

Will work for food. Standing on a street corner under a hooded sweatshirt and shaking a rusted tomato can for loose coin. It was that close. Down to a handful of horses, trainer Bret Calhoun had been down so long it looked like up.

Trainer Bret Calhoun makes it to the 'Bigs' following a pair of Breeders' Cup wins

From that place to this place. Fifteen years later, two Breeders' Cup victories at Churchill Downs last November, and the wolf no longer howls outside Calhoun's door.

"It's been a long time coming, and Bret has done it the hard way, no doubt about it," said Bill Martin, who co-owns Sentient Jet Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Sprint (gr. I) winner Dubai Majesty.

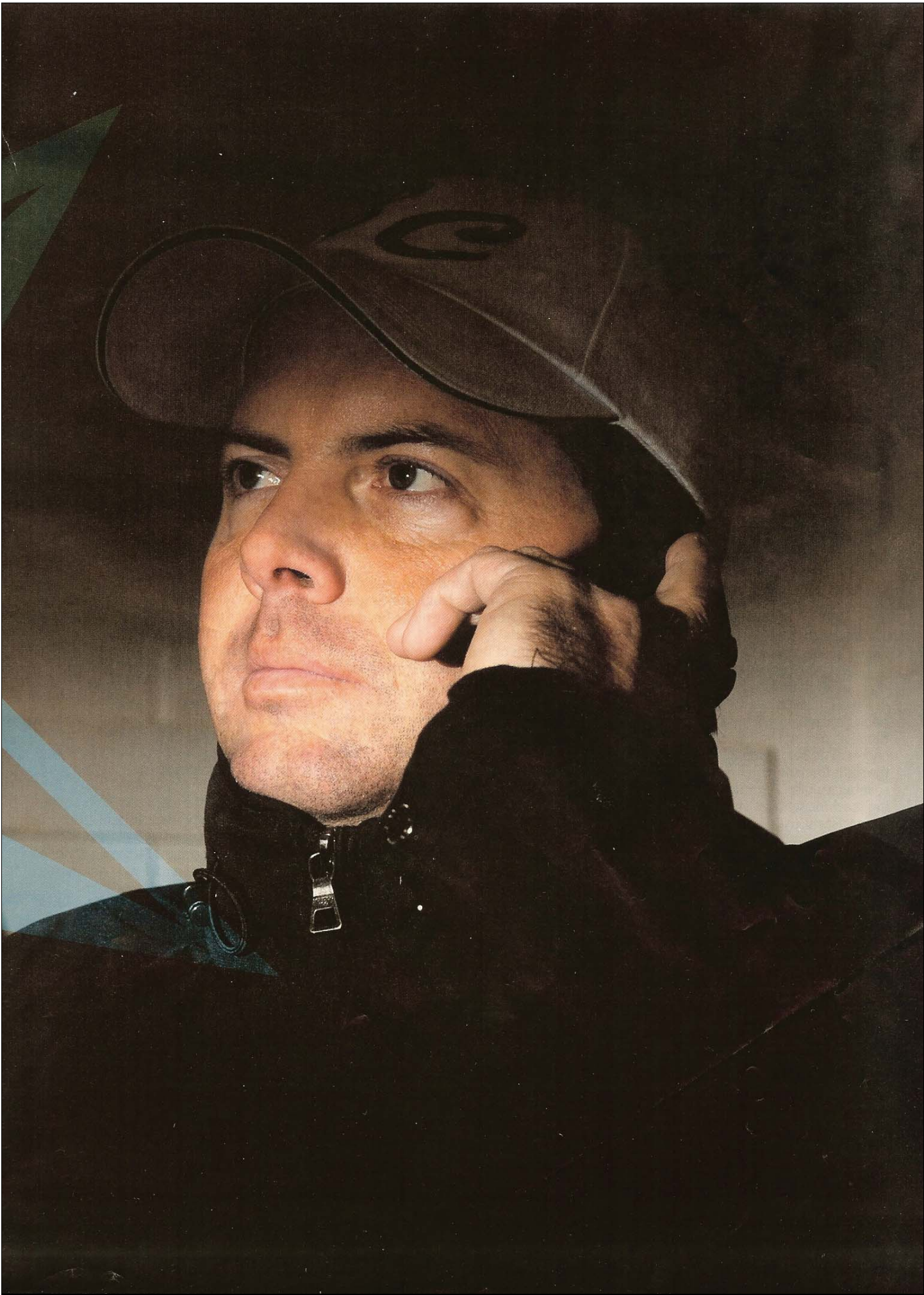
Even today, after tasting success with Dubai Majesty and Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint (gr. IIT) winner Chamberlain Bridge, Calhoun still adheres to the same principles and work habits he embraced during the hard times.

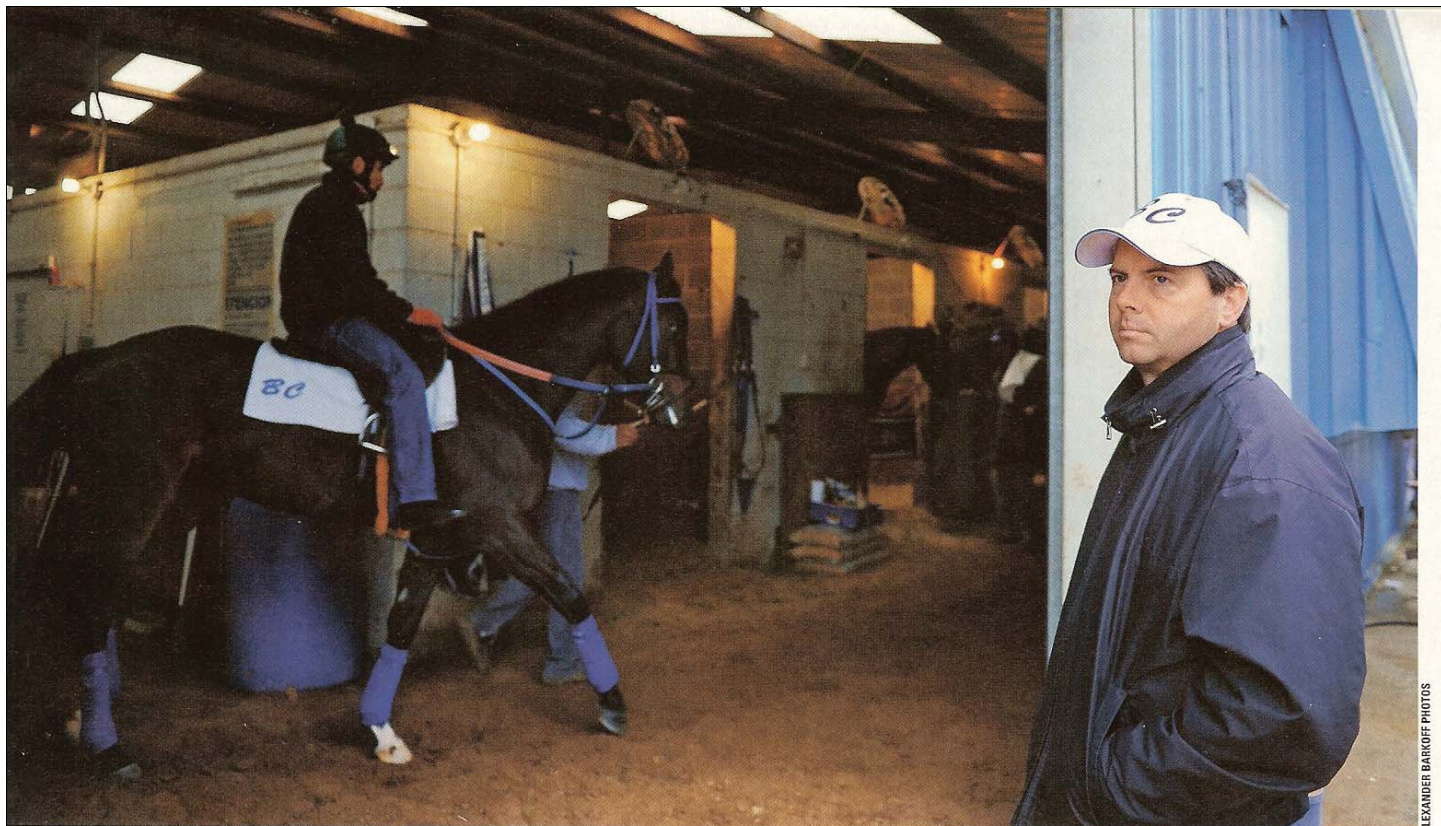
In the constant movement of leather, hay, rakes, bandages, curry combs, liniment, oats, wheelbarrows, jockey agents, bridles, buckets, hotwalkers, pitchforks, blacksmiths, veterinarians, blankets, and

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Bret Calhoun follows the morning activity at his winter base at Fair Grounds



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push brooms that is the makeup of Barn 32 on the backstretch of Fair Grounds, Calhoun appears to be doing nothing.

Take a closer look. The reality is that nothing is left undone. Not barking orders or shouting instructions, a respectful Calhoun moves like an invisible man through the mix and movement of the morning's chores. The horses are being taken out of the stalls for their baths. Exercise riders are soaping saddles. A groom loads the washing machine with an armful of leg wraps. An assistant trainer punches holes in a cinch strap. Nobody is standing around with their hands in their pockets.

The awareness to task makes it obvious that here is a team that understands the consequences of being careless.

"There is always a lot of work," Calhoun said with a trace of Texas accent, "and everybody knows what their job is and how to do it. We don't have to stand over the top of them and tell them every five minutes what to do. Organization is the key to operating a big stable."

Calhoun grew up in and around Grand Prairie, Texas, in the middle of horse country. His father, William "Buddy" Calhoun, was a schoolteacher but also maintained a ramshackle breeding farm of Quarter Horse mares. Sitting on his father's lap, holding the steering wheel of an old, beat-up truck, the 8-year-old Bret went to the bush track match races at Ross Downs, where six furlongs was considered a route race.

"We would be driving along," Buddy Calhoun remembered, "and I usually had

a lot worrying my mind. Bret would say something to make us laugh and forget all the troubles. After that we nicknamed him 'Happy Mouth.' "

The dream of being a trainer incubated in Calhoun for several years. It was a secret that he kept locked away, but the hidden seed of ambition burst at the age of 14.

"When it came to racehorses, I was like a sponge," Calhoun said. "I began to read and watch everything I could get my hands on. I knew where I wanted to go, but I didn't know how to get there. My parents said that if I applied myself to school like I did the horses, I would have been a Rhodes scholar."

It killed him inside, but Calhoun bit his lip and went off to college. He attended Texas Tech University, where he went through the motions of being a student. Geology, business administration, and so-

cio-economics textbooks may have been piled on his desk, but Calhoun's real curriculum was the *American Racing Manual* and Elliott Burch's hardbound copy of *How to Train Race Horses*.

Chasing after a grade-point average was not Calhoun's idea of having a good time. During spring break or summer vacation his classmates would head for the beach or the Mexican border towns. Calhoun would drive to Ruidoso Downs in New Mexico or a bush track outside Lubbock for the Quarter Horse races.

"I went anywhere that I could stay involved in the racehorse mix of things," Calhoun said.

Death of a salesman. Birth of a trainer. In 1993 "Happy Mouth" was not happy anymore. Disillusioned and burned out from the office cubicle life of peddling print media ads, Calhoun went to Shreveport, La., to help his retired parents run a string of five overmatched manes and tails at Louisiana Downs. Living in a trailer, Calhoun planned to stay for one week. When his parents realized that getting up at 4:30 in the morning was not the ideal retirement schedule, Bret took over the operation. The horses were owned by the family so there was no per diem money to help pay the bills. Calhoun's job description included being the groom, hotwalker, exercise rider, and trainer all in one.

Calhoun dove into the chores with the teeth-clenching determination of a pit bull.

"He was at the barn day and night," his father remembered. "He worked his rear end off. All you could see of him was skin

W. Bret Calhoun

Age: 46 **Family:** Single; son Logan
First Winner: Ramjet, April 22, 1994



Graded Stakes Winners:
 Baghdaria,
 Cactus Ridge,
 Chamberlain
 Bridge,
 Dubai Majesty,
 Janeian,
 Jody Slew,
 Mr. Nightlinger,
 Storm Mesa

and bones. It got to where he couldn't keep his pants up around his waist."

Times were hard, but Calhoun had to figure out how to survive on his own.

"Frankie Brothers was king of the hill at the time," Calhoun stated. "I paid attention to everything he did and how he prepared his horses. Bobby Barnett and "Cracker" Walker were guys that won a ton of races, and I just took a little bit here and there from all of them."

Next stop on the pain and suffering express was the 1994 winter at Fair Grounds.

"I went down to New Orleans with a handful of horses that were not much to speak of. Actually, they should not have been put in a trailer," Calhoun recalled. "But I had to throw my hand in the deck. I knew that if I didn't get around the better tracks, get around the better horsemen and higher level of competition, that I would never get to the top."

Calhoun saddled one winner during that winter and it was on the last week of the meet.

Two seasons later at Fair Grounds, Calhoun saw a ray of hope when a maiden named *Richochet One* paid more than \$100. Relief was in sight. Calhoun thought he had some breathing room. A few weeks later the meal ticket horse fractured a sesamoid in a routine gallop. The pain and disappointment pulled Calhoun down to rock bottom. That night's phone call home was the first time Calhoun's father can remember his son crying.

"My dad begged me to quit," Calhoun said. "He told me to pack my bags and come home."

Calhoun retreated to Texas. With program odds of 20-1, horses in his name began to show up at tracks like Trinity Meadows, Retama, and Sam Houston.

"I had a pretty bleak inventory," Calhoun said, "so I decided that I better stay close to home. I was on the brink of getting out many times. When you are down to one horse, things have a way of coming into sharp focus."

People encouraged Calhoun to find work as an assistant trainer and build up his resumé. So much for advice. Calhoun took three horses to Lone Star Park for its inaugural meeting in 1997. He didn't win a race.

If a man sits in a barber shop long enough he is bound to get a haircut. Calhoun's career altered course with a 2-year-old colt named *Cowboy Dan*. Owned by Tommy and Mary Landreth, *Cowboy Dan* was a \$1,600 yearling purchase.

"He was the best horse I had ever been around," said Calhoun, who was living in a dormitory on the backstretch of Delta Downs at the time. "I knew right away that he was a runner."

Cowboy Dan won his trial and then finished a late-flying fourth in the rich *Jean Lafitte Futurity* after being blocked most of the way. A game plan was drawn

up. The owner supplied truck and trailer, and *Cowboy Dan* was vanned north to Churchill Downs for the 1997 WHAS-11 Stakes.

From a financial standpoint, little had changed for Calhoun. His savings had slipped away. He was \$20,000 in the hole from outstanding debt and didn't have two pennies to rub together. Arriving at Churchill Downs, owner Landreth walked *Cowboy Dan* around the shedrow while Calhoun cleaned the stall.

In the WHAS-11 Stakes, run on the undercard of the Kentucky Derby (gr. I), *Cowboy Dan* drew post 13 and dueled eventual Horse of the Year *Favorite Trick* the length of the stretch, losing by a neck at the wire. *Favorite Trick* went on to an undefeated 2-year-old campaign and the WHAS-11 Stakes was his only scare. Needless to say, the trailer went back to Delta Downs empty. *Cowboy Dan* was sold privately for \$250,000 and Calhoun was awarded a 10% cut of the deal.



"That sprung me out of the trap," Calhoun said.

The script was about to flip. Following *Cowboy Dan*'s gritty performance, Calhoun's phone began to ring. The momentum of publicity brought new clients and better stock. On the Texas-Louisiana circuit Calhoun runners were no longer an automatic 20-1 in the program. He would win a meager total of 26 races in the first four years of his career, but *Cowboy Dan* began the run to daylight.

The man who was once down to one horse now has 120 horses that race on the multiple fronts of Kentucky, Texas, Delaware, Illinois, and Louisiana, and his numbers have become some of the strongest in the country. In the last four years (from 2007 to late December 2010) Calhoun has won more than 850 races. In fact, 2010 has been a tsunami of black type with 35 stakes wins, bringing his career stakes total to the swagger level of 126.

Despite being near the top of the mountain, Calhoun remains a valley spirit. Easy to meet but hard to get to know, Calhoun wears a bulletproof flak jacket over his emotions. Never too high. Never too low. He's in there somewhere but hard to find. Seldom in the office, Calhoun walks to the track with each set and prefers to hang out in the back of the barn where he watches horses jog on the pavement. Listen to him chat with a blacksmith or veterinarian and you will hear a disdain for bad management or sloppy procedures, but his words are never tainted with malice. The north Texas DNA blocks out the backstretch disease of whining.

If there is a reason that Calhoun appears to be doing nothing, it comes in the form of

Above, assistant Dennis "Peaches" Geier; below, Calhoun discusses the conformation of a horse with an owner

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assistant trainer Dennis “Peaches” Geier, who has been with Calhoun for the past eight years. With a body language and style similar to the boss’, Peaches keeps the Calhoun ship in the middle of the stream. Geier sets the pace 24/7, with a dependability and efficiency that set an example for others in the barn. There is no policy and procedure manual when it comes to managing the operations, but Geier’s standards are made clear from the first day of employment.

“Nobody can drink on the job,” Geier emphasized. “You get one warning. After that I’m looking for help that likes horses and doesn’t ever beat up on them.”

What does Peaches like about working for Calhoun?

Calhoun and jockey Jamie Theriot had a big Breeders’ Cup weekend with Dubai Majesty (below, left) and Chamberlain Bridge (below right)



ANNE M. EBERHART PHOTOS



“I’ve been with Bret through hell and high water,” Geier explained about his job satisfaction. “He’s honest to a fault. You can tell him what you want and not what you think he wants to hear. He’s that way with his owners, and that’s the way he wants us to be with him.”

Tongue in cheek. The backstretch joke that still lingers about Calhoun is that he only won two races during the 2010 Churchill Downs fall meet. Poor baby. On Nov. 5, Calhoun saddled Martin Racing Stable and Dan Morgan’s Dubai Majesty to win the Breeders’ Cup Filly & Mare Sprint, then followed up the next day with a win by Carl Moore’s Chamberlain Bridge in the Breeders’ Cup Turf Sprint. Tough meet all around.

You can’t pick it up if you don’t lay it down. In a Texas Hold’em-style gamble, Dubai Majesty was a \$90,000 supplement entry to the Filly & Mare Sprint. It didn’t hurt that they were playing with house money. Dubai Majesty was coming off a win in Keeneland’s Thoroughbred Club of America Stakes (gr. II).

“It’s still hard to twist an owner’s arm to write that kind of check,” Calhoun said

of the decision. “We thought it was a good gamble since the horse was sharp and likes the surface. When we drew the outside, I was feeling really good.”

Co-owner Martin, a real estate developer in Dallas, stated, “The main thing about working with Bret is that you don’t have to read between the lines. He is very straightforward. From an ownership standpoint that gives me confidence in making plans. Bret isn’t afraid to tell you where you stand with a horse at all times.”

With Chamberlain Bridge in the Turf Sprint, Calhoun was beaming with confidence until the post position draw.

“We were really high on him that day, but the rail post in a large field did not fit his running style.”

Crowded away from the gate, Chamberlain Bridge (under Jamie Theriot, who also rode Dubai Majesty) raced near the back of the pack in the early going then rallied wide, catapulting into full stride nearing the wire to win by 1½ lengths. “It was an incredible ride by Jamie,” Calhoun said. “For awhile it looked like we didn’t have a chance. The horse jumped heels at the three-eighths pole, found a seam, and

then just exploded.”

Moore, the owner of Chamberlain Bridge, lives in Fort Worth, Texas, and, according to his trainer will be making the 7,821-mile trip to Meydan Racecourse in Dubai where Chamberlain Bridge is being pointed to the \$1 million Al Quoz Sprint (UAE-III) March 26. The cake is already in the oven.

“The prep race plan is in place,” Calhoun confirmed.

Moore, who has 15 horses with Calhoun, said, “I’m one of these active, passionate owners that wants to be involved, and Bret and his team have made me feel like part of the family. We respect each other’s opinions. I can’t thank him enough.”

From the windswept flats of the Texas bush tracks to the palatial suites of the Jumeirah luxury hotel in Dubai, another part of the journey for a man who has ridden out the storm will be charted, a 46-year-old who has never tasted the silver spoon.

“I guess that I was just too stubborn,” Calhoun explained about why he never quit. “I was down to one or two horses several times. I was basically out of the game but too hardheaded to admit it.” 🐾