

## Early Morning Man

A glimpse into Lambholm South, one of the nation's premier Thoroughbred training facilities.

## By Summer Best

Junior Serna sits on a stool in the watchtower at Lambholm South in Reddick, Florida, as calm and comfortable as can be. He's there every day from 6 a.m. until all 60 or so racehorses under his care have worked for the day. He quietly sips coffee, watches horses gallop by on the track and gives instructions to exercise riders. He's careful. He's methodical. Junior Serna

Then a particularly special filly comes out to gallop. Junior sits up straight. His eyes are intense.

"See that filly? See how she just...watch! Now, this filly is very correct in front! She's not coming off the ground very high with those legs. And she gets those legs under her, see? And when you ask her to GO, she just PUSHES with that hind end. And she's so correct in the back!"

Junior's arms are going every direction, and he's pointing, and standing up, and describing and talking louder –

"And now, you see? Now, THAT's a nice way of going!" he exclaims.

I feel like I've met a man with two personalities. One, the quiet, soft-spoken, silver-haired horseman who is almost bashful when asked for an interview. And the other personality? It belongs to a racehorse trainer who is a fanatic about spotting and starting good racehorses.

Turns out, I'm right on both accounts.

## From Age 9

Junior Serna's career began in South Texas, where, at age 9, he tasted the early thrill of the racetrack by galloping horses and eventually riding in Quarter Horse Early morning gallop match races. Soon, he was training full-time, and 1977 brought him to Ocala, where he has been head trainer for the 420-acre training facility, Lambholm South, ever since. In the past 26 years, Junior has outstayed three owners and three name changes – but his forté has always been training Thoroughbred winners.

"It's an all-day job," he says of his work. "We try to get done here (at the track) around 10:30 or 11, but then you've got all the horses on the farm to look after. I help manage the farm, but training is what I do."

And he does it well. Remember Azeri? Last year's Thoroughbred Racehorse of the Year? She got her start with Junior at Lambholm. Does the name Farda Amiga ring a bell? What about National Museum of Racing Hall of Fame inductees Personal Ensign and Slew of Gold?

When the farm was owned by Seattle Slew's owners, Dr. Jim Hill, Mickey Taylor and the Murty brothers, the group called themselves the Slew Crew and trained and raced a surplus of Seattle Slew's first foal crops. Junior has also overseen two-time turf champion, Flawlessly, champion 2-year-old Epitome, champion 3-year-old Ajina, champion handicap female Ascena and more.

"We've been fortunate," Junior says in his understated style. Lambholm South, a 420-acre complete facility with a six-stall stallion barn, broodmare barn and yearling barn, plus the training accommodations, is rich with tradition.

Lambholm South's owner, Roy Lerman, also owns the original Lambholm Farm, located in Middleburg, Virginia, and he spends several months of each year living in Middleburg and Reddick, in addition to his home in Saratoga Springs, New York.

Quarter Century of Study Early morning practice  
Every day, Junior carries a printout that gives him detailed information about each horse as he watches them work. But he rarely relies on its data.

"There've been times when I would train 100 head of horses at a time and pretty much go through the whole deal and know every horse," he admits. "Of course, I'm getting to the age now where I have to look at my sheet a little more often!"

Junior explains what he's scouting for in young prospects.

"You want to see a horse that stays low to the ground and pushes with his hind end and gets his hind end under him and goes, just goes!" he says. "But if they have high knee action, it doesn't mean they aren't good, because they can level out... you've got to try them. We've had so many horses, and you'll get to breezing them, and doing a little more and more, and next thing you know, you say 'Hey, this horse is all right.' And the truth is, at the end of all of this, you've just got to get them into the game. A lot of horses learn here what their jobs are. And others need a race or two before they really get into the game."

Part of Junior's training concept is to think like a horse.

“You get into their heads, and you try to figure out what they’re trying to do, then beat them to it!” he says.

An exercise rider walks up on a filly, waiting for instructions. practice

“Mile and a quarter,” Junior mumbles to her.

She nods and urges the horse forward.

Most of Junior’s riders will gallop, or “breeze” eight to 10 Thoroughbreds every day. Again, he is constantly studying them, trying to figure out exactly what makes them tick. “

This filly is a little too much on the bit,” Junior tells of the horse. “She’s a little too nervous, see? Her mind is going faster than where she belongs right now. Physically and mentally, if I can get those things to match, then we’ll be OK. Her mind gets going too fast, so we’re going to back off just a little bit. We’re going to let her relax, let her gallop and just settle in. She’ll come around.”

It’s just something he knows.

Rewards?

Like a lot of horse industry professionals, Junior Serna says his reward is just being able to work with horses every day.

“For me,” he says, “It’s just the same ol’ deal. Just another crop, another year, and I hope we come up with another nice horse.” care taking

But of course, in the racing business, there’s even more.

“Well, OK,” he admits. “When I turn on my T.V. on Saturday afternoon, and a horse that we’ve had here and broke here wins, that’s great! Like last week, we had the horse that beat Empire Maker. And you’re happy for the owners, too, because they’ve put so much into it. So when you get a nice horse, you’d better enjoy it. I hope we come up with another nice horse. We’ve got some pretty good-looking ones right now.”

Quite possibly the understatement of the season.

Quick Stats:

Lambholm South, Reddick, Florida

Owner: Roy Lerman

Trainer: Junior Serna

Assistant Trainer: Len Blackson  
Office Manager: Doris Van Fleet  
Office assistant: Judy Little  
Stallion and Broodmare Manager: Ron Martin  
Stallion Administrator: Patty Izdebski  
Barn Manager: Valentin "Cowboy" Cornejo  
Assistant Manager: Julian "Guy" Serna III  
Maintenance Manager: Carl Sheridan  
Computer & Organic Products Management Assistant: Steve Jones

## Nutrition Needs

Junior Serna expects his horses to look ideal, and that requires planning. On the feed and forage side, he provides a timothy/alfalfa mix.

"I don't dislike alfalfa, but the T&A has worked well for us," he says. "They like it, so we stick with that." Many of the racehorses in training are fed Seminole Blue Ribbon 14, a premium sweet feed formula that offers plenty of energy and keeps the youngsters in good flesh. Mares and foals are fed Seminole Mare and Foal Formula, and other products are used specifically for yearlings or horses in other life stages.

"We feed anywhere from 12 to 16 percent protein," Junior says. "I like Seminole Feed because it's been here for a while, and I think they have a good foundation, a good program, and good feed. I like, too, how if I need them, they'll get somebody over here to talk to us and discuss our program and go over the feed."

Seminole Challenge, a beet pulp-based feed, is added to the rations of some horses.

"I like how Seminole is going out and beating the bushes and keeping up with what's going on out there (with equine nutrition)," Junior says. "It helps me a lot, because I can't spend all my time going out and looking around for all the latest stuff.

"Hey," he adds. "Our program is working."