maiden special weight in her debut at Meadowlands last October; Gregg expects the 3-year-old to blossom this summer. And he says that Debonair Darling (Formal Dinner—Darling Bride, by Unbridled), who finished second at Gulfstream in her debut after a troubled start, shouldn't stay a maiden for long.

His stable is its largest in years. There are promising young horses on the way. His youthful excitement is still there, still contagious, when he speaks about envisioned milestones. One in particular, though surely ambitious, gives Gregg pause.

"I would like to win the trainer's title at Monmouth," he says. "There has never been a father-son to do it. It would mean a lot to me. I think about it because my dad is getting up there in age. It's something he would be so proud of if I could achieve it." ★

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