



Don Engel: Calling It A Career

by LARRY BORTSTEIN

Don Engel, who worked in the Thoroughbred industry in many capacities for the past half-century, including as breeder, sales agent, innovator, website launcher and newsletter publisher, has put aside his catalogs and ledgers—as well as his pithy commentary—for the last time.

"I'm 83 and I don't want to do anything anymore," said the resident of the wine country town of Rohnert Park, California, where, since Nov. 1, he has lived in retirement with Jean, his wife of 39 years.

"I don't know where the Thoroughbred business is heading, but wherever it's going, it'll have to get there without me," Engel said.

Engel, who owned his first horse in 1959 and became a member of the California Thoroughbred Breeders Association in 1961, hasn't renewed his CTBA membership, which expires at the end of December.

In May 2007, he stopped producing his monthly TIA (Thoroughbred Information Agency) newsletter, which served as an industry watchdog for more than 40 years.

Recently, he sold his last horse-related business venture, a popular breeding and racing website located at www.thoroughbredinfo.com, to California racing journalist Lisa Groothedde.

But total idleness is not on the agenda of this 5-foot-10, 170-pound, physically fit man.

"I still play tennis on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays," he said. "It's always singles, never doubles, I don't play doubles because I can't stand the guilt when I betray my partner."

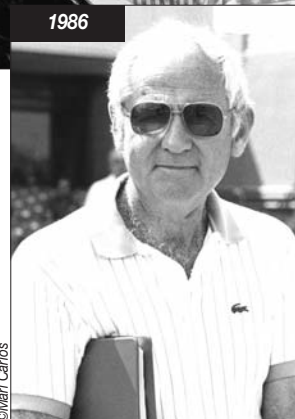
Engel also can reflect on an interesting life's journey that has seen him work in journalism in California and Louisiana, as a high school teacher, college professor, Army Air Corps navigator, U.S. Forest Service worker, in a machine shop, as a handyman in a Girl Scout camp and

even as a pinsetter in a bowling alley.

Two of his more fascinating experiences included international celebrities—former heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson and jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie.



Don and Jean Engel in 1993



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He was the 17-year-old sports editor of the *Bakersfield Californian* in 1942 when Johnson, who had become the world's first black heavyweight champion in 1908, came to town to referee a wrestling match.

"I still can't believe I got to interview him," Engel recalled of the mythic figure of controversy who became the subject of the movie, "The Great White Hope," starring James Earl Jones.

A lifetime jazz aficionado, Engel got to play chess years later against Gillespie when the legendary musician was in San Francisco for a performance.

"I don't remember the winning moves, but I do remember beating him," Engel said with a smile.

Those adventures are among many in an adventurous life that began in 1925 in a ranch house in Baird, Texas, where he was the only child of Otto, a West Texas oilfield wildcatter, and Ruby Halsted, the daughter of a rancher/dairyman. Most of Engel's youth was spent on remote oil properties.

The family moved west to Bakersfield after Engel's sophomore year in high school, and he began working for the *Californian* shortly after graduation. He later graduated from the University of California in Berkeley with a degree in English.

Engel didn't enter the horse world until the late 1950s. His second wife, Shirley, was a Thoroughbred enthusiast, and the couple bought their first mares in 1959. Later, buoyed by an inheritance from her family, they purchased more-expensive mares and launched Honey Lake Thoroughbred Farm.

One of those first mares, Irlandesa, gave them their first foal when she dropped late one night a Renown colt they would name Friendly Fred, in honor of noted broadcaster Fred Friendly.

"We came to her stall the next morning and found her foal by her side," Engel recalled. "She had given birth with no help from anyone. We sold the foal and he ended up winning 12 races and placing in two stakes at Golden Gate Fields, including a second to Native Diver. That's what got us started."

Believing they needed expert guidance, Engel turned to Col. F. W. Koester, then the general manager of the CTBA.

"I wrote to him and he wrote me many long letters with all kinds of ideas and suggestions," Engel said. "He didn't know who I was but he wanted to help. You don't see that happening any more."

As the business evolved, Engel developed an innovation of which he still "is most proud."

"When we took our first yearlings to market at the 1965 Hollywood Park select yearling sale, we showed slow-motion pictures of our horses running individually in the pasture," he recalled.

"I took them with my little home movie camera and they were a great success. I wanted prospective buyers to see the way each horse moved, instead of running in a pack. I believe that was the first time such films had ever been shown by a yearling consignor, certainly the first time in California."

Shirley, the mother of Engel's four children—three of whom still are living—and Don were divorced with the children remaining with him. The Honey Lake operation dissolved, and he began TIA as an advertising vehicle for clients and moved south to Arcadia, California, where he remained a prominent sales agent through the 1980s.

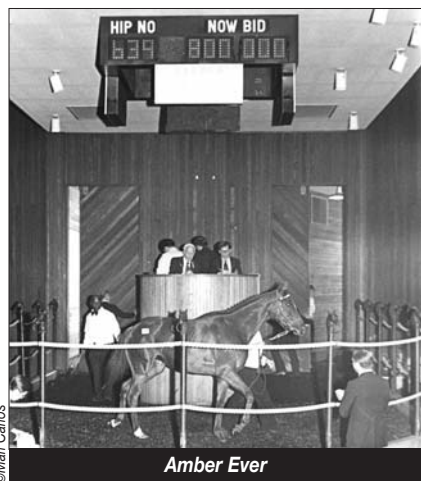
His consignment, in January 1982, of the equine holdings of publishing heir Hastings Harcourt, who died in 1981, was perhaps his most significant success. Twenty-five horses sold for \$2,827,400, including grade II winner Amber Ever, a three-year-old Top Command filly out of the Raise a Native mare Up In Arms, who brought \$800,000, then a California record for a filly or mare in training. Up In Arms, bought privately for \$20,000, herself sold for \$250,000.

From the Harcourt dispersal, Engel also sold the broodmare Bold Captive, in foal to Relaunch, for a record \$350,000. The resulting foal was Skywalker, winner of the 1986 Breeders' Cup Classic and an influential sire.

In a 1973 auction, he sold a T.V. Lark filly out of the dual stakes-winning Blue Prince mare Thoroly Blue for a state record weanling price of \$67,000.

"I know most, if not all, of those records have been broken," Engel said. "Memory fades."

But what grand memories they are. 🐾



Amber Ever



Skywalker



Bold Captive