

Looking Back

SAVE THE DATE

Malibu Stakes
Continues to Deliver
for Racing

By JAY HOVDEY

In Southern California part of the holiday season includes the day after Christmas, when the Malibu Stakes tops the traditional opening day of Santa Anita Park's winter-spring season



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HORSE RACING has its share of hooks on which to hang the best traditions of the game, days and dates entwined and imbued with the sense memories of lasting experience. The first Saturday in May. The first Sunday in October. The first Tuesday in November. Louisville, Paris, or Melbourne—the geography does not matter as much as the knowledge that the day will be special for all the right reasons, and that there will be another one next year.



For many years a singular such date proved elusive in Southern California. The era of year-round racing at California tracks served to water down the impact of the various opening days. Hollywood Park began with a post-Santa Anita Park whimper then built to a grand array of its stakes events while Del Mar enjoyed the crazed participa-

In the 1957 Malibu Sequet Stakes, Round Table (left) would prevail over Seaneen

tion on its opener by a local citizenry—many who then disappeared for the rest of the meet. Neither track wasted a race of significance to kick things off.

That approach changed with the opening of the Santa Anita meet on

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Dec. 26, 1984. The Malibu Stakes, a grade 2 race on its way to grade 1 status, was rescued from its variety of running dates to be embedded as the crown jewel of the program, and there the race has remained in all its seven-furlong, main-track glory, synonymous with the annual renewal of the West's most historic racing venue.

As of 1984, the opening of the Santa Anita meet on the day after Christmas had long been set in stone as a sacrosanct racing holiday, although there have been a handful of calendar exceptions. Dr. Charles Henry Strub, the founding impresario of Santa Anita, was so impressed with his gift to the sport that he held the track's debut program on Dec. 25, 1934, thereby stealing all possible local headlines. The Christmas Day opener ran its course after four years, followed by an array of dates during the last week of December.

Because of World War II, there was no racing at all at Santa Anita from late 1941 until May 15, 1945, one week after the Allied victory in Europe was declared. In 1970, opening day was delayed until Feb. 3 due to a contract dispute between management and the union representing mutuel clerks,

followed by a couple of minor shifts in the opener to avoid six or seven straight racing days right off the bat. Otherwise, commencing with Dec. 26, 1977, there has been no other date attached to Santa Anita's opening day.

A RACE IS ALWAYS KNOWN BY THE COMPANY IT KEEPS.

The Malibu Stakes began life in 1952 as part of Strub's unique series of races for late 3-year-olds and newly turned 4-year-olds. The Santa Anita Maturity, at 1¼ miles in January and then early February, was inaugurated in 1948 as a sort of valedictory moment for the generation to savor before being thrown to the older wolves. Kentucky Derby winner Ponder and stablemate Two Lea ran 1-2 for Calu-

met Farm in the 1950 Maturity while in 1951 Great Circle and Bill Shoemaker took down the \$144,325 Maturity first prize, the richest purse that year in North America.

The Malibu and the 1½-mile San Fernando Stakes were intended as steppingstones to the Maturity and served the purpose well. (Five years after Strub's 1958 death, the Maturity was renamed in his honor.) But the Malibu always had the feel of a stand-alone attraction, pitting pure sprinters against more long-winded horses either dropping back in distance or ramping up their campaigns. The 1960 Malibu was a case in point. The fiery Ole Fols, cross-country winner of the Sport Page and Bing Crosby handicaps at six furlongs, defeated Bagdad, winner of the 1¼-mile Hollywood Derby and second to Sword Dancer in the Belmont Stakes.

The name of the race stood out among Santa Anita's extensive tributes to Hispanic towns, missions, and landmarks. At first, it was the Malibu Sequet Stakes, named for the 13,000-acre Mexican land grant ranging inland from coastal L.A. County that was acquired in the late 19th century by the eastern aristocrat Frederick Rindge, who had inherited his money from his father's shipping and textile investments. Rindge's widow, Rhoda May Rindge, developed a beachfront stretch of the property into a haven for Hollywood stars, and their son, Frederick Hastings Rindge Jr, was yacht club pals with movie studio mogul Hal Roach, who also happened to be Strub's partner in the founding of Santa Anita Park.

All through its early history, the Malibu was a race looking for a secure place on the calendar. After its first four years offered in early January, a stretch that included the victory of 1954 Kentucky Derby winner Determine on New Year's Day 1955, the Malibu Sequet shifted to late Decem-



There have been an array of Hall of Fame horses with a Malibu Stakes trophy on the shelf, including (from left) Native Diver in 1962, Buckpasser in 1966, and Damascus in 1968

ber for 3-year-olds. One of the winners during those years was Round Table, whose Dec. 28, 1957, Malibu score under 130 pounds was his 15th win of the year in his 22nd start. To say they don't make them like Round Table anymore is beside the point. Even then, they made very few like him.

By the late 1950s, the unincorporated city of Malibu was well established for its graceful beaches and the intimidating wealth and celebrity of its marquee residents. The "Sequet" portion of its land grant name was rarely heard any longer, which prompted Santa Anita's racing department to streamline the name of the race for its Dec. 27, 1958, renewal, the second day of the new meet. Hillsdale, the pride of Indiana, beat the classy Jewel's Reward, then went on to win nine stakes as a 4-year-old in 1959, ending the year weighted at 130 pounds on the Free Handicap alongside older champion Round Table.

A race is always known by the company it keeps. Besides Round Table, there have been an array of Hall of Fame horses with a Malibu Stakes trophy on the shelf. Native Diver took a deep breath and inhaled the 1962 Malibu by $6\frac{1}{4}$ lengths, wire-to-wire. Both Buckpasser and Damascus, on the heels of their Horse of the Year campaigns, came west to add the Malibu to their resumes. Ancient Title was unbeatable at seven furlongs—a fitting seven-for-seven during his 57-race career—and the 1974 Malibu victory over Linda's Chief was one of his finest hours.

Spectacular Bid opened his splendid 4-year-old campaign by putting California's champion Flying Paster in his place while winning the 1980 Malibu in a stakes—and track-record 1:20.

At the end of his 3-year-old season, Precisionist already was an established middle-distance star of various moods when he won a division of the 1984 Malibu—the first year of its current run as a Dec. 26 opening day fixture. No one



In winning a January edition of the Malibu in 1980, Spectacular Bid launched one of the greatest racing seasons of all time as he would sweep the Strub series and win each of his nine starts—all graded stakes

California-bred Ancient Title won the 1974 Malibu Stakes, contested in January rather than December, and he followed with wins in the San Fernando and Charles H. Strub stakes to sweep the series

should have been surprised, therefore, when he went back to those roots 10 months later to win the Breeders' Cup Sprint (G1) at Aqueduct.

The most anticipated match-up in Malibu history came opening day of the 1987-88 Santa Anita meet, when classic winners Snow Chief and Ferdinand were poised for comebacks after sitting out the second half of the 1986 season. The advantage seemed to lean toward Snow Chief, with his quick-twitch style that had carried him to victories in the Preakness Stakes (G1), Florida Derby (G1), Santa Anita Derby (G1), and Jersey Derby (G2), along with an Eclipse Award for the division. Ferdinand won the Kentucky Derby—a rare day Snow Chief failed to fire—but Ferdinand could not catch his rival in the Hollywood Futurity (G1), the Santa Anita Derby, or the Preakness. Also,

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Precisionist, seen here winning the 1985 Breeders' Cup Sprint at Aqueduct, showed that same sprinting ability in taking the 1984 Malibu

Charlie Whittingham, spent most of the lead-up to the Malibu splashing cold water on Ferdinand's chances.

"It's not his distance," deadpanned the trainer.

Of course, that day it was. Snow Chief looked like a winner until Bill Shoemaker and Ferdinand caught him in the final sixteenth of a mile to win by a length and a quarter. The race marked Shoemaker's eighth (and final) victory in the Malibu, a record that began with Round Table and included Olden Times, Damascus, and Spectacular Bid.

Other Malibu odds and ends:

- **THE 18 HORSES** that ran in the 1969 Malibu must have represented a significant portion of the 1965 foal crop. The chart comments read like a passage from *War and Peace*, but jockey Jerry Lambert had the right idea. Breaking from post 18, Lambert put First Mate on the lead as soon as he could clear the herd to the inside and led the rest of the way to win by three-quarters of a length.

- **IN 1973** the Round Table colt Bicker provided the second father-son winners of the Malibu, following in the footsteps of Imbros and Native Diver. Bicker won the subsequent San Fernando Stakes, but like his sire he hated the mud and said so with a disappointing effort in the Strub.

- **MY JULIET**, in her first start at 4, finished third to Forceten and Messenger of Song in the best showing of the few fillies that have tried the Malibu. She went on to be champion sprinter of 1976, a title then including males and females.

- **AN UNUSUALLY DULL** Affirmed, reigning 1978 Horse of the Year, finished third in the 1979 Malibu to Little Reb, beaten 2¼ lengths. The champ lost again in the San Fernando, after which Laffit Pincay replaced Steve Cauthen on Affirmed, who concluded his career on a roll of seven straight victories.

- **THE MOST SUCCESSFUL** trainer of Malibu winners has been Richard

Mandella, who was born two years before Phil D won the first running Jan. 5, 1952. Beginning in 1988 with Oraibi, a son of Forli owned by Ralph and Aury Todd, Mandella has won the race six times with colts reflecting the spectrum of styles and profiles found throughout the history of the race.

Afternoon Deelites, owned by Burt and Jane Bacharach, was returning from a procedure to repair a tendon he had bowed in the Kentucky Derby when he won the first grade 1 version of the Malibu, in 1995. Gerald Ford's Dixie Union was very good for Mandella at 2 and even better at 3, when he added the 2000 Malibu to his win in the Haskell Invitational Handicap (G1). Mercedes Stable and Madeleine Paulson's Rock Hard Ten, second in the Preakness, was making his first start for Mandella when he defeated Lava Man in the 2004 Malibu, in what turned out to be a meeting of future winners of the Santa Anita Handicap (G1). In 2012 the sprinter Jimmy Creed won for Mandella and the Spendthrift Farm of B. Wayne Hughes, defeating

Private Zone, who went on to win two versions of the Vosburgh Stakes (G1) and a Cigar Mile Handicap (G1).

Mandella also has finished second twice in the Malibu, in 1978 with the gelding Bad 'n Big, who became a stable pony, and in 2008 with Into Mischief, who has gone on to a pretty good career at stud.

"I don't remember how he got beat in the Malibu," Mandella recalled. "He should have won, the way he'd run in the Damascus Stakes on Breeders' Cup day when he came from out of it and circled the field. Wayne took him home and retired him after the race, which really (bothered me). We'd just gotten him good after fighting a foot fungus that bothered him most of the year. But when his stud fee got high enough, a couple of years ago I told Wayne I forgave him."

Into Mischief's fee for 2022 is advertised at \$250,000.

Mandella's most recent Malibu



winner was Fox Hill Farms' Omaha Beach, a heartbreak of a racehorse who took his people to the threshold of both the Kentucky Derby and Pega-

In winning the 1973 Malibu Stakes, Earl Scheib's Bicker followed in the footsteps of his sire, Round Table; Scheib, third from the left, raced as Green Thumb Farm Stable



The most anticipated match-up in Malibu history lived up to its billing as Ferdinand edged Snow Chief in a clash of classic winners on opening day of the 1987-88 Santa Anita meet after trainer Charlie Whittingham spent much of the week playing down his colt's chances for victory



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sus World Cup Invitational Stakes (G1) before being sidelined by illness and injury. Omaha Beach won the Malibu easily under Mike Smith Dec. 28, 2019, on one of those opening days adjusted to avoid a marathon holiday week.

“With him, you tend to forget the races you won,” Mandella said. “But at least the Malibu showed what kind of older horse he could have been.”

In 1998 the Strub Stakes was shortened from 1¼ miles to 1½ miles

THROUGH IT ALL, THE MALIBU SURVIVED: STILL AT SEVEN FURLONGS.

while the San Fernando was shaved to 1½ miles (Silver Charm won them both, after being upset in the Malibu by Lord Grillo). The San Fernando was removed from the stakes schedule after the 2013 running, and the Strub was run for the last time in 2014, when its distance was dumbed down to 1½ miles.

Through it all, the Malibu survived: still at seven furlongs, firmly wedded to Santa Anita's opening day, and delivering good fields and memorable sport at the grade 1 level. Even as the 2021 season was drawing to an end, the names of such crowd-pleasing colts as Jackie's Warrior, Flightline, and Life Is Good were being floated as possible Malibu starters on opening day in a race that has endured. **BH**



Trainer Dick Mandella, with 1995 Malibu Stakes winner Afternoon Deelites, has won the Malibu six times



Rock Hard Ten used his 2004 Malibu win as a springboard to stretch out to victories in the 2005 Strub Stakes (G2) and Santa Anita Handicap (G1)



Today the Malibu can set up horses for international races as Charlatan followed his 2020 Malibu win with a runner-up finish in the 2021 Saudi Cup