

CLAIM *to* FAME



Oklahoma owner
Danny Caldwell
has found great
success in the
claiming game

BY MICHAEL CUSORTELLI

PHOTOS BY
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Oklahoman Danny Caldwell has become one of the most successful claiming owners in the country, and it hasn't taken him long.

How successful, you ask? Just two years ago, Caldwell's runners—most of which were horses he had claimed—won 48 races, ranking him 32nd in North America by victories among all owners, ahead of such well-known names as Stronach Stables, Gary and Mary West, Dogwood Stable and West Point Thoroughbreds.

More recently, Caldwell was the 52nd leading owner in North America in 2012, as his horses won 42 races from 227 starts and earned \$711,148 in purse money. Caldwell also has been the leading owner for four of the last five Remington Park meets. A former high school teacher and coach near his hometown of Poteau, Oklahoma, Caldwell credits his success to his competitive spirit.

"I'm a very competitive person," Caldwell said. "If I wasn't involved in horse racing, I'd probably be a college coach by now."

Caldwell claimed one of his most noteworthy runners, Oklahoma-bred Fifth Date, for \$18,000 at Remington last August. A 9-year-old gelding by Cherokee Five, Fifth Date has since won three races, including the \$155,500 Oklahoma Classics Cup, and he ran second to multiple stakes winner Okie Ride in the \$50,000 Silver Goblin Stakes at Remington.

Fifth Date has earned \$148,034 since the claim, but that hefty bankroll is only one of his endearing traits. According to his owner, Fifth Date doesn't act his age.

"He looks and acts like a 4- or 5-year-old," said Caldwell. "He's the type of horse I'd love to turn out and give a break, but I can't. He's just not that type of horse. He'll either hurt himself or somebody else. He's wired, just like me. He wants to go out and do something every day. He always wants to be the first one out to get walked and the first one fed. When we first got him, he'd just stand in his stall and kick at the walls. We've got him now to where he doesn't do that anymore. When we first got him, he wouldn't even come up to the stall door to meet you, but now we've got him to where he's throwing

his head up and down and wanting attention. He's really changed.

"I claimed another 9-year-old, George Ray, at Oaklawn this year," he added. "He's a nice horse, but he looks 9. Fifth Date doesn't look or act his age, and as long as he wants to run he's going to get that opportunity."

Another successful Caldwell claim, Oklahoma-bred Herecomesthemorrow, was tagged at Remington during the summer of 2009. Caldwell moved the then 9-year-old Here We Come gelding up the ladder, and he won his next two outs, including the \$70,000 Oklahoma Classics Sprint.

FROM EDUCATOR TO BUSINESSMAN

Caldwell was introduced to horses at an early age. He grew up on a farm in eastern Oklahoma, not far from his current home in Poteau, where he lives with his wife of nine years, Shelly, and his 17-year-old stepson. He also has two grown sons from a previous marriage and two grandchildren.

A three-sport athlete at Panama High School about 10 miles north of Poteau, Caldwell earned his degree in 1988 at Northeastern Oklahoma State in Tahlequah, where he was a starting quarterback on the football team. In 2002, after 12 years as an educator, he changed gears to start a stone business from scratch with his brother, Tommy.

The stone business, Bluebird Stone, has grown to a \$4-million a year enterprise. The idea to start the business was his brother's.

"My brother called me one day and said, 'Let's get into the stone business,'" Danny recalled. "I said, 'The stone business? What are you talking about?' Well, when he was working in the coal mines he was digging through stone, and he told me there were guys there making money selling stone. It sounded like a good idea to me, because at that time I was interested in making a career change.

"I knew nothing whatsoever about the stone business," he added with a laugh. "When Tommy and I started the business, we had no customers and no inventory—we had nothing. We just built the whole thing from scratch through calling potential customers, sending samples and flying around the country meeting people. We sell it to retail dealers, and they sell it to their customers, who use it to build homes, patios, walkways, fireplaces, countertops, things like that. We send it all over the country, from Pennsylvania to California. We've even sent stone over to China."

When he's not at the track racing his Thoroughbreds and claiming more, Caldwell works three days a week at Bluebird Stone. He tends to the financial end of the business and still does some sales work Monday through Wednesday, but he's at the track the rest of the week. His main circuit consists of Oaklawn Park in Arkansas from January to April, Prairie Meadows in Iowa from April to July and Remington from

After claiming Oklahoma-bred Fifth Date for \$18,000 in late August, Caldwell and Villafranco sent the now 9-year-old gelding out to win the \$155,500 Oklahoma Classics Cup at Remington Park in October. The son of the Cherokee Run stallion Cherokee Five has banked nearly \$150,000 for his new connections.



August to December. Caldwell also campaigns a few horses in Texas and Louisiana.

He's worked with several high-profile trainers throughout the years, including Steve Asmussen, but currently his private trainer is Freddy Villafranco, a familiar face around Oklahoma tracks. Villafranco's brother, Luis, is one of the state's top American Quarter Horse trainers.

Between his stone business and his horse business, Caldwell works seven days a week.

"I guess I just like being busy," Caldwell said. "I don't really know any other way."

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

Using some money from his share of Bluebird Stone, Caldwell claimed his first horse with trainer Ron Moquett at Churchill Downs in 2007. Even though Caldwell's success has been well-documented, he still recalls a good one that got away one year later at Oaklawn.

"I was looking at a 3-year-old gelding named Force Freeze, who was making his first start in a maiden \$20,000 claimer," Caldwell recalled. "I did some research on him, and I had a trainer who was going to make his first-ever claim for me. I had a gut feeling about this horse, and I told my trainer, 'I really like this horse. I like the way he goes, and I kind of want this horse.' He told me, 'Well Mr. Caldwell, I can't claim this horse for you because I can't see his legs.'"

As fate would have it, Force Freeze won that 5 1/2-furlong race by 8 1/2 lengths. He won his next race, a six-furlong entry level allowance, by four. Force Freeze eventually won two stakes, including last year's Grade 2, \$150,000 Gulfstream Park Sprint Championship, and he was group-stakes placed in Dubai. He also ran second to Amazombie in the 2011 Sentient Jet Breeders' Cup Sprint (G1) at Churchill Downs. All

Caldwell has topped the owner standings at Remington Park in four of the past five meets.



I don't do my job well, then it's hard for Freddy and his crew to do their job well. We're a team, and all the success we've had has been as a team. From my coaching experience, I know I'm only going to be as good as my assistants."

LUCK OF THE DRAW

While Caldwell might do as much pre-race preparation as any owner in the business, there is one aspect of the business that no amount of time and effort can control.

"When I rely on claiming like I do, I also have to be lucky when it comes to shakes," he said about the process of a random draw to determine who gets a horse in cases when multiple claims are submitted for the same horse. "I won six straight shakes at Oaklawn this year, but then I lost six straight. It's important for me to have backup plans, because if I just set my sights on one or two horses and I lose a lot of shakes, I'm going to end up with empty

told, the Forest Camp gelding has earned more than \$850,000.

"I had the claim slip for Force Freeze all filled out, and I would've been the only person to put in a claim for him," Caldwell said. "I've won and lost my share of shakes, but I would've gotten Force Freeze without a shake."

Despite that missed opportunity, the numbers show that Caldwell has had much more success than disappointment. From 2007 through the end of February 2013, his runners have won 15 percent of their races with 186 wins from 1,275 starts and earnings of nearly \$3 million.

DOING HIS HOMEWORK

Although a little luck never hurts in racing, Caldwell's success in the claiming game has come with hard work, as he's spent many an evening conducting online research. He won't even consider making a claim without checking a horse's pedigree and other information he deems important.

"When I'm looking at a possible claim, I look at the race replays, and I pull up information on all the horses it's been running against to see how those horses competed in their other races," Caldwell said. "If those horses go on to win other races and keep moving up the ladder, then I know the horse I'm looking at didn't run a bad race if he ran fourth or was beaten a neck.

"I go so far as to check where the horses sold and how much money they sold for," he adds. "I even check who their trainers were and the race records of their siblings. I also like to lay my eyes on them. I feel a whole lot better about making a claim if I have a gut feeling about a horse, like I had with Force Freeze. I don't even know how many horses I've claimed, but I know it's been more than a hundred. My job is to find Freddy good horses he can work with. The way I look at it, I'm still coaching in a way because it's my job to recruit players for our team. If

RACEHORSE CLAIMING 101

Interested in getting in the claiming game? Here are some tips from four-time Remington Park leading owner Danny Caldwell:

- Find a good trainer, someone you feel comfortable working with. Get all the information about their rates and what's included in the rates.
- There's a lot of good information online, so be sure to do your research. That includes checking out a horse's pedigree and the race records of his siblings.
- Make a few practice claims before you invest any real money. If you're looking at a horse you might be interested in claiming, take a look at it on the track and research it. Make a practice claim, then follow up on the horse to see how it does in future races.
- Be patient, and don't get discouraged if you make a few bad claims along the way.

stalls. As a claiming owner, I'm also going to lose a lot of horses."

Caldwell said that one factor in his success is racing his horses where they fit.

"Because I'm so competitive and I like to win, I don't like to run horses over their heads," he added. "I carry a condition book around with me all the time, and I study it like I'm at school studying for an exam.

"I have an edge at Remington because I have a suite right on the finish line," he said. "I'll go out on the balcony and watch every horse gallop out. I look for how far they gallop out and how they come back, and I'll make notes. I have a pretty good memory, so if for some reason I don't write something down, I can usually remember it."

Just as a coach relies on scouting reports and other in-depth information to prepare his own team and face the competition, Caldwell also goes beyond the obvious information provided in the past performances.

"I've also noticed that the runners of some sires, like Stephen Got Even and Include, get better with age, and they stay sound," he said.

"They might not do much at age 3 or 4, but at 5, 6 or 7 they get to that stage where they just take off. I always take a second look if I see those two stallions on a prospective claim's pedigree."

EXPANDING HIS HORSE BUSINESS

Caldwell has also bought a few horses at sales, but he's had limited success in that arena. However, he has started his own breeding program with one of his 2007 claims, Ellerton. A winning 10-year-old son of Silver Deputy, Ellerton was tagged by Caldwell in a seven-way shake for \$15,000 at Churchill. The stallion stands for a \$1,000 fee at Sunlight Farm at Sallisaw, Oklahoma.

Caldwell currently has 10 broodmares at his farm, which is managed by David Pettinger, a successful jockey who won 866 races on the Midwest circuit from 1976-87. All of Caldwell's broodmares raced for him after he claimed them. His first homebreds will hit the track this year.

As a claiming owner, Caldwell knows that he can't get too attached to his horses because they could be moving on to a new barn with the drop of a claim slip. Fifth Date, however, will always have a special place in his heart.

"When he's done racing—whenever that is—he's going to have a good home somewhere, if not at my farm then somewhere else," Caldwell said. "I'll find him a good home." ★

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