ROBERT HESS

Robert Hess grew up with horses on a farm in rural Pennsylvania where his father broke work horses and trained polo ponies, in addition to occasionally driving trotters in harness races. Robert’s decision to become a thoroughbred trainer came while in the Army.

Discharged from the service in the Seattle area, Hess went to work at Longacres Racetrack for $35 a week. He spotted a horse he liked – Rock N Ran -- and claimed it for $1,200. Noticing that the horse was bred for distance, Hess entered him in a 1 ¼ -mile race and he won, the trainer’s first of more than 1,600 trips to the winner’s circle.

In his 60-year career, Hess has sent horses to the post more than 10,000 times and his entries have earned almost $17 million in purses.

Although he has trained horses in Washington, Southern California and Mexico, Hess has been predominantly a Northern California trainer since 1964. He reached elite trainer status in 2007 when My Creed, a gelding, won the Grade 3 Berkeley Stakes. My Creed was Hess’s most successful charge with lifetime earnings of $335,955, but the Castro Valley horseman considers another horse, Smokeys Image, his most talented.

In 1994, Hess spotted Smokeys Image as a yearling and bought him for $7,500, but the horse was so good he couldn’t hide him. In his first start, a two-year-old maiden allowance race, Smokeys Image breezed to victory, defeating a horse (Cavonnier) that finished second in the Kentucky Derby the following year. Unfortunately, a pinhole tear in a tendon was discovered shortly after that race and the horse was rested for almost a full year. When he tried to return to the track the hole was still there. Smokeys Image never raced again.

Despite the long hours and frustrations, Hess, now 85, would gladly do it all again. And he has no plans to retire. “How many people can do what they want all their lives?” he asked.

Hess and his wife of 55 years, Maria Elena, raised four children (two sons and two daughters) in Castro Valley. Their oldest son, Robert Hess, Jr., is a successful thoroughbred trainer in Southern California and the East. The couple has six grandchildren.