

Gonzalez, Santiago: Born: July 9, 1983. From: Maracaibo, Venezuela.

He may not speak much English, but jockey Santiago Gonzalez' perennially smiling face doesn't require a translator to be understood across the Californian racing scene. His race riding skills don't require a translator, either.

The Venezuelan native has made a big splash on the Californian circuit, appearing from seemingly out of nowhere in December of 2014.

“It was always my dream, to ride races in California,” said Gonzalez, who grew up watching riding legends Laffit Pincay, Jr. and Angel Cordero, Jr. on television.

Born in the city of Maracaibo, the second largest in Venezuela, Gonzalez began riding races at the age of 14. (Coincidentally, Maracaibo is the same hometown of Eclipse Award-winning jockey Javier Castellano, with whom Gonzalez is good friends.) He became known as “El Ciclón,” the cyclone, after an announcer used the term to describe the rider's unrelenting, aggressive style on the track.

Over the course of his Venezuelan career, Gonzalez won approximately 2,200 races, including multiple Group 1 events. He chased Emisael Jaramillo in the race to be Venezuela's leading rider for 13 years in a row before that rider made the move to South Florida.

Jaramillo's relocation was predicated by the rising economic and political turmoil in Venezuela in recent years. The South American nation's economy is largely tied to its vast crude oil reserves; the price per barrel of oil has plunged significantly, taking Venezuela's stability down with it.

“The situation there was pretty bad,” Gonzalez said. “It wasn't safe anymore.”

Gonzalez took a leap of faith, packing up his wife and four children to pursue a career in the United States in December of 2013. Arriving first in South Florida, the jockey was able to net 41 winners between Gulfstream Park and Gulfstream Park West over the course of 2014. But California was still in the back of Gonzalez' mind, tempting him.

Former jockey agent Alex Procel spotted Gonzalez in Florida and made a call to California-based agent Craig Stephens, convincing him to take the jockey's book on the West Coast. Stephens was hard to convince because as a journeyman with no reputation it would likely be hard to get good mounts.

On top of those difficulties, riding in the United States is inherently different than in Venezuela, especially in California. “You have to be very quick out of the gate,” Gonzalez explained. “It's just a different style of riding.”

Within the first week, Gonzalez had his initial winner. The hard-working rider would breeze as many horses as he could in the mornings, then spend a significant amount of time studying the form of every mount he had on the day's card. In the afternoons, he always seemed to have his

mounts in contention at the top of the stretch, giving every horse his patented “cyclone” effort, no matter how long the odds on the board.

“My favorite horses are the ones that try very hard, no matter what level they run at,” he said. “I have a very strong, aggressive style of riding.”

His attitude and work ethic have attracted the attention of a number of top trainers across Southern California. Gonzalez was first picked up by James Cassidy and now rides for many other stables as well, including Doug O'Neill, John Sadler, Phil D'Amato, Wesley Ward, Jerry Hollendorfer, Chris Hartman, Peter Miller and Simon Callaghan.

“I can't say anything but good about the kid,” Cassidy said. “He comes to ride and he gives it his all, whether it's a 30-1 shot or a favorite.”

Last winter, Gonzalez captured his first US riding title when he took the three-week Los Alamitos meeting and followed up that effort to finish sixth in the spring meet standings at Santa Anita, despite missing six weeks with a broken jaw.

At the end of May, Gonzalez picked up a new agent. Ronnie Ebanks has represented a number of top jockeys over his career, including Joel Rosario, Tyler Baze, Joe Talamo, Chris Antley, and Pat Valenzuela. The agent took some time away from the game to pursue his passion for entrepreneurship but when the opportunity to represent a top quality rider like Gonzalez presented itself, Ebanks couldn't pass it up.

“I only wanted to do this again if I could do it at the top level,” Ebanks said. “I watched him ride and thought he could be a leading rider.”

Ebanks doesn't speak Spanish, and while Gonzalez has made significant strides toward improving his English, the two usually communicate through a text-message translation program.

“It's pretty simple really,” Ebanks explained. “I do my job, lining up the horses and putting him on the best mounts possible. Then he rides them.”

The system seems to be working for the pair; they kicked off the Del Mar meeting with a bang, winning three races on opening day. Gonzalez is currently second in the standings behind Flavien Prat. With earnings of \$3.4 million on the year so far, he is on target to surpass his personal best year-end earnings of \$4.9 million in 2015.

Gonzalez has been riding more graded stakes mounts as well, winning the G3 Cougar II Handicap with Hard Aces two weeks ago and finishing second aboard 40-1 longshot Indexical in the G1 Bing Crosby this past weekend.

“I'm very thankful to the trainers and the owners for the opportunities,” Gonzalez said. “And of course, to the fans.”

Those fans have grown since Gonzalez moved to the United States, but the jockey's South American fan base is still very vocal in its support of the jockey, especially on social media. Gonzalez has more than 10,500 **followers on Twitter** and another 1,300 on Instagram. Gonzalez hopes to win his first US Grade 1 race in the near future. He'd also like to ride in the Breeders' Cup at Santa Anita this fall and follow in the footsteps of his fellow Venezuelan jockeys Castellano and Jaramillo to ride in the Kentucky Derby.

“Of course, that's the dream of every jockey,” Gonzalez laughed. “But I'm just so happy to be here.”