

# Texas Rocket

## JIM'S ORBIT TOOK HIS TEXAS OWNER ON A THRILLING RIDE TO THE KENTUCKY DERBY

By Denise Steffanus

**M**arch 21, 1985, was just another day during foaling season at El Rancho Cottrell in Cleburne, Texas. Jim Cottrell, a hands-on breeder, had helped his mare Gaytimer deliver a plain chestnut colt, whom he named Jim's Orbit. The unremarkable but healthy son of Orbit Dancer would take Cottrell, trainer Clarence Picou and jockey Shane Romero on an odyssey to their only Kentucky Derby (G1) and etch his own name into the record books as the greatest of his sire's offspring.

Cottrell had a meager investment in the foal. He had purchased Gaytimer, a Te Vega mare out of Real Swinger, for \$11,000 and used one of his shares in Orbit Dancer, an unraced son of Northern Dancer who stood for \$5,000, for the mating. The colt went on to bankroll \$600,720, more than four times that earned by any of Orbit Dancer's previous offspring.



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In 1987, Jim's Orbit was listed ninth on the Experimental Free Handicap after placing second in the Arlington-Washington Futurity (G1), third in the Sapling Stakes (G2) and winning the In Memoriam Stakes. He amassed an aggressive juvenile record of three wins, four seconds and a third in 10 starts and earnings of \$258,368 that garnered him Texas Champion 2-Year-Old Colt honors.

As a 3-year-old in 1988, Jim's Orbit won the Derby Trial Stakes (G3) and Ohio Derby (G2) and finished second in the Illinois Derby (G2). That year, he capped his racing career with two wins, a second and two thirds in nine starts while banking \$342,352. The Texas-bred was honored on the *Daily Racing Form* Free Handicap at number 12 behind Risen Star and was named Texas Champion 3-Year-Old Colt.

Cottrell recalled the chestnut yearling as large and lethargic. He sent him to Ed Dodwell to be broken at his training center in Roanoke, Texas, where Jim's Orbit made an unexpected transformation.

"I hadn't seen him in about a month, and I just couldn't believe how he had muscled up so quickly," Cottrell said. "He was a pretty precocious animal. He continued to develop rapidly, so we raced him as an early 2-year-old."

But first, Cottrell had to find a trainer, and fate stepped in. Cottrell had stopped at the Sky Club at Louisiana Downs one day, and the maitre d' seated him at a table with Picou, who passed away in 1998.

"We were just sitting there talking, and I told Clarence I was looking for a trainer," recalled Cottrell. "He said, 'Boy, are you in luck today! I am a trainer.'"

That was the beginning of a whirlwind ride for the duo that would take them from Louisiana to the glitz of the Northeast and on to the hallowed ground of Churchill Downs.

Jim's Orbit debuted at Louisiana Downs in a 4 1/2-furlong maiden race on May 15, 1987, with Romero in the irons. He finished second by a head in a driving finish. Two races later on July 5 at Louisiana Downs, Jim's Orbit broke his maiden in a 5 1/2-furlong special weight race with Carlos Gonzalez aboard.

After a second in the 5 1/2-furlong Pioneer Stakes at Louisiana Downs, Cottrell decided to venture from his home track to Monmouth Park, where Julie Krone hustled Jim's Orbit to a third-place finish behind Tejano and Unzipped in the Sapling Stakes. But the bold 2-year-old never really showed his true potential until his

connections challenged him at a mile in the Grade 1 \$411,800 Arlington-Washington Futurity at Arlington Park.

"We probably shouldn't have put him in those short races because he was a large, long-striding horse," said Cottrell. "But in each of his races, he was always coming on. He would get beat by half a length, but he might make up 10 or 12 lengths in the stretch. I knew he would be a much nicer horse when we stretched him out.

"I put up \$25,000 to run him in the Arlington-Washington Futurity because I had so much confidence in him," Cottrell continued. "Clarence didn't have as much confidence as I did, but I had studied the charts on everything in the race. I had raced with several of them, and I felt very confident that we could at least run second. And that's what we did. Pat Day rode him in that race."

Up against Tejano again in the Futurity, Jim's Orbit lay third behind the D. Wayne Lukas-trained 3-to-5 favorite and his stable-mate Native Stalwart at the half. In the final furlong, the Texas-bred challenger closed

briskly along the rail, vanquishing Eugene Klein's Native Stalwart by five lengths while keeping Tejano in his sights as the two colts thundered to the wire. Tejano bested Jim's Orbit for the second straight race, but this time by a narrower margin of 1 1/2 lengths.

The second-place finish against the nation's best juveniles validated Cottrell's confidence in his homebred colt. So his next start, the listed In Memoriam at Turfway Park in Northern Kentucky, was not about prestige, but rather its \$125,000 purse. Again with Day up, Jim's Orbit dismissed the field of 11 runners to score by three-quarters of a length over eventual Belmont Stakes (G1) runner-up Kingpost.

Jim's Orbit completed his freshman campaign with fourth- and fifth-place finishes, respectively, in two Grade 1 \$500,000 events, the Champagne Stakes at Belmont Park and the Young America Stakes at the Meadowlands.

After a hard juvenile season and a four-month freshening, Jim's Orbit embarked on the Triple Crown trail. In his first two sophomore races, the colt held his own against Secretariat's finest son, Risen Star, in the Louisiana Derby Trial Stakes and the Louisiana Derby (G3), finishing third and fourth, respectively. In both races, Risen Star had 18-year-old sensation Romero in the irons. When Picou and Day clashed over Jim's Orbit's future racing schedule, Romero recovered the mount on Jim's Orbit, Eddie Delahoussaye replaced him on



Led by groom Bobby Ray with jockey Shane Romero aboard, Jim's Orbit walks to the track before the richest victory of his career in the Ohio Derby.

Risen Star and trainer Woody Stephens gave Day a leg up on Claiborne Farm's Forty Niner.

"Out of all the horses I've ever ridden, he probably had the biggest heart," Romero recalled of Jim's Orbit. "He was probably a notch under the big horses, and Mr. Picou always had him in \$100,000 or \$300,000 races and he wouldn't always win – sometimes he was second or third – but he was always giving it his all. He tried until right up to the wire. He wasn't like some horses that give it up when they see they can't win. He was always trying, giving it 100 percent.

"He came from a little off it, depending on how the pace was setting up in front of him. Most of the time, he was never on the lead, but he was always coming from a little off it. He was a push-button horse, and if I asked him if I thought he was too far out of it at the five-eighths, I'd ask him a little and he'd give it to me and we'd sit. And if I asked him again at the top of the stretch, he'd give it to me again. In the last sixteenth, if it was a head-and-head duel and I asked him, boy, he was just always giving me what he had."

Romero's first start back on Jim's Orbit was in the Jim Beam Stakes (G2) over a rock-hard yet sloppy surface at Turfway. The colt's old nemesis Kingpost won the \$500,000 prep for the Kentucky Derby, but Romero closed from 10th to fourth in the stretch and crossed the wire just a half-length behind the leader in a four-horse finish. Jim's Orbit emerged from the race with swollen ankles.

"The track was muddy and we had him bandaged behind, but if you put on a glove and hit a cement wall often enough, it still is going to hurt you," Picou told reporters. "We had been planning on running him a couple of times before the Derby, but I told Mr. Cottrell we better come on to Churchill."

Cottrell said he and Picou were an excellent team who collaborated on the direction of the Texas-bred colt's campaign.

"When it came to the big races, we would decide on what distance we were going to send the horse. In fact, I placed the horse in every race. That was strictly my idea," said Cottrell, whose brother Comer serves on the Texas Racing Commission. "We would talk about what we were going to do before a race, and this made it interesting. It really did me all the good in the world when I would go into places like Monmouth and Aqueduct with a Texas-bred and they didn't give us any recognition and then when we'd

run big, they would be so surprised."

There were big surprises ahead in the Derby Trial Stakes in Jim's Orbit's first trip over the legendary track. In the final Derby prep, a one-mile event just one week before America's most famous race, the powerful Orbit Dancer colt battled through an opening on the inside, got slammed against the rail, but responded courageously when asked by Romero for a closing kick. Jim's Orbit stuck his nose in front of a driving charge by Kingpost, Lover's Trust and Frosty the Snowman to earn a berth in the Kentucky Derby.

### The Derby — Texas Style

On the first Saturday in May, Cottrell, Picou and Romero were in for the biggest thrill of their lives and one they would remember as the greatest day of their racing careers.

"Here we come with a Texas-bred, coming to Kentucky with a black owner. It was a lot of fun, I'll tell you," Cottrell said. "I had bought tickets for about 25 people. Everything I had won from the

Derby Trial the prior week was spent buying tickets and accommodations for friends. It was quite a ball."

For Picou, the Derby was a homecoming for the 56-year-old conditioner who had earned the nickname "King of Miles Park" for his years on the racing scene at the old Louisville oval and at Churchill. His daughter, jockey-turned-photographer Suzie Picou-Oldham, whose work has appeared in *The Texas Thoroughbred*, recalled how friends and family rolled out to support her father in



Trainer Clarence Picou poses with an imposing 2-year-old Jim's Orbit.

his finest hour.

"Coming back there, because it was a place he had spent many years as a local trainer, with a better horse meant a lot," she said. "His wife's family lived nearby, so it was a coming home of sorts. The groom, Bobby Ray, grew up in the neighborhood near the racetrack, and Bobby's little brothers also had worked for Dad on the backside. And Dad had so many friends on the backside. So (the Derby) drew in old friends that he had left when he went racing south. Everybody was back on the scene. It was a special time.

"Dad would never have gone to a race like that if he didn't think horses that ran special for him, and this horse was a Texas-bred, so that was pretty special because he got a lot of attention back home," Picou-Oldham said of her father's Beaumont roots.

Romero, who had started his riding career in 1986, found himself up against the industry's most-seasoned riders on top horses, but the 18-year-old was not intimidated as the youngest rider in the 17-horse race.

"They treated me with respect as a journeyman rider, and it was good to ride with them. We rode tight in the race, close together, and I knew I was safe because they knew what they were doing. I just wish I could have run better on Jim's Orbit," Romero said of his 10th-place Derby finish.

"He broke right with the leaders, and he settled in like he always did," he continued. "He probably sat about seven or eight lengths off it. And when I asked, he tried and he made his run. Of course, he wasn't passing up too many horses but, as I recall, there weren't many passing him up. He kind of ran an even race all around there.

"I figured Risen Star would be the one to beat. That year, Winning Colors was the winning filly for Wayne Lukas. Of course, I figured she would be tough to beat, too. I was happy the way Jim's Orbit performed. Just like I said, he ran in the middle of the pack, and he was probably a notch under the big horses. The big horses ran 1-2-3-4-5, and I was right there behind them."

The Lukas-trained filly, Winning Colors, bested the boys that year, with Forty Niner second by a neck and Risen Star three lengths back in third. The next seven horses were tightly grouped, with Jim's Orbit finishing 10th less than 3 1/2 lengths behind Risen Star.

"I don't regret running in it," said Cottrell. "I was so happy that I did."

## Orbiting Ohio

One month after the Kentucky Derby, the trio took Jim's Orbit to Sportsman's Park for his third 1988 derby, the Grade 2 \$500,000 Illinois Derby, where he was rematched with Proper Reality, who had finished fourth in the Kentucky Derby. The hard-knocking Texas-bred managed to eke out a second, but was four lengths behind Proper Reality. Later in the season, it was discovered that Jim's Orbit and Proper Reality both developed ankle chips in that race, but Cottrell's gritty colt was back to normal just two days after the Illinois Derby, and his swollen ankle was at the time considered a minor injury. So Picou and Cottrell pushed on to Thistledown in Ohio for

the crowning race of Jim's Orbit's career, the \$250,000 Ohio Derby, a Grade 2 event.

Just as the Kentucky Derby had been a homecoming for Picou, the Ohio Derby drew Jim's Orbit back to his roots. Both his sire, Orbit Dancer, and his dam, Gaytimer, were Ohio-breds. Te Vega, his

broodmare sire, was also an Ohio-bred who had won the 1968 Ohio Derby and three other stakes at Thistledown. Gaytimer was third in the 1979 Leading Lady Stakes there.

Thistledown also held nostalgia for Picou, who had been a jockey there and at its defunct sister track across the street, Randall Park.

Sent off at 9-5 as the second choice behind the Lukas entry of Tsarbaby and Digress, Jim's Orbit broke in fifth and cruised along in fourth position just to the inside of Primal, who bore down on pace-setters Tsarbaby and Woody Stephens-trained Din's Dancer.

Jim's Orbit and Romero were boxed in, but Romero briefly raised up and glanced from side to side, looking for room to run. As the pack turned for home, Primal bobbed to the outside, and Romero asked his courageous mount for a bold move through the narrow opening. At the eighth pole, Romero cracked him once with a right-handed whip and Jim's Orbit drew away to score a two-length victory over Primal in 1:51 3/5 for the 1 1/8-mile race.

The race had taken its toll on the gutsy Jim's Orbit, however. His old ankle injury flared up and Cottrell took him to Dr. C. Wayne McIlwraith, the renowned equine surgeon, who removed chips from the colt's left front ankle. In an odd twist of fate, McIlwraith also removed an ankle chip from Proper Reality that same day.

Picou returned Jim's Orbit to Louisiana for a three-month lay up before entering him in the Prelude Stakes at Louisiana Downs, a prep for the \$1 million Super Derby (G1). Again facing Thoroughbred royalty, Jim's Orbit held on for third behind Private Terms and went on to the Super Derby.

"We came back too soon after his arthroscopic surgery," admitted Cottrell. "(The Super Derby) was a race we really aimed for because it was at home, and I guess we all didn't want to be disappointed. But the last work prior to the Super Derby, he came up just a little sore. We had him examined by the vets and Clarence was anxious to go with him. So we ran him in the Super Derby, and that's when he broke down."



Jim's Orbit (on rail) scored a 9-1 upset in the Grade 3 Derby Trial Stakes at Churchill Downs and earned a spot in the Run for the Roses to be contested just seven days later.



TIA FINE PHOTO

Jim Cottrell experienced some rarified air with Jim's Orbit as the Texas-bred became one of the top juveniles of 1987 and then had a super sophomore campaign the following year.

This time, it was not his ankle that gave way, but a tendon. Jim's Orbit made a valiant effort in the eight-horse race, never giving up despite being 20 lengths behind winner Seeking the Gold as he crossed the wire on a bowed tendon in sixth.

"I didn't go to that particular race because it was on a Sunday," Cottrell recalled. "So I didn't see the race, and I'm glad I didn't, really."

After the race, Cottrell took Jim's Orbit back home to Cleburne.

"We tried to bring him back to the races, and it was probably January or February when he died of colic here at my ranch," Cottrell said about his colt.

Although he regretted not being able to establish a stallion career for the son of Orbit Dancer, Cottrell remembers fondly the meteoric ride aboard his two star performers of 1988, Jim's Orbit and 2-year-old filly sensation Darby's Daughter, another Texas-bred who was a Grade 2 winner in New York and later finished second in the Yellow Ribbon Stakes (G1) at Santa Anita.

"On the (*Daily Racing Form*) Free Handicap as a 3-year-old, Jim's Orbit was number 12; and I had the filly, Darby's Daughter, rated number three on the Experimental Free Handicap. I thought that was my greatest accomplishment when I was out there racing," Cottrell said. "I look at some of the big farms in Kentucky, people with far more resources, and if they had one horse on the Experimental Free Handicap, they were happy. And I was near the top with two horses in one year. That was unique.

"I was able to stay in the industry for 18 years, and I bred to some of the best stallions in Kentucky and I really didn't have the resources

of a lot of other people," Cottrell continued. "But because I worked hard and stayed on top of things, I was able to survive. It took a lot of homework, a lot of research and a lot of physical labor. It was a fun ride; it was really a fun ride." ☆

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## Jim's Orbit 1985 Chestnut Horse

Orbit Dancer – Gaytimer, by Te Vega

### Race Record

Year	Age	Starts	1st	2nd	3rd	Earned
1987	2	10	3	4	1	\$258,368
1988	3	9	2	1	2	\$342,352

**TOTALS**                      **19   5   5   3**  
**\$600,720**

### Stakes Record

#### 1st

- 1988 • Ohio Derby (G2)
- 1988 • Derby Trial Stakes (G3)
- 1987 • In Memoriam Stakes

#### 2nd

- 1987 • Arlington-Washington Futurity (G1)
- 1988 • Illinois Derby (G2)
- 1987 • Pioneer Stakes

#### 3rd

- 1987 • Sapling Stakes (G3)
- 1988 • Prelude Stakes
- 1988 • Louisiana Derby Trial Stakes