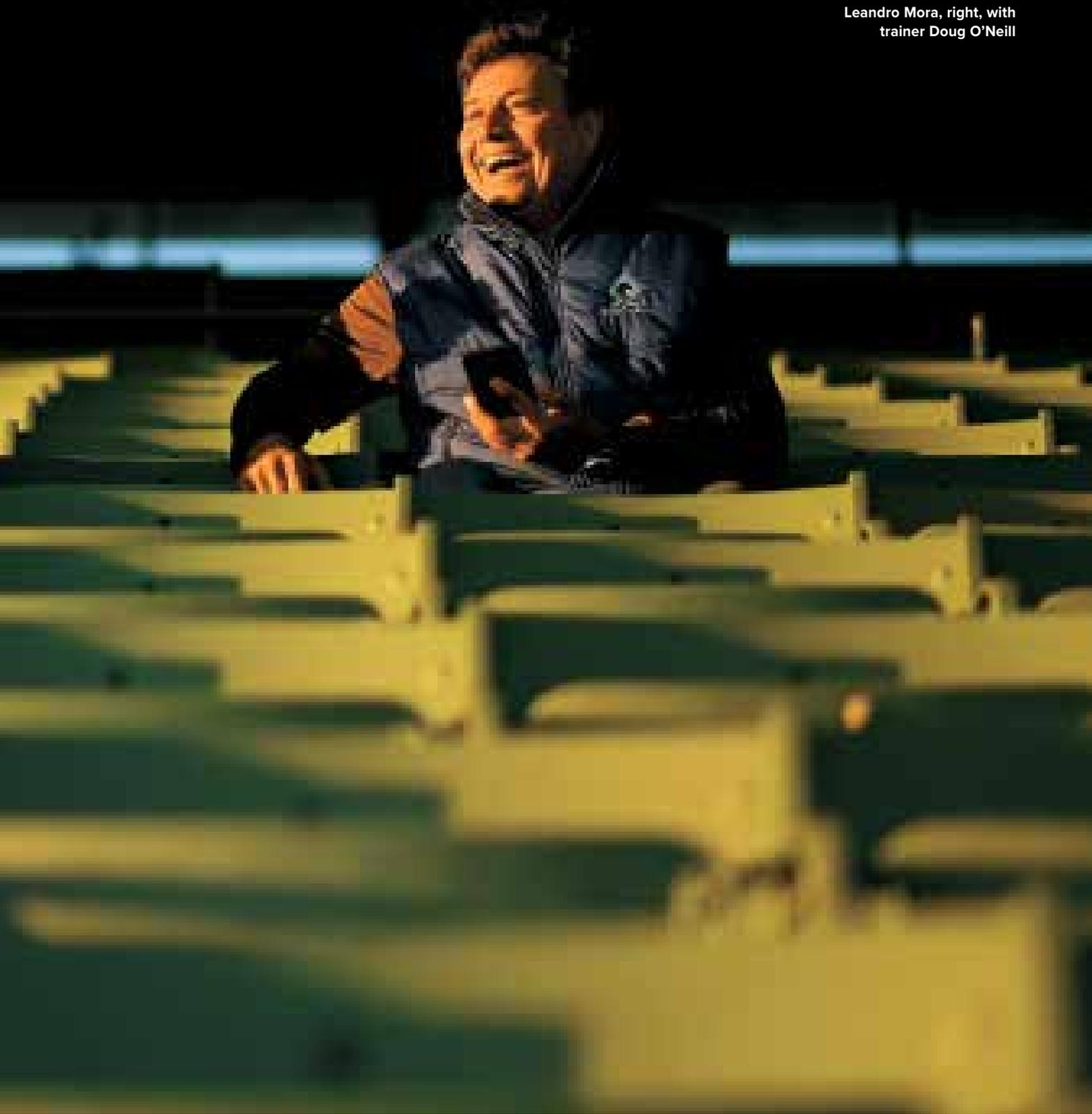


THE LONG RUN



Leandro Mora, Doug O'Neill's assistant
for 18 years, continues to make an impact

BY TRACY GANTZ | PHOTOS BY WALLY SKALIJ



LEANDRO MORA HAS REMAINED Doug O'Neill's assistant trainer for 18 years, not just because O'Neill is a good boss and the stable has won Triple Crown races and Breeders' Cups, but because the two think identically when it comes to the concept of "family."

Both are devoted to the job yet find time for their kids. Mora has seen to it that his two sons, Roberto and Andreas, get college educations. Roberto has a degree in computer graphics, and Andreas wants to teach math and English in Japan after he graduates.

That sense of family at the O'Neill barn runs much deeper,



As O'Neill's top assistant, Mora manages 60-70 employees in Southern California

however, to include the employees.

"It's beyond working now—we're definitely a family at this point," said O'Neill. "Leandro is a godsend to me, my family, and all the horses. He's gold."

Mora, as O'Neill's top assistant, manages 60-70 employees in an operation with little turnover.

"Most of the grooms and some of the hot walkers have been with me the whole 18 years," said Mora.

So when the industry came under attack from animal rights' activists in the wake of the fatalities this past winter at Santa Anita Park, Mora and O'Neill went to work on behalf of their barn family and all other backstretch employees.

Just as they do with the horses, the two men quickly divided tasks. O'Neill organized rallies at Santa Anita with Oscar de la Torre, whose family has worked in the industry. Mora helped bring some of the O'Neill employees to the rallies to speak about the impor-

tance of the industry and what their jobs mean for their own families.

"We love this industry with a passion and with our heart," said Mora. "I'm 60, but we don't want this thing to disappear. We want youngsters to have what we had, to enjoy the beauty of what we've been enjoying."

Their efforts include encouraging backstretch workers to carry signs in support of the industry opposite those with signs that urge the end of horse racing. At Del Mar and Santa Anita, workers have stood up for racing, their horses, and their jobs in the face of angry people whose agenda seems to be closing down racing to "save" the horses without regard for where those horses would go or how many jobs would be lost.

"A lot of people probably don't know the impact this thing can have," said Mora, who explained that each job supports a family. Any job lost can affect a spouse, children, and in some cases

several other relatives.

Family at the O'Neill barn also includes owners, many who have been with O'Neill for years. O'Neill has trained for Paul and Zillah Reddam since 2004. The Reddams owned I'll Have Another and Nyquist, the two Kentucky Derby Presented by Yum! Brands (G1) winners trained by O'Neill, and Mora played a key role in those horses' success.

"First and foremost, Leandro is a great horseman," said Paul Reddam. "He's as steady as a rock and still has tremendous enthusiasm for the game."

Reddam remembers one of his first encounters with Mora, when Great Hunter shipped to Keeneland and won the 2006 Lane's End Breeders' Futurity (G1).

"He just really impressed me with his cool demeanor and his professionalism," said Reddam. "He's a nice, humble man. He has a passion for racing, but he never lets that inhibit how he interacts with people."



Left: Mora, left, with owner Paul Reddam and William and Sarah Farish after Great Hunter's score in the 2006 Breeders' Futurity; right, with assistant Jack Sisterson after Goldencents won the 2014 Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile at Santa Anita

Mora tries to maintain a professional detachment and not favor any particular horse.

"I love every single one of our horses, and I don't try to pick a single one for myself," he said. "It doesn't really matter what type of race they win. Any race that they win for you, it makes you feel like, 'Yes, we've done it!'"

That attitude leads to days such as Oct. 14 at Santa Anita, when the O'Neill barn won three consecutive races—two allowance optional claimers and a starter allowance. They weren't major races, but O'Neill and Mora know what those wins mean to the horses' owners as well as to the entire barn.

One horse in particular did capture Mora's heart—Nyquist. Champion 2-year-old male in 2015, Nyquist won that year's Sentient Jet Breeders' Cup Juvenile (G1) and the following year's Kentucky Derby.

Mora liked Nyquist from the first time he saw the colt as a 2-year-old.

"I knew Nyquist was definitely a nice horse," said Mora. "I told everybody, even Mike Sherlock, the gate starter, after he was in our barn for about two weeks, 'Treat this horse well because he's my Derby horse.' I had this feeling that he was the one.

"That horse did not give us one hiccup after he got here. He was just a professional since he was 2, all the way till he

retired. And he loved people."

Nyquist's first foals are yearlings. Mora is already looking forward to O'Neill's getting a good-looking California-bred yearling son of Nyquist that the Reddams have.

Mora has helped the O'Neill stable perform well at the Breeders' Cup. O'Neill has won four Breeders' Cup races in addition to Nyquist's Juvenile: the 2005 Bessemer Trust Breeders' Cup Juvenile with Stevie Wonderboy, 2006

TVG Breeders' Cup Sprint (G1) with Thor's Echo, 2007 Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Sprint with Maryfield, and 2013 Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile (G1) with Goldencents. In 2014 Goldencents repeated in the Dirt Mile with Mora listed as the trainer (for O'Neill).

A couple of weeks out from this year's Breeders' Cup, Mora says that they are hoping for several starters, including Lazy Daisy and Comical in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies (G1), Legends of War in



Mora has been working at the track since coming to California when he was 18

the Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint (G1T), and Landeskog in the Breeders' Cup Sprint.

Mora traveled a long road to become O'Neill's respected assistant. The journey began in Colima, both a city and state in Mexico.

"My father had two horses, and one of them we used to match race with," said Mora. "But that's not how I got to the racetrack."

Mora's family grew corn and lemons, and Leandro had enough of an allergy to lemons that the smell sometimes made him ill. A friend of his father's had a restaurant in Modesto, Calif., and took 18-year-old Leandro with him to the U.S. They stopped to see the friend's two brothers at Del Mar, and Leandro never left the racetrack.

"We stayed there for two days," Mora said. "I liked it so much that I told him, 'I think you're going to go on your own, and I'm going to stay here and look for a job.' I had no clue how to walk hots, and my first horse stepped all over me, danced on my toes."

Mora worked for trainer Gary Jones for seven months in 1977. Jones had recently taken over after the retirement of his father, Farrell Jones, a longtime leading Southern California trainer. Gary would go on to train many good horses on his own, including major winners Best Pal, Turkoman, and Lakeway, before his retirement in 1996.

"I wanted to become a groom and move up," said Mora. "The youngest groom in that barn had been there for 10 years. And he was the only barn that was giving days off. So I knew I had no shot—nobody left."

Moving on to the David Bernstein barn, Mora remained there for eight years. Not only did he learn his chosen profession, with eventual promotions to foreman and assistant trainer, but he also learned English with Bernstein's help.

"I also went to night school at Monrovia High to try to do better on my English," said Mora, who is now fluent in English and also knows some Portuguese.



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Mora next worked for Brian Mayberry, who had just moved his operation from Florida in 1987. Mayberry trained horses in Southern California for several years, assisted by his wife, Jeanne. Their stable included multiple graded winner Sardula, who was based in Southern California but also won the 1994 Kentucky Oaks (G1).

Mora remained with Mayberry until Mayberry died at age 60 of lung

cancer in 1998.

"I learned a lot from that family—Brian and Jeanne," said Mora. "Jeanne and her two girls are breaking horses and pinhooking in Florida. They are loaded with horses. They do a good job."

Next came a couple of years with trainer Tim Pinfield. During that time, Mora assisted in training Julius Zolezzi's homebred Big Jag, who won the 2000 Gulf News Dubai Golden Shaheen.

That was the first of 13 trips Mora has made to Dubai, the rest with the O'Neill barn. They won the 2007 Etisalat Godolphin Mile (G2) with Spring At Last, owned by Reddam in partnership, and the barn has placed in major Dubai races several times. Thor's Echo finished second in the 2006 Golden Shaheen and won that year's Breeders' Cup Sprint en route to being named champion sprinter.

Pinfield had to return to England, and in 2001 Dr. Melinda Blue told Mora that O'Neill needed a new assistant. O'Neill's



Though more than qualified, Mora hasn't been tempted to go out on his own

barn was expanding, and he had about 30 horses.

Today O'Neill trains more than 100 horses, keeping strings at Santa Anita and San Luis Rey Downs. Mora oversees the entire operation, which includes assistant trainer Sabas Rivera and foreman Benjamin Perez. Stephanie Murray, also an assistant trainer, handles the San Luis Rey string, and Sharla Sanders is the barn's operations manager.

Rivera is better known as the person who rides perhaps the most famous barn pony ever—Lava Man. O'Neill trained California-bred Lava Man from a \$50,000 claimer to a multiple grade 1 winner who earned \$5,268,706. Lava Man, now 18 and a member of the Hall of Fame, last raced in 2009 and today schools the racehorses.

"Lava Man is the favorite in the barn," said Mora.

By the time Lava Man arrived in the O'Neill barn in 2004, Mora had

been with O'Neill for three years and their partnership was already paying dividends.

"It was kind of like the stars were aligned," O'Neill said of hiring Mora in 2001. "I was in a good spot, but I needed a real strong co-pilot. It couldn't have been more perfect. He added a championship feel to the whole barn."

O'Neill recalls being eager to talk to Mora once he heard Pinfield was leaving.

"I think I was one of about 40 people asking, 'What's Leandro doing?' Through Jorge Gutierrez, a good friend of Leandro's, I had a chance to talk to Leandro. We agreed to work alongside each other, and it's been nothing but great stuff ever since."

Dennis O'Neill, Doug's brother, is another integral component of the barn. He's the sales expert, picking out good prospects for his brother to train. Dennis purchased I'll Have Another and Nyquist out of 2-year-old auctions for Reddam.

"He's the brains of the sales," said Mora. "He's done all the hard work himself. I was with him one time only, and he got me tired looking at horses."

Mora is happy to remain somewhat

behind the scenes, arriving early every morning to make sure the barn runs smoothly and horses get the daily training and care they need and deserve. With horses sometimes competing in different parts of the country, Mora will either travel with them or stay at the California track so that Doug can go.

Over the years Mora has received many offers to switch to a different barn, and he also could have easily become a head trainer and gone out on his own. However, he loves his job and his boss, so he hasn't been tempted.

"Doug is the greatest guy I ever met," said Mora. "He's very down-to-earth and treats everybody like family. In my 18 years I have not seen Doug cuss to one of our workers. He's unique as a boss. I wouldn't trade him for anything in the world."

O'Neill feels the same way about Mora.

"It's more pleasurable to be around the barn when Leandro's there," said O'Neill. "He really adds not only a lot of horse knowledge, but he's a great man as well." **BH**

Tracy Gantz is the Southern California correspondent for BloodHorse.



Mora at Santa Anita with Lava Man, who now serves as a school horse for the barn