

QUARTER PATHS

Frankie Figueroa

by Richard Chamberlain

Queenie, Joe Reed II, Miss Bank, Piggin String, Jeep B, Squaw H, Pay Toll, Noo Music, Red Man, Wampus Kitty, Barbra B . . .

On and on, like the distant thunder of hooves, the roll call echoes the great old-time sprinters that were the foundation of modern Quarter Horse racing.

Frankie Figueroa rode them all.

"I rode a lot of horses," he says, squinting into the sun of a southern Arizona morning. "Rode a lot of good ones."

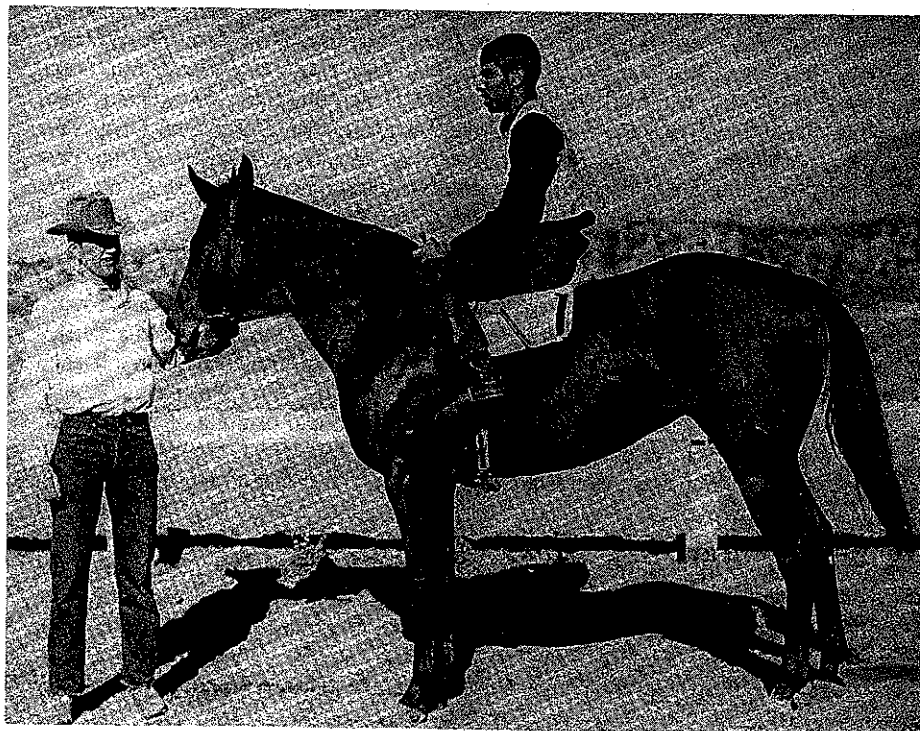
The man paused for a long moment, frowning his brow and collecting his thoughts.

"And a lot of bad ones."

Now 77, with his four sons grown and gone, Figueroa lives quietly with Trina, his wife of more than half of a century. They share a small bungalow on 40 acres of rolling rangeland outside Sonoita, Arizona, the house and land courtesy of their son Roman, today one of the leading jockeys on the West Coast. The elder Figueroa won his first race when Calvin Coolidge occupied the White House, and his last after Gerald Ford had succeeded to the Oval Office. But though he was still winning ropings in the late 1970s, he hasn't been on a horse since undergoing kidney surgery five years ago.

It's been a long journey from that first competition, a match arranged by his brothers when he was 10, to the final cow pony race at the county fair in 1973. But back in the early days of organized Quarter Horse racing, he and his brothers were counted among the very finest horsemen in the Southwest. Whether as trainers or jockeys or both, the "fabulous Figuerosas," as one observer wrote, ruled the short tracks from Moltacqua and Rillito to Albuquerque and El Paso.

In the first decade of this century, Figueroa's parents, Francisco and Gregoria, moved from Sonora, Mexico, to the little livestock community of Rosemont, Arizona, near Sonoita. They raised a large family, with Frankie the third son. While the three were still little boys, the family



Frankie Figueroa on Miss Bank, at Rillito in 1945. Figueroa and his brothers rode and trained many of the great sprinters in the early days of regulation Quarter Horse racing.

moved from Rosemont to a small place that Francisco bought on Rincon Creek, in the foothills on the west side of the Rincon Mountains about 35 miles east of Tucson. After they were settled in, the family added five more sons and four daughters. All the kids, boys and girls alike, helped with the chores and handled the livestock. At age seven, little Frankie was riding burros after the milk cows.

That was one of the few easy jobs. The family got its drinking water from a 65-foot open well. Not having a windmill or a pump, they used to drop a five-gallon bucket down the well and pull it up with a rope and burro. It took the better part of a day, every day, because they also had 300 head of cows to water. They emptied the bucket into a barrel, and a pipe carried the water to a big cattle trough.

"What a job that was!" Figueroa recalls. "It didn't matter if it was Christmas, the Fourth of July or what . . . We had to get the water up and the burro was

our only helper. He was our gasoline. The meanest kids usually got the work."

Frankie got most of it.

The Figueroa boys were small, tough, agile athletes, light on their feet and light in the saddle. Always in demand, their attributes and talents were especially valuable every San Juan's Day, June 24, a religious holiday celebrating the birth of John The Baptist and a day that legend says ushers in the summer rains. The San Juan's Day fiesta consisted of matched racing, roping, bareback bronc riding and about anything else one could do competitively on horseback.

The boys rode the races bareback, because they didn't have saddles. That kind of thing taught them how to sit on the back of a horse. By the time it took two digits to write his age, Figueroa was working for Rukin Jelks, one of the legendary "Four Horsemen" who founded the American Quarter Racing Association and who at the

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time owned the X9 Ranch in the desert east of Tucson. Melville Haskell owned the Rincon Ranch, where Figueroa's brother Juan was working, and Haskell and Jelks began bringing in Thoroughbred stallions to upgrade the stock in the country. Both men bulldozed tracks on their ranches, and the sport of match racing took off in that country.

One of Figueroa's first races using a saddle came in his mid-teens in 1932 on the three-eighths-mile track at the X9. Riding for Jelks, Figueroa was on a grey colt called Joe, a son of a black stud of Quarter type and out of a Thoroughbred mare. Going a quarter of a mile around the turn, Figueroa won against a filly belonging to Jake Meyer.

"It didn't take Jelks long to discover that this good-natured, half-pint cowboy, who stuck to the back of a horse like a cockle-burr to a saddle blanket, had a world of natural riding ability," wrote Willard Porter in the April 1956 *Quarter Horse Journal*. "When Jelks moved to his horse breeding farm on River Road in Tucson, he took Figueroa with him as foreman, horse breaker and jockey." Weighing 116 pounds and standing five feet, five inches tall, Figueroa handled all of Jelks' horses, and broke and gentled Piggin String, the Thoroughbred which Jelks bought in Kentucky in 1943.

"I thought Piggin String was the greatest-looking horse I'd ever seen," he said a few years later. "None of us at that time had seen a Thoroughbred like him in this country. And he proved to be every bit as good as he looked. He was easy to handle. I broke him cowboy style and even roped a few calves off him at the ranch. He went well any way you wanted him to go."

But though Piggin String was the best-looking horse he ever rode, Figueroa unhesitatingly asserts that the stallion was only an also-ran compared to a crippled mare that he used to know.

"Queenie was the best horse I ever rode," he states flatly. "And she had only three (good) legs. She was the first horse to outrun Shue Fly (at Albuquerque in 1944; Figueroa watched her heels from aboard Piggin String in the race). Queenie beat *all* the good ones. After Jelks bought her, I rode her five times. She won every race, and it got so they wouldn't fill against her, so he put her in the breeding string. With a lot of horses, it's hard to tell how good they really are, because a horse can run a good race today and then maybe tomorrow will run a bad race. Like I had

three or four different horses that set track records and then never won another race. And most everybody else has had some horses that way. Queenie, she just run the same lick all the time. That bad foot made no difference. What makes her run like that? I'd like to know, so I could make another one. If I had one that would run with a heart like she had, I'd be alright."

"They were all natural-born cowboys, the kind of cowboys you dream about having work for you. Any of them could ride into a herd and say that calf belongs to that cow and this calf belongs to this cow. They simply had the natural ability, and they were all good horsemen, too."

That, of course, is the age-old problem with racehorses. Making them pay is not easy in the best of times, and half of a century ago, the sport was nowhere near being in its best of times. Before weight and wisdom made him trade his riding tack for trainer's papers, Figueroa was the leading jockey at Moltacqua and Rillito — one season at the latter, he won 230 races. Yet the most money he ever won in a purse race came when he trained the winner of the Southwestern Futurity at Rillito: Figueroa's share of the purse came to \$600. And the most he ever got for riding a race was the \$2,500 that Jelks paid him for taking Miss Bank in a match at Albuquerque.

Twenty-five hundred.

"That was the biggest money I ever made," he recalls, a bit wistfully. "It was quite a bit back then, so of course, I threw it all away. I thought, 'Well, I'll win another one like this next week.' And I never won another one like that one, *ever*."

Figueroa rode Miss Bank in five matched races, and won four. However, even though it did not pay as well, he remembers another race on Miss Bank, the 1947 New Mexico Championship, as one of his most, well, challenging.

"Leon Gillespie (who owned her at the time) wanted to fly me over to Albuquerque," he says. "I'd never been in an airplane before. He had another jockey before me, but he'd got outrun twice. So he called, wanted to know if I'd ride Miss Bank, said she was entered in the Championship. I told him, 'Well, I don't know

. . . . I put up a lot of excuses: 'I couldn't make it, I weighed 127, I didn't give a damn Well, he wouldn't take no for an answer, kept insisting, so I finally said OK, I'd talk to Ed Echois. He was the sheriff of Tucson, good friend of mine. Ed said he'd go with me — fly with me — so I wouldn't jump out of that plane. So we loaded up and headed out. And when that airplane took off, all I could think was, 'Oh God, I'm going to quit this. I don't think we can outrun those horses anyway.'"

To make matters worse, Miss Bank lost a race the day he flew in. And the big race was only three days later, against some of the same horses that beat her. In the Championship, Miss Bank broke third and stumbled at the break. Figueroa picked her up, hunkered down and went to riding. At 300 yards, Miss Bank was still daylighted by B Seven.

"Then she straightened up and really rolled," he recalls. "She caught him right at the wire, nipped him by a nose."

It was that kind of ability in the saddle that made so many people seek out the Figueroa boys. But the family paid a heavy price for its renown. Frankie's brother Cruz was killed on the racetrack when the horse he was pulling up threw its head and crushed Cruz's forehead. Another brother, Albert, was thrown and the horse stomped on his head as he hit the ground; Albert was unconscious for two days, and woke up with a broken jaw, a fractured skull and a chipped hip. A third brother, Charlie, is still partially paralyzed from a car-trailer accident suffered nearly 30 years ago.

"But I was lucky, thanks to God," Frankie says. "I never even broke a bone. Like one time (December 7, 1941) at old Moltacqua, I was a length and half in front, going 5/8ths around the turn, and my horse slipped and fell. He threw me under the inside rail, the other horses ran by and I didn't even have a scratch. Lucky. Yeah, you can say that again: I was lucky."

Figueroa was more than just a lucky race rider and top-hand bronc stomper, however. First and foremost, Frankie Figueroa was a cowboy. (So are his sons. Picking up either end, Figueroa has won team ropings with every one of them, and Roman went to the National Finals Rodeo as a professional header for five years in a row, before riding his first race.) Though he never strayed far from the home range, Figueroa worked for several of the finest

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stockmen in the country. He roped calves off Lightning Bar while at Art Pollard's Lightning A and Manor ranches, ramrodded the Apache Springs Ranch and went through 22 years and several owners on the X9, 55 sections of Sonora desert over which he rose to reign as cowboss.

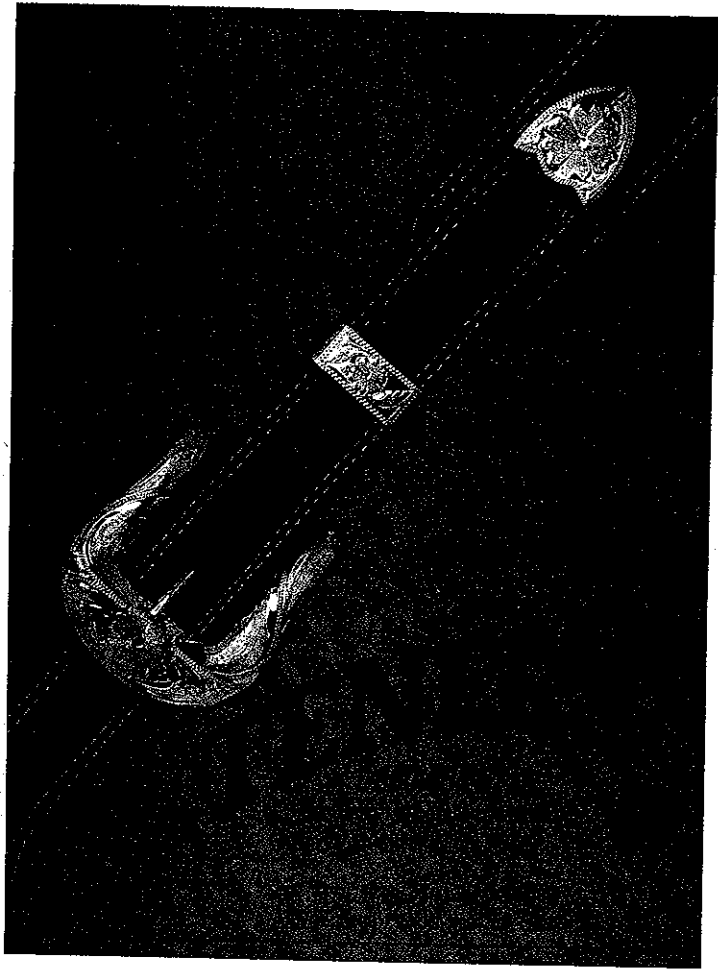
"I liked riding races, and I liked riding and working on the ranch," he says. "They're opposites, but I was a pretty good rider, and I used to cowboy pretty good, too. Like at the X9, one time when it was sold, (the former owner) left a lot of cattle out there on the mountain. They had the best cowboys and they never could catch them. So they asked me if I could gather the cattle, supposed to be 150 head. They told me they'd been working 25 days, they'd caught five head, and they'd lost three back. So that guy finally said he was going to quit and leave 'em for the coyotes. But he told me, 'I'll let you have half of what you get out of them mountains.' I said, 'Alright.' First I wanted to see any cattle and what spots they were in. So myself, my uncle and one other guy rode three miles out on the ranch, into the mountains, and by God, we saw about 30 head. I figured those were 30 head we could catch. Well, we got them. The first part of the cattle was easy. But the last part was pretty hard. If you see them but don't catch them right away, you never see them again. We had to live up in the mountains, but we wound up making a killing. We got 250 head altogether by the deadline. All in all, I'd say we did pretty good."

Quite a few knowledgeable persons used to say the same about Figueroa and all of his brothers. Well-known across the Southwestern range country, the Figueroa boys were much in demand by everybody who had livestock worth caring for. Through drought or depression, good times or bad, the Figueros *always* had jobs.

"They were all natural-born cowboys, the kind of cowboys you dream about having work for you," said Melville Haskell, as quoted by Porter. "Any of them could ride into a herd and say that calf belongs to that cow and this calf belongs to this cow. They simply had the natural ability, and they were all good horsemen, too." □



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