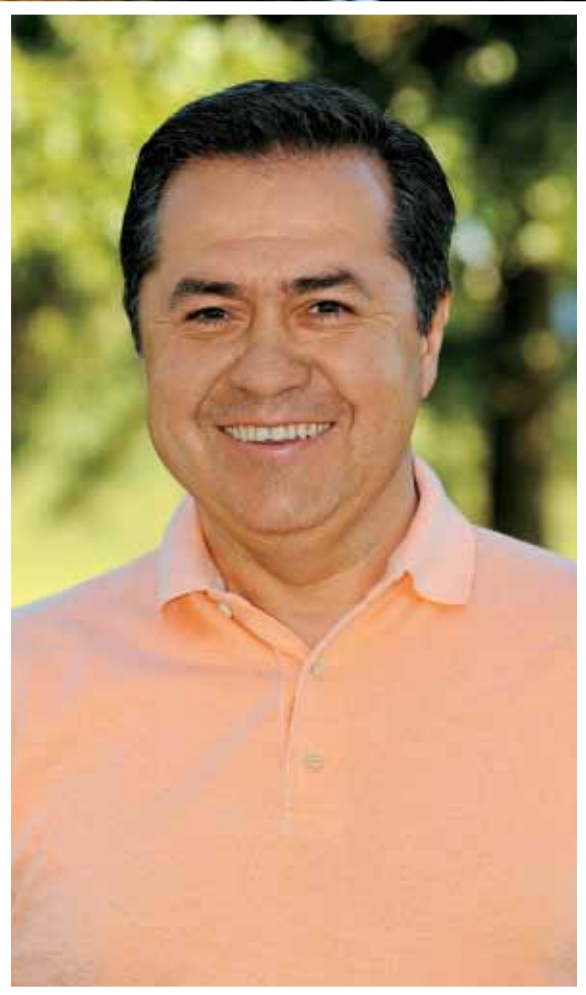


Way Above Par



Ro Parra, owner of Millennium Farms

BY ESTHER MARR /
ANNE M. EBERHARDT PHOTOS

*Ro Parra is using whip-smart
business sense to make his
Millennium Farms a success*

A Thoroughbred operation can sometimes reflect its owner's personality and style. Rosenda "Ro" Parra's Millennium Farms near Lexington, named for the approaching turn of the century when the land was purchased in 1999, does exactly that.

From the simplistic, yet powerful-looking sunburst design on the iron entrance gate on Paris Pike, to the rustic feel of the 320-acre property's sprawling fields, Parra has managed to run an efficient and successful business minus some the fancy frills of his larger counterparts.

While Parra's background in the horse industry may not be steeped in history, his sharp business skills, coupled with a passion for the game, have resulted in much more than just beginner's luck.

After breeding Bessemer Trust Breeders' Cup Juvenile (gr. I) winner Wilko and racing multiple Texas-bred champions, Parra has reached the pinnacle of his career campaigning grade I winner Student Council, who has now carried the Ecuador native's operation to heights he never dreamed of reaching. Parra has raced some 40 stakes winners over a 10-year span.

On a mid-summer afternoon, Parra glanced out the window of his sun-splashed living room at Millennium,

where several mares and foals grazed in their paddock. "A lot of times, you kind of pinch yourself—it's a beautiful place out here," he said. "(Buying this farm) was never the plan. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever anticipate owning a place like this."

Parra has set himself apart in more ways than one: not only has he made it big as a new kid on the block, giving hope to other newcomers in the industry, but with his whip-smart business sense, he has also found a way to run his operation as a money-making enterprise instead of just an expensive hobby.

With careful research and employing the right people for his management staff, Parra has results that speak for themselves. In addition to Student Council, Parra has campaigned graded stakes winners Even the Score, Rolling Sea, Santana Strings, and Super Frolic.

J. Ted Neel, business manager at Millennium, described Parra as "demanding, but fair. He doesn't ask things in a totalitarian way, and at the end of the day, if you didn't meet all your objectives, he's fair. He's a man of utmost integrity. What he says, you can take to the bank, and you don't have to wonder what he's thinking; he's very up front." »





Above, the entrance to the 320-acre Millennium Farms; below, Parra (left) with Michael Dell, chairman of the board and CEO of Dell

Parra never thought that his childhood trips to the racetrack on Sunday afternoons with his father in Ecuador would some day lead to a full-time involvement in the industry, as his business endeavors extended far beyond racing before he made his initial investment in the Sport of Kings.

In 1974, at age 14, Parra moved to the United States with his family. His mother had remarried an American who had been stationed in Ecuador with an engineering company, which had then transferred him to Maryland. Obtaining a degree in marketing from the University of Maryland, Parra held management roles with Radio Shack and GRiD Systems Corporation, a laptop manufacturing company. After GRiD was sold to a company in California, Parra joined Dell in 1993, where he rose through the ranks, eventually becoming president and general manager of Dell Americas. He was responsible for all of the U.S.-based operations at the company, which had been attempting to recruit him since his time at Dell's competitor, Radio Shack.

Parra is humble about the way he climbed the corporate ladder, attributing his success to the early influence of various mentors who steered him in the right direction and encouraged him to seize every opportunity.

"I feel fortunate to be a part of what I consider to be a couple chapters of American business history for the 14 years that I was at Dell," said Parra of the company, which skyrocketed in worth from \$1 billion to \$60 billion while he was general manager.

Though it is difficult to compare Dell to his endeavors in the horse industry, Parra maintained that all the principles of business are essentially the same: "They all come down to surrounding yourself with the right people, and finding a balance between strategy and execution," he said. "You should never lose sight of the power of a great idea. Ideas drive change, and great execution sustains it. To be successful, you need both."

After retiring from Dell last year, Parra founded the company Daylight Partners, which helps mid-stage companies improve their growth initiatives.

In the midst of holding such positions, Parra never lost the fondness for racing that had been kindled by his father.

In the mid 1990s, he moved to San Antonio, Texas, with his wife, Cheryl, a retired pathologist who was completing her medical residency there.

Some may say it was fate that Retama Park opened for its inaugural season of racing around the time that Parra and his family



settled in the area. Located practically in his backyard, it wasn't long before Parra became a track regular.

"I got the urge one day to claim a horse—that's really how it all started," said Parra. "There wasn't a grand plan. The worst thing that happened was that horse won its first two races," he added with a laugh.

The thrill from that first claimer's success spurred Parra to purchase numerous horses in training and develop a 50- to 60-member broodmare band that he boarded in Austin, the city in which his family now resides. Parra dubbed the operation Triple Joy Farm after his wife and first two daughters, Lauren and Megan, but had to change the name after his wife gave birth to two more daughters, Allison and Madison.

Parra, who makes business-related visits to Millennium around once a month, said he doesn't plan to move his family to Kentucky permanently from his home in Austin.

"We really supported the program (in Texas)," Parra said. "But racing there has been scaled down dramatically, so the economics don't work, and we decided to focus all our efforts on the Ken-

tucky operation,” he said of his decision to purchase Millennium.

While Parra started Millennium on the larger side and at one point had in excess of 190 mares, he quickly figured out that concentrating on quality instead of quantity was a more profitable, successful approach.

“Once I began to claim horses and saw how difficult it was to make any money in racing, especially at those levels with the purse structure at the time (in Texas), it was clear that something needed to change to ensure that we had a chance of building our assets and really making money in the business,” said Parra. “So while it started as a hobby, it really turned into a business that just happened to be my passion.”

After Parra reduced his stock dramatically from 400-500 horses in 2000 and 2001 to 150 in 2007, Millennium runners generated \$2.3 million in purses, which was an average of around \$50,000 per starter.

“This year, we’re actually ahead 30% from the same point last year, with about the same number of starts,” explained Parra, who is a meticulous bookkeeper. He keeps a tally of trainers’ records, including how many starters they have had, the purses they’ve earned, and the percentage of their horses that have run in the money.

Millennium, which offers sales prepping, layups, and outside boarding, currently has 188 horses on its roster, which is around 100 fewer than last year. The biggest cuts were in the racing operation, which was reduced from 64 horses in training to 27.

Parra, who employs trainers Steve Asmussen, Dale Capuano, Vladimir Cerin, and James Jackson, said he wants his stock to be lowered further to about 130 horses by the end of the year.

Millennium is situated on the rolling hills of what was formerly known as Buckland Farm, which was owned by the late Thomas Mellon Evans. The operation campaigned homebred champions Pleasant Tap and Pleasant Stage, but was best known for breeding and racing Pleasant Colony, who won the 1981 Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes (both gr. I) en route to being named that year’s champion 3-year-old colt.

The Kentucky facility is home to most of Parra’s stallions, although he also has interests in a few Louisiana, New York, Texas, and Pennsylvania-based sires.

Millennium’s stallion roster currently includes Even the Score, Littleexpectations, Scrimshaw, Shaniko, Will He Shine, and Woke Up Dreamin, who stand for fees ranging from \$3,500 to \$7,500.

When Parra reflected upon what set Millennium apart from other commercial breeding farms around Central Kentucky, one key aspect came to mind.

“The core element of our valuable position is really the team that we have, starting with (farm manager) Bobby Miller and J. Ted,” he said.

Miller, a 26-year veteran of the industry, was a longtime manager of John T.L. Jones III’s Walmac Farm near Paris, Ky., before transferring to Millennium around two years ago.

“He’s a horseman—he’s got an impeccable reputation for hon-



Millennium currently has 188 horses on its roster

esty, integrity, and knowledge of horses,” said Parra. “His hiring has attracted customers to board at the farm and for us to take care of their mares, and it has made a world of difference.”

Said Miller, who graduated from the University of Kentucky, “Ro is pretty understanding of the business. He’s easy to work for, but he knows what he wants and expects, and we try to do that.”

Although Neel, 27, is young, his experience runs deep. Neel grew up learning the ropes of the Thoroughbred business from his father, Clay, who was a trainer and president of the Oklahoma Thoroughbred Association.

Neel’s passion for horses, coupled with skills in accounting and organization (he worked on Millennium’s account at the consulting firm Dean, Dorton, and Ford), spoke volumes to Parra when he was looking to hire a business manager.

“He’s got a lot of responsibility for being so young, but what I like about him is that he’s also a horseman,” said Parra.

Miller and Neel aren’t the only employees at Millennium with equine backgrounds, however.

Office manager Kerrie Cahill, who has been at Millennium for 2½ years, is the daughter of well-known veterinarian Dr. Chris Cahill.

Cahill, whose duties include booking the farm’s stallions, described the atmosphere at Millennium as “very family-oriented. Everybody here knows everyone else. It’s a ‘we’ operation. When a horse is running, whether it’s one of the farm’s horses, or one that’s been sired by one of our stallions, it’s a ‘we.’ Everybody roots together, which is nice.”

Parra said other important contributors to Millennium’s suc-



The Millennium operation is a money-making enterprise, not just an expensive hobby



Parra leads in Student Council following the star runner's Pimlico Special win

cess include its 18-member farm team, sales manager Brian Lyle, and Jerry Brown of Thoro-Graph, who has recommended the purchases of numerous graded stakes winners, including Student Council.

"The fortress of our racing stable really changed when we hired Jerry," said Parra. "We buy horses at the track based on Jerry's recommendation using his speed figures."

Parra ticked off other graded stakes winners he bought on Brown's suggestion, including Even the Score, Santana Strings, and Rolling Sea; plus Copper State, a stakes winner who ran a close second in the July 26 Go for Wand Handicap (gr. I) at Saratoga and also finished second in the Sept. 6 Ruffian Handicap at Belmont Park.

"Jerry had been on me to try and buy Student Council for some time, because he felt that even though he hadn't won a major race, his speed numbers would make him competitive in all the major races," said Parra.

When Parra privately acquired the son of Kingmambo from breeder William S. Farish prior to the horse's upset victory over Lava Man in last year's Pacific Classic (gr. I), Student Council had won five of 20 starts, but had excelled on Polytrack, having won at both Keeneland and Turfway Park.

"We eventually agreed on a price that we were both happy with, and (Farish) sold me the horse," said Parra, adding that he thought Student Council had sire potential from the beginning. "I love (Student Council); he's by Kingmambo, out of a (grade II-winning) Kris S. mare, Class Kris. He has a great pedigree, and he's incredibly sound," continued Parra, who recently created a fan page for Student Council on the social network facebook.com. "In today's market, that's big."

Though Parra was disappointed following Student Council's

fifth-place effort when trying to defend his Pacific Classic title Aug. 24, he remains hopeful for the future.

Parra said Student Council may run next in either the Sept. 27 Goodwood Breeders' Cup Stakes (gr. I) at Oak Tree at Santa Anita Park or the Hawthorne Gold Cup (gr. II), which he won last year. The goal after that is what Parra has been planning all along: the Oct. 25 Breeders' Cup Classic (gr. I), where he will hopefully end his racing career on a positive note.

The bay horse also showed brilliance in winning the May 16 Maryland Lottery Pimlico Special (gr. I), and was third in the Hollywood Gold Cup (gr. I) June 28. In the July 26 Whitney Handicap (gr. I) at Saratoga, he ran second to the front-running Commentator, registering a 112 Beyer Speed Figure, which was the second-best of the year at one mile or more on dirt.

"We may never own another horse like Student Council," said Parra, who in mid-August announced the 6-year-old horse would stand at Millennium Farms in 2009 as property of a syndicate that will include Farish's Lane's End Farm.

"I think he's going to do wonders for us, and everyone is excited to have a horse of that caliber standing here next year....not to mention the financial implications."

Parra originally built his broodmare band on the notion that claiming sound, hard-knocking fillies who could earn their keep on the racetrack would produce successful offspring.

His most profitable decision while sticking to that philosophy was when he claimed the Irish-bred Indian Ridge mare Native Roots for \$30,000 in 2000. A few years later, the mare's first foal, Wilko, became Parra's ticket to elite status in the industry.

Though Wilko raced for Susan Roy and J. Paul Reddam, Parra was no less ecstatic than the colt's new owners when the horse captured the 2004 Bessemer Trust Breeders' Cup Juvenile (gr. I) at Lone Star Park. It became an even better day for Millennium when Singletary, a son of former farm stallion Sultry Song, won the NetJets Breeders' Cup Mile (gr. IT).

Parra explained why he had claimed Wilko's dam, Native Roots: "I loved (Native Roots') pedigree—she was by Indian Ridge and was a fast-looking mare. So in the beginning, that was our philosophy—we focused on mares that really made it on the track over pedigree, but we also bought some well-bred fillies that we could eventually have in our broodmare band. Today, we're trying to reduce the numbers and focus on pedigree, conformation, and race record, and that's why our numbers are going to continue to go down over time."

Parra said the most prized members of his broodmare band include three stakes winners he campaigned himself: My Meggie Meg, Hay Lauren, and Berdelia, who was Texas' 2004 champion 2-year-old filly.

On top of all his other endeavors, Parra also regularly supports the Lexington-based Tubby's Clubhouse program, which teaches basic computer skills to at-risk children and provides them with refurbished Dell computers. For the last three years, Parra has hosted a fund-raiser at Millennium to support the program.

Tubby's Clubhouse is a spin-off of a program called "Learn and Earn" that Parra discovered in Denver, Colo. "The high school dropout rate in Kentucky is unbelievably high," said Parra, noting how an alarming percentage of the state's population falls below the poverty line.

"(Supporting the program) really touches you," he added. "To moderate the life changes of just one kid is really rewarding."

Parra summed up his reasoning behind giving back to the community best during a 2002 graduation speech he presented to students at the University of Maryland:

"Work can be extremely rewarding at times, but a life lived without broader experience is a life limited," he said. "I have spent many years working hard and making many sacrifices...and have been well rewarded for those efforts. But I have also learned that the gratitude of those in the community you serve can give the kind of reward you'll never find at work...no matter how great your employer. The obligation you have is to give back." 