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Fast Lerner

Trainer Andrew Lerner
at Santa Anita Park

**California trainer
Andrew Lerner
has made
a quick mark**

BY TRACY GANTZ | PHOTOS BY ZOE METZ

WHEN ANDREW LERNER wanted to buy into a racehorse at age 15, his parents taught him an important life lesson.

“I was on a baseball team with a good friend of mine, and there was a baseball tournament in San Diego,” said Lerner. “We went to Del Mar, and my friend’s dad said, ‘Why don’t you buy a piece of this horse?’ I was 15—I didn’t have any money.”

Lerner asked his parents for the cash so that he could invest in 5% of a \$12,500 claimer named Sonny Jones. They told him that if he wanted to buy a horse, he needed to get a job.

“So I got a job at Johnny Rockets and worked as a waiter to pay for my 5%

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2019 LEADING SIRES IN CALIFORNIA

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Rank	Stallion (Foreign foaled), (YOB,Sire), Where Stands	2020 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	BT SWnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	Cumulative				
							2019 Earnings	Foals	Stks Wnrs	A-E Index	Comp Index
1	STAY THIRSTY (08, Bernardini), Lovacres Ranch	\$10,000	178/103	4/10	0/4	(Coal Front, \$1,348,000)	\$6,181,343	*419	7	1.30	1.44
2	I'LL HAVE ANOTHER (09, Flower Alley), Ballena Vista Farm	\$6,000	218/99	3/3	0/3	(Another Truth, \$366,580)	\$4,135,940	297	3	0.89	1.11
3	GRAYDAR (09, Unbridled's Song), Milky Way Farm	\$4,000	138/72	3/5	1/3	(Gray Magician, \$787,010)	\$3,811,836	*247	5	0.92	1.44
4	SQUARE EDDIE (06, Smart Strike), Ocean Breeze Ranch	\$25,000	84/41	4/7	1/4	(Eddie Haskell, \$318,104)	\$3,211,627	209	16	1.52	1.12
5	UNUSUAL HEAT (90, Nureyev)	Died, 2017	75/38	6/7	4/6	(Grecian Fire, \$222,491)	\$2,701,194	*828	49	1.87	1.17
6	SIR PRANCEALOT (IRE) (10, Tamayuz), Rancho San Miguel	\$15,000	122/50	5/9	0/5	(Beau Recall, \$605,600)	\$2,543,999	226	7	1.20	0.98
7	SMILING TIGER (07, Hold That Tiger), Harris Farms	\$7,500	83/47	4/8	0/4	(Spiced Perfection, \$592,000)	\$2,434,659	162	6	1.16	1.00
8	LUCKY PULPIT (01, Pulpit)	Died, 2017	145/66	1/2	1/1	(Fashionably Fast, \$212,660)	\$2,219,508	*477	11	1.27	1.05
9	GRAZEN (06, Benchmark), Tommy Town Thoroughbreds	\$6,000	46/25	5/9	2/5	(S Y Sky, \$355,620)	\$2,036,477	113	10	1.70	1.09
10	MINISTERS WILD CAT (00, Deputy Minister), Tommy Town Thoroughbreds	\$4,000	98/55	2/2	0/2	(Royal Trump, \$144,671)	\$1,764,300	477	19	0.97	0.90
11	JERSEY TOWN (06, Speightstown), Daehling Ranch	\$3,000	91/50	1/1	0/1	(Shakopee Town, \$124,003)	\$1,634,516	*161	3	0.98	1.15
12	VRONSKY (99, Danzig), Harris Farms	\$4,500	74/46	0/0	0/0	(Vronilla Parfait, \$91,820)	\$1,536,117	261	10	1.28	1.07
13	EMPIRE WAY (09, Empire Maker), Heinz & Michelle Steinmann Farms	\$2,500	79/38	0/0	0/0	(Cholula Lips, \$102,250)	\$1,157,074	124	1	0.70	0.91
14	ACCLAMATION (06, Unusual Heat), Harris Farms	\$5,000	52/22	1/2	0/1	(Acclimate, \$329,182)	\$1,065,668	122	3	0.99	1.23
15	SLEW'S TIZNOW (05, Tiznow), Rancho San Miguel	\$3,000	45/26	4/4	1/4	(Summersimage, \$135,176)	\$1,027,227	124	6	0.96	1.04
16	MISREMEMBERED (06, Candy Ride), Barton Thoroughbreds	\$2,500	50/27	3/3	1/3	(Remember Daisy, \$85,770)	\$1,018,868	106	6	0.96	1.34
17	U S RANGER (04, Danzig), Rancho San Miguel	\$3,000	85/43	0/0	0/0	(Swing Thoughts, \$97,754)	\$1,005,556	*384	3	0.66	1.25
18	BOISTEROUS (07, Distorted Humor), Tommy Town Thoroughbreds	\$3,000	42/21	0/0	0/0	(Loud Mouth, \$96,780)	\$921,946	82	1	0.80	1.07
19	COIL (08, Point Given)	N/A	47/19	0/0	0/0	(Principe Carlo, \$129,833)	\$885,204	148	0	0.68	1.17
20	CLUBHOUSE RIDE (08, Candy Ride), Legacy Ranch, Inc.	\$3,500	30/22	1/1	0/1	(Warren's Showtime, \$126,271)	\$831,799	59	1	0.97	0.89
21	DESERT CODE (04, E Dubai), Harris Farms	\$2,000	46/29	1/1	1/1	(Desert Law, \$125,382)	\$794,708	157	4	0.87	1.01
22	CYCLOTRON (00, Grand Slam), Old English Rancho	Private	42/23	0/0	0/0	(Dr Wysong, \$127,343)	\$731,377	148	2	0.99	1.18
23	EDDINGTON (01, Unbridled), Ballena Vista Farm	\$3,500	46/23	0/0	0/0	(Opus Won, \$111,600)	\$665,154	*455	11	1.15	1.38
24	OLD TOPPER (95, Gilded Time)	Pnsd	23/13	1/3	0/1	(Queen Bee to You, \$293,703)	\$660,618	558	20	0.93	0.82
25	RICHARD'S KID (05, Lemon Drop Kid), Rancho San Miguel	\$2,500	25/16	0/0	0/0	(Sedamar, \$136,804)	\$659,897	54	0	0.96	1.03
26	COMIC STRIP (95, Red Ransom)	Died, 2017	26/17	0/0	0/0	(Oh My Oh, \$73,914)	\$650,077	359	12	0.84	1.09
27	CHAMP PEGASUS (06, Fusaichi Pegasus), Barton Thoroughbreds	\$2,500	80/32	0/0	0/0	(Wild Bean, \$60,791)	\$649,337	162	0	0.30	1.03
28	HEATSEEKER (IRE) (03, Giant's Causeway)	Died, 2016	52/23	0/0	0/0	(Heatseeker Baby, \$66,292)	\$601,323	*230	8	0.97	1.21
29	EINSTEIN (BRZ) (02, Spend a Buck)	N/A	30/16	1/1	1/1	(Tap Back, \$163,100)	\$538,657	*193	3	0.66	0.95
30	DECARCHY (97, Distant View)	Died, 2017	49/18	0/0	0/0	(Ostini, \$68,311)	\$510,234	427	13	0.98	0.94
31	INDIAN EVENING (09, Indian Charlie)	N/A	16/6	1/1	1/1	(Sneaking Out, \$223,331)	\$504,807	51	3	1.02	1.08
32	KAFWAIN (00, Cherokee Run), Tommy Town Thoroughbreds	\$2,500	49/18	0/0	0/0	(Starring John Wain, \$55,091)	\$492,876	*649	18	0.98	1.18
33	IDIOT PROOF (04, Benchmark), Victory Rose Thoroughbreds	\$3,000	24/11	1/2	1/1	(Bulletproof One, \$165,400)	\$484,088	86	2	1.18	0.96
34	SMART BID (06, Smart Strike), Milky Way Farm	\$3,500	28/11	0/0	0/0	(Kosciuszko, \$93,640)	\$448,545	70	0	0.62	1.00
35	TANNERSMYMAN (98, Lord Carson), Woodbridge Farm	Private	20/10	0/0	0/0	(El Huerfano, \$139,465)	\$447,677	178	3	0.73	0.70

of this horse," said Lerner.

Fifteen years later, at age 30, Lerner has been training for two years and has built a barn of more than 40 horses. He saddled his first stakes winner this past summer when Queen Bee to You won the Bertrando Stakes at Los Alamitos. The California-

bred mare gave him his second stakes victory in the Nov. 17 Betty Grable Stakes at Del Mar and delivered his first graded stakes in the Dec. 8 Bayakoa Stakes (G3) at Los Alamitos.

Sonny Jones didn't lead Lerner directly to a training career. Instead, Lerner ap-

plied the lesson of hard work gleaned from Johnny Rockets to college at Arizona State University, an unlikely choice for a racing fan with the University of Arizona Race-track Industry Program located 100 miles to the south in the same state.

But Lerner wanted to study commercial real estate and land development. Thus, he developed a passion for the Sun Devils instead of the Wildcats, either the U of A or University of Kentucky variety.

"Arizona State was one of the only schools that had that program," Lerner said. "It was a fun school to go to, and then I worked in commercial real estate for five or six years."

He segued from real estate to a fantasy sports business with Daniel Goldring, his best friend since he was 6 years old.

"We got kind of fortunate to be in the right time and the right space," said Lerner.

Lerner capitalized on that moment, reaping success to the point that he could afford to buy some racehorses. Mike Pender trained for him at first, and Lerner asked if he could shadow Pender and his



Lerner takes a hands-on approach with his 40-horse stable



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Lerner's first stakes win came in June with Queen Bee to You (right) at Los Alamitos

help to learn about training.

"Originally, my plan was to train for myself," said Lerner. "I just was doing this to have a string of four or five horses because I really enjoyed it."

Lerner grew up in Agoura Hills, Calif., attending the races with his father, Ross. By the time he decided he could afford to buy some racehorses, he was living in Santa Monica, making for a 40-mile drive through the heart of the greater Los Angeles area to reach Pender's Santa Anita barn.

"I don't think he thought I was going to show up," said Lerner. "I'd get up at 4:30 in the morning, drive out to Santa Anita, and shadow his grooms and hotwalkers."

Lerner also listened to what jockeys and exercise riders said after bringing horses back from the track, but he didn't always understand the points they were making. The solution?

"I wanted to learn to ride," Lerner said. "I didn't know what they meant because I had never been on a horse."

Lerner thus added another 50 miles to his daily drive time, taking riding lessons from a friend in Simi Valley after morning training hours had finished.

"I rode for eight or nine months, did hunter-jumper lessons," he said.

"I thought it was actually really helpful. It helped me learn a lot, more than I thought it was going to."

Next came his trainer's test, administered by the stewards and more difficult and time-consuming than Lerner had anticipated.

"I thought it was going to be an easy process," he said. "You go in, fill out the application, give them \$250, and you get your license. But it was not like that. It took me about 5½ months, and they grilled me. They knew I was a novice, and they really wanted to make sure I could do the job, which is what they needed to do."

At Del Mar's summer meeting in 2017, Lerner had a claim slip in his hand for a 3-year-old Cal-bred filly named Jill Madden, who was going to cost him \$16,000. He ran into Jack Schwartz, the father of his friend who had asked 15-year-old Lerner to invest in Sonny Jones.

"Andrew, I heard you were training—I'll take half of whatever you're claiming," Schwartz told Lerner.

Lerner declined because he simply wanted to train for himself. Schwartz persisted, and Lerner finally agreed, only to see Jill Madden run eighth. But they more than made their money back by winning two races and then losing the filly for

\$6,250.

"From there, it kind of propelled," Lerner said. "We claimed a few more horses and started doing a little bit better."

Success brought Lerner more owners, and before he knew it, rather than training just his own horses, he had a public stable. His owners now include Erik Johnson, a National Hockey League player with the Colorado Avalanche; and George Schwary. Breeder and owner of 2007 Del Mar Futurity (G1) winner Georgie Boy, Schwary now campaigns a half sister, stakes winner Ippodamia's Girl, who under Lerner's care finished third in this year's Senator Ken Maddy Stakes (G3T).

"I had my own philosophies and ideas, and I wanted to do it myself and see if they worked," said Lerner. "I love every moment of it. For me, the most rewarding thing is taking a 2-year-old or a horse that hasn't been performing well and getting them to perform. One of my greatest memories wasn't a win—it was a second. I had this horse, Powerful Thirst. I just couldn't figure him out. He kept running fifth, sixth. We figured out what was wrong with him and trained him a little differently, and he finished second at Del Mar."

Lerner and Schwartz had claimed Powerful Thirst for \$32,000 in November 2017 at Del Mar. The 2-year-old gelding was still a maiden in his sixth start, and he finished sixth that day.

The following August, Powerful Thirst finished second at 16-1 to Livin On Prayer, the 4-5 favorite. He finally broke his maiden for Lerner that November in his 16th start, and he was claimed away in his 17th start.

As Lerner is evolving as a trainer, he seeks advice from several knowledgeable people in the industry. Larry Benavidez, a former longtime assistant to trainer John Sadler, came on board during early 2018 to help Lerner launch his training career. Though Benavidez isn't on the payroll now, he continues to advise Lerner as the

Special Note For Sire Lists:

For stallions that stand, will stand, or stood (deceased) in the states featured in this section (stallions that are dead or exported prior to 2015 are excluded), and have runners in North America. Listed below are all available statistics for the Northern Hemisphere through December 8, 2019. As supplied to BloodHorse by The Jockey Club Information Systems Inc., include adjusted money from Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Adjusted earnings are put on par with average North American earnings from the previous year. For example, the average North American purse in 2015 is \$21,782 or 50% of the 2015 average purse in Japan. To put earnings on par, all Japanese progeny earnings are multiplied by 50% before being credited to a sire's progeny earnings. Hong Kong earnings are adjusted by 17%; Singapore by 57%. Current year stakes winners include all N.H.-foaled stakes winners worldwide and any S.H.-foaled horses that won a N.H. stakes. *Foal counts include Southern Hemisphere. Cumulative stakes winners includes all countries. (A † indicates a sire represented by his first crop to race).

*AVERAGE-EARNINGS INDEX and COMPARABLE INDEX: Lifetime AVERAGE-EARNINGS INDEX indicates how much purse money the progeny of one sire has earned in relation to the average earnings of all runners in the same years; average earnings of all runners in any year is represented by an index of 1.00; COMPARABLE INDEX indicates the average earnings of progeny produced from mares bred to one sire, when these same mares were bred to other sires. Only 32% of all sires have a lifetime AVERAGE-EARNINGS INDEX higher than their mares' COMPARABLE INDEX.



STANFORD

Malibu Moon - Rosy Humor
By Distorted Humor

Fee: \$5,000

Millionaire Son Of Malibu Moon
(by A.P. Indy)

Family Of Leading Sire Pulpit
(by A.P. Indy)



MINISTERS WILD CAT

Deputy Minister - Hollywood Wildcat
By Kris S.

Fee: \$4,000 LF

Ranks Among The Top 10 Leading
Sires In California

Sire Of More Than 40 Lifetime Stakes
Horses And \$2.5 Million In Earnings

Average Earnings Per Starter \$55,000



BOISTEROUS

Distorted Humor - Emanating
By Cox's Ridge

Fee: \$3,000 LF

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racing manager of an ownership group that has horses with Lerner.

“He’s got so much experience,” said Lerner. “Even now I call him and get advice. He’s been great.”

Former trainer Jenine Sahadi also mentors Lerner.

“She’s probably been the greatest influence that I’ve had so far,” said Lerner. “I call her three or four times a week. She’s a good friend, and it’s good to have someone in your corner.”

One time, as Sahadi stood next to Lerner while one of his horses was winning easily, she teased him with the advice, “When they’re eight in front, you can stop cheering.”

“I’m very animated,” explained Lerner. “I love it when we’re out there and we’re winning. It’s fun, whether it’s a maiden 20 or a stakes race.”

Lerner has also brought on experienced employees. His assistant, Gustavo Benitez, previously worked for trainer Carla Gaines. His foreman, Isidro Hernandez, worked for now-retired Jerry Fanning; and Martin Landeros, who runs the Los Alamitos division, has worked for Sahadi and Julio Canani.

Starting his training career with claimers also added to Lerner’s education.

“They’re old warriors, so you kind of get to see different things, which I think really helped expedite my learning,” he said.

Lerner graduated to buying a couple of European horses in training. In 2019 he has had his first taste of bringing along several 2-year-olds, part of the business that he finds very rewarding.

“That’s been my favorite part,” he said. “They’re all different. They all need to be on their own different program. Seeing a horse develop and do well is really exciting.”

Johnson owns or co-owns four of the 2-year-olds Lerner trains. Three of the four have won, and the fourth has run second twice.

Lerner experienced perhaps his lowest moment in training when Princess Dorian suffered a severe injury in a race at Del Mar Nov. 10. He and Johnson had claimed the 5-year-old mare in August for \$20,000, and she won for them in October at Santa Anita.

Princess Dorian took a bad step in the Del Mar race, and Lerner and Johnson did everything they could to save her. They

sent her to the nearby San Luis Rey Equine Hospital for surgery, and Johnson pledged to give her a good home for the rest of her life. But she developed laminitis and had to be euthanized Nov. 18. That was only a day after Lerner won the second stakes of his career, with Queen Bee to You in the Betty Grable. Within 24 hours, Lerner had scaled the heights of his training career and then plummeted.



Lerner is also bringing in new owners through his Del Mar Summer Racing Club

“It was sad because we did the surgery, and she was doing really well for about seven days,” said Lerner. “We knew we weren’t out of the woods yet, but it seemed like everything was going well. Then I got a call at about midnight that things had turned for the worse. At that point you’ve got to do the humane thing.”

Even though Princess Dorian hadn’t been with Lerner long, she had already become a barn favorite.

“She was so sweet,” said Lerner. “Any time we had a barn tour with kids, we’d bring them over to her stall.”

Though the experience was devastating, Lerner tries to focus on the positive, and Queen Bee to You is certainly one of those. Owned by Christopher St. Hilaire and Adam Vali, the 5-year-old is a Cal-bred daughter of Old Topper—Silk Queen, by Touch Gold. St. Hilaire claimed her in late 2016 for \$50,000 from her breeder, Tommy Town Thoroughbreds, and Lerner began training her last June.

“She tries all the time,” said Lerner. “When we got her, she was doing well, but

my team really spent a lot of time on her.”

Being squarely in the millennial generation, Lerner is well-versed in social media. He uses it to promote his business and to generate new owners, often by putting together partnerships.

“It’s a great way to promote the sport and attract new owners,” said Lerner. “One thing I loved as a fan was being at the track in the morning. I always promote—even if you’re not an owner—scheduling barn tours. We’re happy to show you the horses. I want people to see how well they’re taken care of.”

When Lerner has purchased horses at public auction, he has used Twitter to let people know they can buy into them.


“They sell really quickly because there are people out there who didn’t know about the opportunity and want to jump on and grab 10% of a horse,” said Lerner.

This past summer Lerner created the Del Mar Summer Racing Club. People paid money up front with the proviso that there wouldn’t be continuing training and veterinary bills.

“I think the thing that scares people off—and rightfully so—are the bills,” said Lerner. “I didn’t think it was going to take off, and we had so many people who said, ‘I’ll buy in for 5%’ because they know what their fixed costs are.”

Rocky Policy, a 7-year-old Maryland-bred daughter of Rock Slide—Smart Policy, by Smart Strike, won for the club in August, got claimed, and has since captured the Turf Amazon Stakes at Parx. Drift Away, a 4-year-old Kentucky-bred daughter of Congrats—Retroesque, by Red Ransom, races for the club, Hidden Brook Farm, Lerner Racing, and Christopher Howell. Claimed at Ellis Park for \$30,000, she has won three races for the partnership, including one at the Santa Anita fall meeting.

That victory was one of five that Lerner had at the short meeting, putting him in the top 10 among trainers.

“I wanted to crack the top 10,” he said. “Sometimes it’s hard with fewer numbers, but it was exciting. It’s good for the whole team. Everyone works so hard. It comes down to the team and your staff. You’ve got to have good people.” 

Tracy Gantz is the Southern California correspondent for BloodHorse.