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Dream come true

**Twin Oaks Training Center is the
culmination of a long-term plan**

Twin Oaks Training Center is the culmination of a long-term plan

BY DENIS BLAKE

MANY nine-year-old kids do not know what they want to do tomorrow, let alone for the rest of their lives. But by that age, Eddie Milligan already had a career plan mapped out.

That kind of precocity is unique, but perhaps even more remarkable is that the young boy's plan unfolded just as he had hoped. After finding success first as a jockey and then as a trainer, Milligan and his wife, Charlene, have combined family life and horses at their Twin Oaks

school of hard knocks," said Milligan, who grew up on a horse farm in Celina, Texas. "He didn't pull any punches. I started galloping when I was ten and riding in some races when I was 13. He let me learn how to gallop on my own, but he gave me clues and pointers."

Milligan left home at age 17 to be a jockey, and shortly thereafter he met his future wife, who at the time was grooming horses at Louisiana Downs. Even as a teenager, he knew the rigors of making weight would eventually cause him to hang up his tack, and after



Courtesy of Charlene Milligan

The Milligans spent a week at Churchill Downs earlier this year helping prepare Bella Diamante for the Kentucky Oaks

Training Center near the northeast Texas town of Murchison.

"From nine years old I knew what I wanted to do in life, and I've pretty much done it," said Eddie Milligan, 45. "I wanted to ride for a while, train for a while, and then get a farm and break babies."

For the past 12 years, the Milligans have broken, prepped for sales, and consigned some of the best horses in the Southwest, and just as importantly to the couple who will celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary on July 23, they have also raised two sons and enjoyed time together as a family.

Pedigree for horses

Milligan comes from a long line of horsemen—his grandfather and uncle were involved with Tennessee Walking Horses, and his father, Eddie Milligan Sr., who passed away earlier this year, was a successful conditioner for decades on the Southwest racing circuit. His brother, Allen, followed in his father's footsteps and has saddled the winners of more than 400 races.

"My father put me through the

about six years of riding he started training a string of horses for John T. L. Jones Jr. when Remington Park opened in the late 1980s. After that, he had a stint managing prominent Quarter Horse owner Herbert Graham's Texas operation while his wife completed her nursing degree. Then he went out on his own as a trainer on the Texas and Louisiana circuits before looking for a place to put down some permanent roots.

Down home on the farm

Even though Milligan made a successful transition from jockey to trainer, the constant moving between racetracks was not conducive to family life or the career of his wife.

"We got tired of moving around, and I was working full time in nursing and we had our son in school, so I couldn't just up and move with him," Charlene Milligan said. "[Eddie] was missing out on some things with our son and part of his goal was to do all the family things, which is much easier if you have a farm."

So the couple jumped at the

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chance to leave the racetrack behind and start Twin Oaks, a 135-acre property they bought in 1998. Although it had been used as a horse farm in the past, the Milligans had to do quite a bit of work to improve and expand the training track to nearly five-eighths of a mile. They had just six horses to break when the farm opened, but there was soon a waiting list and over the years they have gradually expanded the original 24 stalls to the current 63.

While the farm now employs up to 15 people during peak breaking season, one of the first employees was the couple's oldest son, Caleb.

"When he was growing up, his summer job was maintaining the track, painting fences, and things like that until he went off to college and got his engineering degree," Charlene Milligan said. "He's 24 now, and he loves the ownership side of horses and has a passion for pinhooking and racing, but he didn't really have the passion for the hands-on part of it. He didn't like getting in the stalls and mucking, but he loved having a hammer in his hands all day and working on the tractors, so he was a big help to us."

While Caleb Milligan did not have the same passion for the hands-on and leg-up approach of his father, the couple's other son, 13-year-old Cameron, is learning to ride like his father did.

"He started to gallop last summer, and he's saving up for his first truck," Charlene Milligan said. "He really likes the horse side of it. I'm sure Eddie's intention is to have him galloping about ten [horses] a day."

Working vacation

Even though the Milligans gave up the racetrack life more than a decade ago, that does not mean they do not enjoy taking a trip to the track, especially to Churchill Downs.

The couple got to spend the week of the Kentucky Derby Presented by Yum! Brands (G1) in Louisville this year as Eddie Milligan helped his brother prepare Bella Diamante for the Kentucky Oaks (G1).

"Allen has horses stabled all over the place, so Eddie offered to go down there and help take care of her and gallop her," Charlene Milligan said.

It was not Milligan's first time at Churchill, but it was the first time in years.

"I galloped horses at Churchill and Keeneland [Race Course] for [trainer] Carl Nafzger when I was about 18," he said. "So it was a lot of fun being there again; it was an experience that words can't explain. There were so many people watching those horses in the morning. It was just amazing hearing the people cheering and clapping just watching the horses work."

Although Bella Diamante finished far behind winner Blind Luck and last of 14 in the Oaks, both the Milligans called it an awesome experience they will never forget.

Decade of success

Since the Milligans started Twin Oaks in 1998, the facility has helped launch the careers of many notable horses. Among them are Grade 3-placed stakes winner Chief of Affairs, multiple Grade 3 winner Mr. Nightlinger, and four-time stakes winner Triple Card, who was trained by Eddie Milligan Sr. Twin Oaks also broke and consigned Tensas Yucatan, the \$270,000 sale topper at the 2006 Fasig-Tipton Texas sale of two-year-olds in training. That price was the highest at the sale since 2000, and the Ide filly went on to bank \$436,324 and win four stakes.

Using his skills and instincts as a former jockey, Eddie Milligan gets up on all the horses at Twin Oaks.

"I wouldn't trade that for the world, to be able to get on a horse," said Milligan, who also serves on the Texas Thoroughbred Association board of directors. "I've always had a pretty good feel about where a horse is sore and what he's feeling."

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While many equine-related operations in Texas have struggled in recent years as horsemen and horses have left for slot machine-enriched purses and incentive programs in neighboring states, Twin Oaks has operated with full stalls and continues to build its business.

The Milligans plan to add a covered *Eurosizer*, which is an exercizer, this year and also cover their round pens. During peak season, Twin Oaks takes up to 70 horses, which is about the maximum the facility can handle.

“We have our plates full with that number,” Charlene Milligan said. “We’ve been extremely blessed in this business and it has grown every year here, but you’ve got to have a life, so we don’t really have plans to expand beyond that. The whole point of moving to the farm was to have a family life, and that’s what we’ve done.” ☺

Denis Blake is a Texas correspondent of
THOROUGHBRED TIMES.
