

CALIFORNIA IDAHO NEVADA OREGON UTAH  
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## *Young Executives, New Ideas*

Nate Newby, Santa Anita's general manager

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**At Santa Anita, Merz, Newby trying new things**

BY BYRON KING

**TOM ROBBINS, EXECUTIVE** vice president of racing at Del Mar, can't recall the precise year, but he remembers the conditions under which he picked up an intern in the Del Mar racing office for a meet about 10 years ago.

A young man who had studied at the University of Arizona's Race Track Industry Program "kind of wandered in. I don't think he was officially one of our interns," Robbins recalled.

Yet he possessed knowledge of the InCompass software that racing offices use,

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## 2021 LEADING SIRES IN CALIFORNIA



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Rank	Stallion (Foreign foaled), (YOB,Sire), Where Stands	2021 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	BT SWnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	Cumulative				
							2021 Earnings	Foals	Stks Wnrs	A-E Index	Comp Index
1	<b>I'LL HAVE ANOTHER</b> (09, Flower Alley), Ocean Breeze Ranch	\$10,000	112/18	0/0	0/0	(Another Truth, \$88,590)	<b>\$404,498</b>	370	3	0.97	1.11
2	<b>GRAYDAR</b> (09, Unbridled's Song), Milky Way Farm	\$4,000	51/10	0/0	0/0	(Tenderfoot, \$65,100)	<b>\$332,453</b>	*300	5	0.91	1.40
3	<b>STAY THIRSTY</b> (08, Bernardini), Lovacres Ranch	\$10,000	64/15	0/0	0/0	(Hop Kat, \$48,800)	<b>\$305,862</b>	*555	13	1.25	1.37
4	<b>SQUARE EDDIE</b> (06, Smart Strike)	Pnsd	53/9	0/0	0/0	(Found My Ball, \$48,600)	<b>\$294,211</b>	246	18	1.51	1.16
5	<b>SMILING TIGER</b> (07, Hold That Tiger), Harris Farms	\$7,500	46/11	0/0	0/0	(Tigre Di Slugo, \$30,000)	<b>\$278,092</b>	255	9	1.08	1.00
6	<b>GRAZEN</b> (06, Benchmark), Tommy Town Thoroughbreds	\$6,000	35/7	0/0	0/0	(Desmond Doss, \$50,400)	<b>\$274,068</b>	225	11	1.55	1.05
7	<b>ACCLAMATION</b> (06, Unusual Heat), Harris Farms	\$4,000	19/3	0/0	0/0	(Acclimate, \$62,000)	<b>\$268,558</b>	169	3	0.99	1.20
8	<b>CLUBHOUSE RIDE</b> (08, Candy Ride), Legacy Ranch	\$3,500	22/5	1/1	1/1	(Brickyard Ride, \$90,000)	<b>\$257,700</b>	103	3	1.42	0.91
9	<b>VRONSKY</b> (99, Danzig), Harris Farms	\$3,500	26/6	1/1	1/1	(Closing Remarks, \$110,000)	<b>\$230,648</b>	322	11	1.22	1.04
10	<b>MR. BIG</b> (03, Dynaformer), Rancho Temescal	\$4,500	26/5	1/1	1/1	(Big Fish, \$110,000)	<b>\$225,577</b>	133	4	1.49	0.90
11	<b>RICHARD'S KID</b> (05, Lemon Drop Kid), Rancho San Miguel	\$2,500	21/4	0/0	0/0	(Sapphire Kid, \$79,380)	<b>\$206,244</b>	83	0	1.13	0.97
12	<b>MINISTERS WILD CAT</b> (00, Deputy Minister), Tommy Town Thoroughbreds	\$4,000	41/10	0/0	0/0	(Stalking Shadow, \$24,540)	<b>\$173,343</b>	521	20	0.94	0.89
13	<b>LUCKY PULPIT</b> (01, Pulpit)	Died, 2017	36/7	0/0	0/0	(Offshore Affair, \$38,300)	<b>\$155,268</b>	*478	12	1.22	1.03
14	<b>THE PAMPLEMOUSSE</b> (06, Kafwain)	Pnsd	8/1	1/1	1/1	(North County Guy, \$110,000)	<b>\$116,659</b>	127	1	0.60	1.02
15	<b>SIR PRANCEALOT (IRE)</b> (10, Tamayuz), Rancho San Miguel	\$15,000	43/9	0/0	0/0	(Rio Natal, \$15,787)	<b>\$115,302</b>	*292	9	1.29	0.93
16	<b>EMPIRE WAY</b> (09, Empire Maker), Heinz & Michelle Steinmann Farms	\$2,500	23/6	0/0	0/0	(Later Days, \$21,000)	<b>\$87,727</b>	156	2	0.64	0.90
17	<b>TIME TO GET EVEN</b> (04, Stephen Got Even)	Died, 2019	7/3	0/0	0/0	(Mister Bold, \$37,800)	<b>\$85,415</b>	85	1	0.81	0.71
18	<b>JERSEY TOWN</b> (06, Speightstown), Daehling Ranch	\$3,000	20/3	0/0	0/0	(Workin On a Dream, \$19,650)	<b>\$76,276</b>	*199	4	1.02	1.08
19	<b>ANTHONY'S CROSS</b> (08, Indian Charlie), Special T Thoroughbreds	\$2,500	12/4	0/0	0/0	(Joy's Rocket, \$20,000)	<b>\$72,545</b>	56	2	0.94	0.93
20	<b>ELUSIVE WARNING</b> (04, Elusive Quality)	N/A	12/5	0/0	0/0	(Sure Angel, \$16,176)	<b>\$65,158</b>	91	1	0.55	0.97

and he was eager to observe and learn. So Robbins welcomed him to his staff.

Little did he know that about a decade later, that intern—Chris Merz—would be running the Santa Anita Park racing department as one of North America's youngest racing secretaries at age 30.

Nor is he the only young blood in Santa Anita management. During the same fall period in which Merz was promoted to racing secretary at Santa Anita, Nate Newby, 43, became the track's general manager, succeeding Aidan Butler, who had transitioned to a new Florida-based role with The Stronach Group, which owns Santa Anita.

Newby also began working at a California racetrack as an intern, facilitating logistics for the Oak Tree Racing Association in 2002 when filming of the movie "Seabiscuit" was taking place at Santa Anita.

Though both men are young, they possess backgrounds more typically found in older track leaders. In addition to coming up within the racing-office ranks in California, Merz previously served as racing secretary for the TSG-owned Maryland Jockey Club, operator of Laurel Park and Pimlico Race Course, and Newby has spent his working life at Santa Anita, becoming vice presi-

dent of marketing and later assistant general manager under Butler.

"Nate—not many people know this, but he's really a true horseman. He's about as knowledgeable as you can get in areas," said Butler, now COO of 1/ST Racing and president of 1/ST Content for TSG. "He was (an assistant) trainer. He has worked at Santa Anita for 17 years. He's been around every aspect of it. He is a really talented handicapper, and he's probably the best guy in the business when it comes to hosting tournaments.

"You have all these different aspects, and then on top of it, being in marketing with Santa Anita for 17 years. That, in my eyes, is about the best ingredients for a GM as you can get. Yes, he understands the business, but he also understands what the customer needs and what the customer wants."

Neither Newby nor Merz can coast. Though Santa Anita has to this point weathered an animal welfare crisis that began in 2019 after a spike of breakdowns at the track, it remains in the sights of anti-racing forces, eager to publicize every fatality and every track management misstep.

"We're hoping for some quieter days ahead; just grow the business and have some less crazy challenges to deal with," Newby said. "What happened with horse safety issues, we really took it seriously and addressed the safety issues, really led the reforms in California with our partners—the California Horse Racing Board, Thoroughbred Owners of California. Obviously. I think we had a safety record we could all be proud of last year between Del Mar and Santa Anita. We handled that well. Sometimes with the public you have to continue to do the right thing, and eventually those issues and the



Chris Merz, one of North America's youngest racing secretaries

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sensitivity will quiet down a little bit. I think we are doing great things, and the numbers show that. “

When one further considers COVID-19, which brought racing to a halt last fall and through the early winter after an outbreak at Santa Anita’s sister track, Golden Gate Fields, not to mention frequent regulatory changes in California, it’s clear that while Merz and Newby are young, they might age quickly.

Still, there are few places Merz would rather be. Born in California, he grew up going to the races with his father, a track chartcaller and horse owner, and was eager to return to California from Maryland in early 2020. At that time he joined Santa Anita as director of racing, reporting directly to then Santa Anita vice president of racing and racing secretary Steve Lym, who has since moved on to assist Butler in another executive role within TSG’s racing division.

“I wasn’t here during the 2019 stuff that was going on,” Merz said. “I was still impacted by it because California is my home and you hate to see anything like that go on here. I kinda felt a little helpless, to be honest with you, sitting back in Maryland. I didn’t know at the time if I could help or not, but it was really kind of painful to watch.

“But coming back here, at least right now, people are starting to get a little more of the pep back in their step. The old Santa Anita is coming out a little bit.”

The betting product, diminished by declining quality and reduced field size in recent years, is on the upswing from last year. Through Feb. 7, the track averaged almost 8.0 starters per race for its meet that began Dec. 26. That’s ahead of last year’s full-meet average of 7.5, though with the benefit of a horse population boost from Northern California in the early part of the season when Golden Gate was not racing because of COVID-19.

“I think they’re appreciative of Chris, thus far,” Robbins said. “The racing secretary’s job is like the track superintendent. If you please 51% of the crowd, you’ve done a good job.”

Handle has increased during this period of larger fields. Spurred by a mandatory payoff in the Rainbow 6 jackpot wager, bettors poured more than \$5 million into



Along with top-class racing, Santa Anita offers perhaps the most majestic backdrop in racing: the San Gabriel Mountains

the wager during the Feb. 6 race card for a six-race sequence that averaged 9.1 horses per race. Overall betting on the day totaled \$17.5 million, largely coming from off-track sources and advance-deposit wagering platforms as no fans currently are permitted on-track because of COVID-19.

This came six weeks after a record opening day at Santa Anita Dec. 26 when the track handled more than \$23 million.

Though no timetable has been established for when fans might return to Santa Anita, Newby looks forward to when

COVID-19 conditions improve, not only for the track but for the country and the Los Angeles community.

“Coming out post-COVID-19 and when things open back up, we think there will be some pent-up demand, that people will be excited to get out of the house and go have fun, and I think we’ve got the best outdoor venue for that,” he said. “With 300 acres, we can really spread people out, keep them safe, and give them a fun experience at the track.”

In the meantime, the track must promote itself to the at-home fan, and it has used its resources and partnerships to do so. TVG, responsible for the majority of ADW wagering and television coverage in California, provides extensive television coverage at the track, and TSG’s wagering platforms, 1st/Bet and Xpressbet, further drive handle toward Santa Anita. Free streaming of the track’s races is also available on the Santa Anita website.

Now it is up to Santa Anita to give fans something compelling to watch. The addition of the track’s new turf chute has drawn sizable fields for longer turf sprints. This filled a void left when the track discontinued grass sprints down its unique hillside course, a move—criticized by many California horse racing enthusiasts—track management made in the midst of the breakdown crisis.

Other changes still need to be made for

ANNE M. EBERHARDT

### 2021 CALIFORNIA SIRES BY WINNERS

Sire	Rnrs	Wnrs
I’ll Have Another	112	18
Stay Thirsty	64	15
Smiling Tiger	46	11
Graydar	51	10
Ministers Wild Cat	41	10
Square Eddie	53	9
Sir Prancealot (IRE)	43	9
Lucky Pulpit	36	7
Grazen	35	7
Vronsky	26	6
Empire Way	23	6
Mr. Big	26	5
Clubhouse Ride	22	5
Elusive Warning	12	5
Richard’s Kid	21	4
Anthony’s Cross	12	4
Unionize	7	4



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The new turf chute at Santa Anita was unveiled when the meet opened Dec. 26

Santa Anita to bring back the type of racing it previously staged.

“We are actually working on re-honing the stakes schedule here. Our stakes schedule kind of reflects a horse population of kind of 1990,” Merz said.

He wants to announce some adjustments by perhaps May, hoping to bring the schedule in line with the current horse population and the increased competition for certain classes of stakes horses. He indicated the goal is for the track to “get its old glory back.”

“The main race we’re looking at is the Big ‘Cap,” Merz said, referring to the Santa Anita Handicap (G1), a \$400,000 race March 6 that is one of Santa Anita’s signature races.

“It’s been an iconic race for like, forever. It’s just unfortunate now that there are a lot of things that work against it. Obviously, one is the Breeders’ Cup. You’re not getting a lot of the top horses sticking around anymore. They’re going straight to the breeding shed. If they do stick around, you’ll see them run in the Pegasus. And now with the Dubai race and the Saudi race, it’s in a spot where it just gets crushed.”

Tinkering with the historic Santa Anita Handicap—a race won by legends such as Seabiscuit, Affirmed, Spectacular Bid, John Henry and Alysheba—might not please some racing purists. Merz

had better have thick skin.

“He didn’t come into an easy situation. Anything at Santa Anita is difficult, but being the racing secretary at Santa Anita is as difficult as any track at the moment,” Butler said. “He’s a breath of fresh air. Similar to Nate, young and energetic, he brings in a new approach to what had become a stagnant role. Racing secretaries across the country have kind of done things the same way. Chris is a little outside the box.”

Though the Santa Anita Handicap survived being cut from a grade 1 by the American Graded Stakes Committee this year following a forgettable 2020 renewal won by the since-winless Combatant, other stakes at Santa Anita were downgraded. The Las Virgenes Stakes, which went from a grade 1 to a grade 2 in 2016, dropped another level this year to become a grade 3. The Senator Ken Maddy Stakes also went from grade 3 to listed.

The challenge facing Santa Anita is not all about scheduling; it is as much about economics. California is one of the few major racing jurisdictions that operate without purse subsidies from slot machines, casinos, or historical horse racing.

Racing in the state, however, did receive a \$15 million purse boost this year when the Thoroughbred Owners of California reached amended wagering agreements with numerous ADW providers, though

not with the Churchill Downs Incorporated-owned TwinSpire.

“California and Santa Anita over the last few years have declined compared to what it used to be. That’s what our priority is to get back,” Newby said. “This was a good first step, and I think we have to look at other ways to drive purses and improve the product and recruit horses and take care of owners, and all those things that drive our business.”

Recruitment of horses is an area where Del Mar has led in the state, attracting Eastern shippers to race there during its fall turf festival and adding horses to the circuit through its popular “Ship & Win” incentive program.

Merz has visited with Robbins and Del Mar racing secretary David Jerkens—under whom he worked at Golden Gate Fields previously when Jerkens headed the Northern California track’s racing office—to discuss California racing and recruitment.

“Believe it or not, the plan is to actually work with Del Mar a little bit more,” Merz said. “We feed Del Mar and Del Mar feeds us. We sat down and talked, and we think it would be better if we start going out and recruiting together as one, instead of as two separate entities.”

The two tracks announced Feb. 8 a newly created Wild West Bonus, offering a \$1 million payoff to any horse that wins the Santa Anita Handicap, Hollywood Gold Cup Stakes (G1), and TVG Pacific Classic Stakes (G1) in the same year. The Pacific Classic is run at Del Mar after the first two races of the series are contested at Santa Anita.

“There is no easy one fix,” Newby said of business on all fronts at Santa Anita. “I think we just have to make a lot of good, little decisions. The sport has been a little slow to modernize over the last 20, 30 years and put us in the position we’re in. This year has been interesting, especially. We have seen we can still put on a good show and people are interested in our product.” **BH**

#### Special Note For Sire Lists:

For stallions that stand, will stand, or stood (deceased) in the selected region (stallions that have died or been exported prior to the 2016 breeding season are excluded), and have runners in North America. Listed below are all available Northern Hemisphere statistics through February 7, 2021. As supplied to *The Blood-Horse* by The Jockey Club Information Systems, Inc., earnings 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 2019 is \$25,300 or 53% of the 2019 average purse in Japan. To put earnings on par, all Japanese progeny earnings are multiplied by 53% before being credited to a sire’s progeny earnings. Hong Kong earnings are adjusted by 17%; Singapore by 85%. Current year stakes winners include all N.H.-foaled black-type stakes winners worldwide. \*Foal counts include Southern Hemisphere. Cumulative stakes winners include all countries. (A ¶ indicates a sire represented by his first crop to race).