

# Class President

*Student Council, purchased a week prior to the race, upsets the field in the Pacific Classic*

BY TRACY GANTZ

**B**uying horses today may mean dusting off the old axiom “horses for courses” and adhering to it with new fervor. Ro Parra certainly took advantage of it, searching for horses that might like synthetic surfaces now that Southern California tracks are converting to Cushion Track and Polytrack.

Parra ferreted out 5-year-old Student Council, bought him a week before Del Mar’s Pacific Classic (gr. I) for his Millennium Farms, and proceeded to win the seaside’s track \$1-million race with him. In the process, Student Council vanquished the popular Lava Man, who had won the

last five of California’s big three events—the 2007 and 2006 Hollywood Gold Cup (gr. I), 2007 and 2006 Santa Anita Handicap (gr. I), and 2006 Pacific Classic.

Only one of those five Lava Man victories, however, this year’s Gold Cup, came over a synthetic surface. Despite trainer Doug O’Neill working Lava Man at Del Mar the week before the Pacific Classic, the gelding found the Polytrack heavy going, and ended up sixth in the 12-horse Classic field.

“It is a tiring, laboring track,” O’Neill said, “but they all have to run over it. The five (Student Council) just skipped over it.

I sure thought going into it Lava Man was ready to run a big one. He just didn’t have the legs under him to get it done.”

Before Parra purchased Student Council privately from breeder William S. Farish, the horse had won five of 20 starts for a 25% win percentage. On Polytrack, however, that figure rose to 50%, Student Council having won once at Turfway Park and once in three starts at Keeneland since that track installed Polytrack last fall.

“I think the horse can run on any sur-



NORTH AMERICAN GRADED STAKES



In his first start for Ro Parra’s Millennium Farms, Student Council wins the \$1-million Pacific Classic over Awesome Gem



Favored Lava Man (black and pink silks) put in his customary run to the lead as the field hits the top of the stretch

face," said Vladimir Cerin, who took over as Student Council's trainer after Parra bought him. "He's a very consistent horse."

Neil Howard had trained Student Council for Farish and had him at Saratoga. Steve Asmussen, who trains for Parra in the Midwest and the East, picked him up and shipped him to Cerin.

"Mr. Howard sent me every bit of information that I could possibly need on the horse, everything that's been done with him over the last few months," Cerin said. "That was quite helpful."

A quiet man who thoughtfully considers his responses before answering any question, Cerin eschewed the raucous post-race celebrations that often attend million-dollar victories. Other than admitting he plotted race strategy with jockey Richard Migliore, Cerin modestly declined to take credit for training Student Council up to the Classic. He explained that the horse only arrived the Tuesday before the Aug. 19 race.

"We had a pretty good idea what the pace of the race would be," Cerin said. "(Migliore) was a master at executing the plan, if we had enough horse. Of course, you don't know that before the race."

#### **LAVA MAN VULNERABLE?**

Like the rest of the field, Student Council had to contend with the legendary Lava Man in the Pacific Classic. Yet given that

Lava Man had traveled to Dubai and run last in the Dubai Duty Free (UAE-I) earlier this year, had lost the Charles Whittingham Handicap (gr. IT) to After Market, had emerged from the Hollywood Gold Cup with an abscess in his left front foot, and was making his debut on Polytrack, horsemen may have thought him vulnerable.

Certainly, that contributed to the 12-horse field, up from eight in the 2006 Pacific Classic. It was the second-largest Classic field in the race's 17-year history, surpassed only in 2002, when Came Home defeated 13 others.

Competitors came from all facets of Southern California's horse population. A. P. Xcellent, Big Booster, and Porfido had finished second, third, and fourth, respectively, to Lava Man in the Hollywood Gold Cup. Sun Boat, Awesome Gem, and Salty Humor captured the first three spots in Del Mar's Classic prep, the San Diego Handicap (gr. II). Arson Squad, sixth in the San Diego, had won the Strub Stakes (gr. II) at Santa Anita. Hello Sunday was an improving 4-year-old from the formidable Bobby Frankel barn.

Even 3-year-olds tried their luck, a not-unheard-of phenomenon in the race's history. Best Pal won the inaugural Pacific Classic at 3 in 1991, with sophomores General Challenge and Came Home following in 1999 and 2002, respectively.

Initially, 3-year-olds Tiago, Albertus Maximus, and Time Squared were set to wade in. However, trainer John Shirreffs and owners Jerry and Ann Moss elected to scratch Tiago, a half-brother to 2005 Kentucky Derby (gr. I) winner Giacomo, from the race and look elsewhere.

Still, no one took Lava Man lightly.

"Lava Man's a great horse," Cerin said after the race. "He's been very well-handled by his trainer and his owners, but all streaks come to an end."

Lava Man drew the rail, and jockey Corey Nakatani angled him outside of horses in time for the run to the first turn.

"Corey did a great job getting him off the rail," O'Neill said.

Third as the field headed down the backstretch, Lava Man ranged up on the second turn with his signature move. Usually, that puts Lava Man on the lead, where he holds off the competition through the stretch drive.

"He tried hard," Nakatani said. "But he was struggling a bit out there."

Migliore let Student Council relax in the middle of the pack early. Sitting in fifth, alone behind the first quartet of runners, Migliore could watch the leaders and time his move.

"He's such an intelligent rider," Cerin said. "The word 'cerebral' isn't often used with jocks, but definitely goes well with this rider."

Migliore followed Lava Man when the favorite began his run.

"I expected Lava Man to carry us further, and we ended up making the lead sooner than I wanted," Migliore said.

It didn't matter. When Migliore stepped on the gas, Student Council circled the leaders, racing outside of Lava Man, his momentum carrying him to an easy lead. Lava Man briefly tried to stay with Student Council, but the real danger loomed from Awesome Gem, launching a too-late rally.

At the wire Student Council remained a half-length ahead of Awesome Gem, who had four lengths on Hello Sunday. Arson Squad led in the others—Big Booster, Lava Man, Porfido, Albertus Maximus, A. P. Xcellent, Time Squared, Salty Humor, and Sun Boat.

Student Council ran the 1¼ miles in 2:07.29, nearly six seconds slower than Lava Man needed to win the 2006 Pacific Classic over traditional dirt. It was by far the slowest in Pacific Classic history, with Lava Man's 2006 time, 2:01.62, the previous slowest mark.

#### **PRO POLYTRACK**

The time didn't concern Cerin, one of Polytrack's biggest fans.

"I've been a proponent of it for three years, ever since I first stepped on it at

Keeneland when they put it in on the training track," Cerin said. "It's the best thing we've ever done for racing. We have so many fewer injuries. We're saving millions and millions in horseflesh."

Acknowledging the cost to install a




**Winning rider Richard Migliore**

synthetic surface, Cerin said he felt Del Mar is reaping the rewards in larger field sizes and handle. On Pacific Classic day, Del Mar set an all-time handle record of \$24,642,601.

"When I work six horses on a Tuesday, on Wednesday morning I no longer pray that three of them are OK because I know three of them are done," Cerin said. "I just walk in Wednesday morning and I know all six are OK." He paused and asked, "Am I a little too excited?"

"Not at all," answered Del Mar president Joe Harper. Harper has had to field some complaints, notably from trainer Bob Baffert and owner Ahmed Zayat, that Polytrack isn't fast enough in the afternoons and is disadvantageous to speed horses.

"I think if we get more and more synthetic tracks, you'll hear the word 'dosage' again," Cerin said. "We've become Quarter Horse trainers instead of Thoroughbred trainers. We buy horses that run an eighth of a mile in 9.9 seconds instead of ones that run a mile and a quarter."

Kentucky-bred Student Council demonstrated that he has the pedigree to run 1¼ miles. By French classic winner Kingmambo, the sire of 1999 Belmont Stakes (gr. I) winner Lemon Drop Kid, Student Council is out of the multiple graded stakes-winning Kris S. mare Class Kris. 



**The 12-horse cast for the first Pacific Classic on Polytrack was the second-largest field in the race's history**