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## DeBartolo brings Life to Breeders' Cup

By Claire Novak  
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LOUISVILLE, KY -- Candy DeBartolo sat in the Turf Club at Churchill Downs and found that her ticket for a \$5 wager had just returned \$3,500.

"I don't know how I did it! I just pick names!" she exclaimed with a bright-eyed smile, holding the small slip of paper between her perfectly-manicured fingers. Its' presence and newly-discovered value added to the cheer and general festivity of the afternoon. This was Thursday, less than 24 hours before the first leg of the Breeders' Cup World Championships, and there was nothing better than to be at the racetrack.

Across the table, Eddie DeBartolo Jr. wore a smile that stretched from ear-to-ear. The former owner of the San Francisco 49ers paused briefly to acknowledge his wife's winnings, but barely lost momentum from reflections upon his love for horses, remembrances of his father, and the reason he was getting back into the racing game. His birthday was Saturday and they were running a horse, Life At Ten, in the Breeders' Cup Ladies' Classic on Friday. Speaking of life, it felt pretty darn good.



Eddie DeBartolo Jr. looks on as his wife Candy pets Life At Ten.

"We've never been to the Breeders' Cup before!" DeBartolo said. "I've watched it on TV. But my dad went to the Breeders' Cup a number of times when he was alive ... It's going to be exciting tomorrow; it's good to be here."

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Life At Ten is a 5-year-old race mare, installed at odds of 7-2 on the morning line in Friday's marquee race for female horses. She is trained by top horseman Todd Pletcher. Candy DeBartolo is her owner of record.

"Finally, it's my name, instead of his name written down," Candy joked. "It gets to be my name. It's very exciting."

It's good for Candy to experience something different, something fresh and new. In April of 2008 she was diagnosed with lung cancer, and she battled through treatments and surgery in 2009 to beat it. She and her husband had purchased Life At Ten before that, in November of 2007, but suddenly found that the horse they acquired on a whim had become a welcome distraction.

"It was another dimension coming into our lives at a time when it was helpful," Candy said.

The DeBartolos are no stranger to the racetrack. Eddie's father, billionaire Eddie DeBartolo Sr., bought Thistledown Race Track in 1960 and went on to build Remington Park in Oklahoma City and Louisiana Downs in Bossier City. Although his focus was shopping mall development (the DeBartolo Corporation was the undisputed leader in the shopping mall industry from the late 1950s until his death in 1994),

horse racing was his passion.

"Racing was his relaxation, he just loved it as a sport," DeBartolo said. "Obviously, I was old enough to be involved."

The DeBartolos went to the races all the way back when they were just dating, high-school sweethearts with stars in their eyes.

"That was someplace I'd never been before," Candy recalled. "It was nerve-wracking for me; I didn't know what to expect from going to a racetrack."

The couple found racing to be an enjoyable social activity, but when Eddie bought the 49ers in 1977 at the relatively young age of 30, their lives became all football, all the time. Through 23 years of owning the team, through an unprecedented five Super Bowl victories, horse racing was the furthest thing from their minds.

"I was so involved in football, and so was Candy," he said. "We lived in Youngstown, Ohio, so every game was an away game for us. We commuted and we were trying to raise a family at the same time."

The disconnect from racing was amplified in 1994, when DeBartolo Sr. passed away at the age of 85. The DeBartolo Corporation's assets were divided between Eddie and his sister, Marie York, and that was when they sold the racetracks.

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You may leave a piece of property behind, but friendships built over decades last forever. For David Vance, time spent managing racetracks for Eddie DeBartolo Sr. has merged seamlessly into his new position for his late boss's son as instigator of equine purchases extraordinaire. Although he spent eight of the past 10 years in South America, working on racehorse purchases and bloodstock selections there, Vance remained tuned in to the North American racing scene. Three years ago, it all came back together.

Candy, a longtime horse lover who used to ride (she stopped when a Quarter Horse threw her 10 years ago at the couple's Montana ranch), had been re-introduced to Thoroughbred racing by some friends who would go to the track when she went to visit Los Angeles. When Vance heard of a very nice 2-year-old filly that had recently been located for Pletcher by bloodstock agent Gary Young, he made a proposition: why not buy a racehorse?

"He said, 'Well there's this little filly,'" DeBartolo remembered. "And she's not a little filly anymore; she's a beautiful, big girl. But anyhow, Candy at the time was doing fine, but she had gone through those medical issues -- which thank God now are past -- and we talked about it and she said, 'You know, it would be something different, it would be something fun.' And I said, 'Okay, why not?'"

The filly's road to the Breeders' Cup Ladies' Classic was not without setbacks. Although she turned in a solid maiden victory on Dec. 5 at Hollywood Park, coming from sixth to win easily by 3 ¼ lengths, she suffered a shoulder injury that put her on the sidelines for over 10 months. She came back in October of 2008, but finished second, and was beaten six times in a row. She also spent seven months on the sidelines with a knee chip from the beginning of 2009 to the late summer, and it was November 15 of 2009 before she got another win at Aqueduct. But suddenly, the lightbulb went on. And the faith her connections had in the filly paid off.

"It took a little while to get her at her best," said Pletcher, who conditioned the 5-year-old daughter of

Malibu Moon to six straight wins including that Aqueduct score. "But I feel like she's training very well leading up to this race."

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On Thursday, Candy and Eddie went to the barn to visit Life At Ten. It was the first time they'd seen her in person since buying her in 2007. Candy brought a medal of St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint of the animals, and blessed her with it. She got to pet her on the nose.

"She's very gentle, that's what I felt," Candy said. "She's a gentle giant. She's a big, big horse, but she's very sweet. I wasn't afraid, and I've gone up to horses before and been afraid of them. I was not afraid of her at all."

The DeBartolos raise Clydesdales at a ranch in Kalispell, Montana, close to Glacier National Park. They sell some to the park service, horses that give sleigh rides to tourists through the powdery snow every winter. They go there to relax.

Horse racing is different. It's fast-paced and high-stakes. It's putting a spark into their lives again.

"At least I knew with football whether our team was ready," DeBartolo said. "I knew the players we had, I knew the team was mentally and physically prepared to play. And that didn't mean they were going to win, but at least I had a feeling. I was disappointed a lot, but I was very happy a lot, too. In racing, it is absolutely out of your hands. When that starting gate opens, nobody knows. It's a world you have zero control over. Really, you don't."

Sitting with Eddie DeBartolo, one is inclined to think, here's a man who has it all. But you hear him talk about the potential of losing Candy, his wife of 42 years, of the struggles they went through as she battled her illness and hung on through treatments and the recovery period. You listen to the pride in his voice when he mentions their grandkids and the love they share, and you realize that this guy has made a pretty good life for himself, sure, but it hasn't been without heartache.

"She's doing the cat scans and we're out almost 20 months and thank God she's doing great and she looks great," he said. "I'm trying to put a little weight on her now."

Candy, petite and delicate, scoffs at this idea. But an idea she doesn't scorn is that of buying a few more horses, of spending more time at the races. "It's enjoyable, it's different to be here," she said. "It's very good to be back. It makes life more interesting; it almost feels like one of my daughters going to her first dance recital, or graduating from college. That's how I feel with her."

"David and Todd have brought us some opportunities. Some other trainers have come to us, and we're really seriously going to look at getting into racing on a bigger scale," DeBartolo said. "I think it would be fun to have a couple more horses, and even in talking to (Hall of Fame trainer) D. Wayne Lukas, he said nowadays it's a buyer's market, basically, and he said you can get a lot of value for your money. He just said you have to know what to do and when to do it, and I'd like to continue in this venture. We're not in it to make money, we're in it to have some fun, to enjoy it, to propagate the sport and the business. Racing has taken really a sock to the face, and two or three people can't raise it back up, but we can do our part."

Although the factor of the unknown looms in the sport, the DeBartolos know they've hired the best in the business to work with their first runner.

"You don't have any control, but you do have control of the quality and the type of trainers that you hire, and what they represent," DeBartolo said. "There's no question that Todd Pletcher and his dad and his entire company have done a phenomenal job with his horse."

And as far as Life At Ten is concerned, a score in the Ladies' Classic could just be the beginning of her journey.

"She's raced wonderfully and we don't know what we're going to do after this race," DeBartolo said. "I'd like to see her be a broodmare, but this year she's really coming into her own. There's some talk that maybe she could race another year."

"If Todd's hoping she's better than she's ever been right now, and when you say that about a five year old mare, there's a question of 'Why stop?'" Vance said. "I mean, Zenyatta's six!"

"We just hope she's going to have a good day," said Candy. "She's done wonderfully, she's a beautiful wonderful horse, and no matter what happens, we love her dearly."

*Claire Novak is an award-winning journalist whose coverage of the thoroughbred industry appears in a variety of outlets, including The Blood-Horse magazine, the Times Union (Albany, N.Y.) and NTRA.com. She lives in Lexington, Ky.*