



CTBA Member  
**PROFILE**

# ADRIAN GONZALEZ

BY EMILY SHIELDS

THE GRAND-  
MASTER OF  
CHECKMATE

**A**drian Gonzalez abided by the “fake it until you make it” school of thought, and ultimately made it.

Having been accepted to California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, Gonzalez needed a job to help put himself through school. He had grown up around horses, but not Thoroughbreds.

“I stumbled upon Cardiff Stud Farm,” he said. “My very first experience there was as an exercise rider, breaking yearlings.”



Adrian Gonzalez' California-based Checkmate Thoroughbreds comprises many facets of the Thoroughbred industry

Within a year Gonzalez was working as a stallion groom at Creston Farms, then helped handle weanlings.

“I hadn’t done any of that,” Gonzalez admitted. “I thought, ‘fake it until you make it.’”

During that year the studious Gonzalez not only saw several different facets of the industry, but also spent time perusing *The Blood-Horse’s* annual auction results book.

“Not to date myself, but there weren’t a lot of sales results online at the time,” he said. “The farm had a library with all the old stallion registers, and I was taking the auction books and going page by page, highlighting horses that sold in multiple years. That’s how I first started doing pinhooking research. How were these horses selling for nothing in one sale and for lots of money the next year? How did they do that?”

Bitten by the sales bug, Gonzalez was determined to try it for himself. He couldn’t find a job after graduating, so he started his own Checkmate Thoroughbreds in 2006. Early on Gonzalez had “a good sale” and the business blossomed.

“People saw what we had as a product, especially with our sales prep program,” he said. “Everything has built from there. We’ve gone a lot of different directions to try and encompass more of the industry than just sales prep.”

Checkmate now offers consultations, stallion seasons, and mares and yearlings for sale. Gonzalez is even breeding his own horses.

“We bred a few mares on a very small scale,” he said. “We’ve been doing the back and forth every other year from Kentucky to California, so we can have Kentucky-sired Cal-breds.”

The “we” in question is Erin Gonzalez, his wife, who was at Cal Poly with him.

“She has been absolutely instrumental through all of this,” Gonzalez said. “She’s been along with me for the entire journey, from picking me up from the hospital when I got into a wreck at the first farm to being there for my first sale-toppers.”

The first one was an Afleet Alex colt that brought \$100,000 at the 2011 Barretts October yearling sale.

“We paid \$12,000 for him as a weanling,” Gonzalez said. “We’ve sold horses for more than \$100,000 since then, but that was one of the best.”

COURTESY OF BARRETT'S



Adrian Gonzalez  
with stallion Danzing  
Candy who stands  
at Rancho San Miguel

**“It’s not often a stallion [grade 2 winner Danzing Candy] comes into California where people can buy in.”**

— Adrian Gonzalez

Other top memories include being the leading consignor at the 2017 Barretts October sale, selling three of the top four prices at the 2018 Barretts January sale, and selling both the highest-priced filly and colt at the 2018 Barretts October sale.

In addition to breeding mares and sales prepping young horses, Gonzalez has a new venture: standing young sire Danzing Candy in California.

Danzing Candy, by Twirling Candy–Talkin and Singing, by Songandaprayer, retired in 2017 after earning \$700,930 and winning six of 11 starts. The dual grade 2 winner scored in stakes races from seven furlongs to 1¼ miles, and even shipped to win the Lone Star Park Handicap (G3) by 4¾ lengths. Although Danzing Candy is a solid physical specimen with speed and determination, Gonzalez was worried that his new purchase would not be well supported early.

“We weren’t sure how well he would be received, and we wanted him to have a good start with the right numbers,” Gonzalez said. “Looking back now, we didn’t need to do that because he was super popular on his own. But we went nuts buying a whole bunch of new mares in foal to a fancy group of Kentucky stallions that we’re excited about. Those Cal-breds will be coming up for the yearling sales this year.”

Gonzalez put together a deal to purchase Danzing Candy that included the horse’s syndication. Danzing Candy stands at Rancho San Miguel for \$5,000.

“It’s not often that a stallion comes into California where people can buy in,” he said.

The Gonzalez team has a 66-acre facility in Paso Robles that acts as a nursery for mares, foals, and young horses undergoing sales prep. The past few months have provided more

highlights for the couple, as Checkmate graduate Spiced Perfection won the \$301,035 La Brea Stakes (G1) and was later named California’s Horse of the Year, champion 3-year-old female, and champion sprinter.

“Obviously, she’s the highlight right now,” Gonzalez said. “We sold her at a 2-year-old in training sale for \$50,000. Her credentials are pretty well known.”

Cal-bred King Abner, now 5 but a former member of the Checkmate program, was second by a half-length in the \$100,000 Tiznow Stakes on March 3 and has won five races overall.

But the horse closest to Gonzalez’s heart is Cal-bred Cotton’s Point. The 9-year-old daughter of Salt Lake–Smart ’n Striking, by Smart Strike, was bred by Gonzalez and failed to meet her reserve at \$47,000 in the 2012 Barretts March 2-year-old sale. Gonzalez raced her in partnership, and the filly finished second in the California Thoroughbred Breeders Association Stakes and third in the Keith E. Card California Cup Juvenile Fillies before ever breaking her maiden. She is now a broodmare for Gonzalez.

“We bred her, we raced her, and now we’ve been breeding her,” Gonzalez said.

Her first foal, Shanghai Point, by Shanghai Bobby, brought \$82,000 as a weanling and is not only a four-time winner, but unbeaten in two starts in 2019. Cotton’s Point’s second foal died as a yearling, but the third is an Honor Code juvenile filly named Honesta.

“She’s a really special mare to us,” Gonzalez said. “She has a Cal-bred colt by Runhappy who is a yearling now and could be super special. I think he could top a lot of sales.” **CTB**