



# Domenico Cecere

## Opportunity Fulfilled

Working with top bloodstock, head trainer for Lindy Farms saw horses accomplish goals in 2021

story by **Rich Fisher**

**D**omenico Cecere had to take a huge step backward when he arrived in America, but has gone forward ever since and made his biggest leap to date in 2021.

Entering mid-December, the head trainer at Lindy Farms in Somers, Conn., had recorded career highs with 64 wins and \$1,513,461 in earnings. Much of that had to do with a red-hot autumn, when Cecere posted 25 wins from Aug. 26 to Nov. 19. Six of those were on the Grand Circuit, where he hit the board 11 times in 16 starts.

“These 14 years we had good years in Kentucky and Canada, but this year was definitely one of the best years we’ve had,” said Cecere, who arrived at Lindy Farms in 2007. “It was very, very exciting.”

And it continued to make Lindy Farms President Frank M. Antonacci

look like quite the talent evaluator after relinquishing his head training duties to Cecere at the end of 2017.

**Cecere hails** from Locorotondo, Italy, the same hometown as Antonacci’s grandfather, Guy “Sonny” Antonacci. After becoming a top driver in northern Italy, the then 25-year-old decided to take a shot at the more lucrative money in America.

Upon arriving at Newark Airport, he and his luggage were tossed in the back of a pick-up truck and driven to a New Jersey farm. After seeing his shabby living quarters, Cecere broke down in tears and began second-guessing himself. He had gone from a rising star at home to a country where he knew little English and was completely starting over in harness racing.

But Cecere drew on some old-world

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creeds to give himself a pep talk and decided to stick it out. Working for Jan Johnson, he was sent to Florida where he met Antonacci. Things changed quickly, as Antonacci took Cecere under his wing. He gave him a job while also helping him learn English, procure a driver's license and green card, and basically learn American culture.

In working side-by-side with Cecere, Antonacci became increasingly impressed by his work ethic and horse knowledge. After 10 years together, Antonacci tabbed his friend to replace him as head trainer for one of the nation's most prominent stables.

**The decision** has worked out nicely. In 2018 Cecere won 62 races and \$1,311,849, followed by 52 wins and \$984,667 in 2019 and 37 wins and \$700,267 in COVID-shortened 2020.

The 2021 season topped them all, thanks in part to a windfall as the autumn leaves fell.

"It was very exciting," Cecere said. "When we sat down and discussed what we had last year, we knew we had

a lot of talented babies. We're always trying to get the horses in great shape and build for Lexington. When we go to Lexington, the horses are more ready. We plan to do that. We save a little bit and build them for the late season."

Two of the top horses were 2-year-old colt trotter Branded By Lindy and 2-year-old filly trotter Raised By Lindy. Each horse won their International Stallion and Bluegrass stakes races in Lexington. Branded By Lindy also took third in the Breeders Crown and won seven races from September through October. Raised By Lindy took second in the Breeders Crown and Kentuckiana Stallion Management Stakes and won four fall races.

"The plan worked great this year," Cecere said. "Branded By Lindy is a great colt; I'm very excited for his campaign as a 3-year-old. And the same with Raised By Lindy. She raced fantastic at the Breeders Crown in the elimination and final. The colt raced great in the elimination and in the final too. He got beat by two nice horses and I think the track conditions hurt him."

Several other Cecere horses looked good in the season's late months, including 3-year-old Moni For Lindy (four wins in the Massachusetts Sires Stakes, including the \$100,000 final) and 2-year-olds Did You See Lindy and I'll Have A Lindy (two wins each). The 3-year-old Goodashim had two wins and just missed hitting the board with a fourth in the Zweig Memorial Open Trot.

"We have a really nice group of 2-year-olds that are coming back as threes," Cecere said. "The team did a great job in Florida. We built them up as good 2-year-olds and they showed it when we got to Lexington. I'm very happy with the horses in Kentucky; they started to really show who they are, especially Branded By Lindy and Raised By Lindy."

"When it was time to really show off in Kentucky, we did it. I was proud of the campaign we had there. In the beginning we had very hot weather, so some horses didn't want to race good. But after we were there a month, we knew we had the horses, so I was very proud of them and the whole team."



**FIT AND FAST / Opposite:** Domenico Cecere conditions his horses in Florida, with the aim of getting them ready for the Red Mile meet in the fall. **Above:** Cecere spoke with Michael Carter about his two entries in last year's Breeders Crown—2-year-old trotting colt Branded By Lindy and 2-year-old trotting filly Raised by Lindy. Although they finished third and second, respectively, both horses had made their mark a few weeks earlier, winning their International Stallion and Bluegrass stakes races at Red Mile.

**Thanks to the faith** that Antonacci had in Cecere when he first came on board, Cecere said his transition to head trainer felt seamless.

"Frank would give me a lot of confidence; we always stuck together," he said. "When I was second trainer next to him, I always felt I was the head trainer because everything we did, we did together and we learned together.

"The difference now is my name is on the program and it's a little more exciting. In all these years, Frank saw me growing. I have more responsibility now, but I had responsibility before this too."

Cecere will also be getting more responsibility at his Enfield, Conn., home, where wife Ericka is expecting their second child in April. It will be a girl and Daddy said, "It is 90 percent sure we will name her Kristina."

She will add to a family that also includes 4-year-old Stefano.

Since becoming a father, Cecere believes he has taken a more mellow approach to business.

"After we got Stefano, I became more

relaxed," he said. "Before I was probably more hyper; now I kind of slowed down a little bit. I think he helped because I probably needed it."

In summing it all up, life could not be better these days for Cecere, who left in early December for four months of training in Florida. He has a growing family and is consistently working with top-level horses.

"Lindy Farms always tries to breed the best mares and best stallions to try to make champions," he said. "It's great to work with great horses with a great pedigree. It makes working with your horse a little easier. Year after year they get better and better."

It's a far cry from Cecere's first visit to a Jersey farm.

"I'm very comfortable," he said, "and very happy with how things are going."

He's in a good place, and looking forward to the future. *HB*

**Rich Fisher** is a freelance writer living in New Jersey. To comment on this story, email us at [readerforum@ustrotting.com](mailto:readerforum@ustrotting.com).

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