

Steeplechasing 101: Summer Session

by Regina Welsh

So, how does one become a jump jockey? That's what six junior young riders set out to discover last summer. They were chosen to attend a steeplechase racing camp/clinic sponsored by the North American Point-to-Point Association. Selected based on their commitment to steeplechasing, an essay about how this experience would benefit them, and a recommendation letter from a professional horse person, Fritz Boniface, Willie White and Casey Pinkard of Maryland, along with Pennsylvania's Kelsey LeFever and Lauren Feldman, and Molly Bance of Virginia made up the 2004 class of campers.

Packed into an 11-passenger van driven by this writer, they began a journey that Willie White called "the opportunity of a lifetime."

The camp/clinic covered four states in five days:

Day 1—Butler, Md.

The junior jockeys spent the



L to R: Fritz Boniface (MD), Lauren Feldman (PA), Molly Bance (VA), Matt McCarron, Kelsey LeFever (PA), Willie White (MD), Casey Pinkard (MD) in the paddock at Saratoga

morning working and riding for top Maryland trainers Ann Stewart, Alicia Murphy, and Jack Fisher, and myself. Inspired by a question and answer session with the trainers from the previous evening, the riders came up with the idea of asking three questions of ev-

eryone they met on their trip:

- What do you wish you knew before you got into the sport?
- What advice would you give to a newcomer?
- What would you do differently?

(See sidebar for answers.)

Day 2—Unionville, Pa.

Lilith Boucher, Bruce Miller, and Janet Elliott worked with the campers. Each rider got a chance to gallop and school top horses, including Najjim and Turkish Corner. Legendary timber trainers/riders Paddy Neilson and Bruce Miller viewed videotapes of the campers in action, pointing out good and bad moves that young jocks made. NSA Course safety inspector and starter Barry Watson gave the rundown on how a race is properly "started."

Day 3—Middlebury, Vt.

The kids spent the morning reviewing bandaging techniques, racing injuries, fitness programs for horse and rider, and race day protocol. That afternoon, champion jockey Matt McCarron conducted a mounted session focusing on galloping in a group and starting. Students rode retired steeplechase horses and polo ponies.

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"What I wish someone had told me before I started Steeplechase racing"

Pay close attention to what trainers you work for are doing, why they are doing it, and what the results are—good and bad.

Go to the best people—learn from them, work hard and find someone who will give you opportunities—a good attitude and work ethic is rewarded.

Stay with good horses and watch out for people who want to put you on a bad horse. Good horses give confidence and bad horses take away confidence, and confidence is everything.

Watch flat jockeys to learn about finishes. Practice on an Equicizer and find a mentor to coach you. Videotape yourself if possible. If you can finish well, you will get rides.

Watch race tapes. Watch races on courses in advance of riding them, watch one rider and follow his/her strategy. Pay attention to what the winners do and also the mistakes people make.

You will make mistakes. Just don't make them twice.

Don't underestimate the difference that fitness makes. A professional athlete is a professional athlete, whether the sport is football or riding races. You need to be fit.

Pay attention to learning balance and positioning. It makes a differ-

ence to your horse and can win or lose races.

Don't try to control the strides in front of a fence. Learn to read them and make a decision accordingly.

Racing is about flow. The smoother ride you have, the better off you will be.

Dedication and hard work IS rewarded, even though it takes awhile. People get behind you if you show a winning and professional attitude.

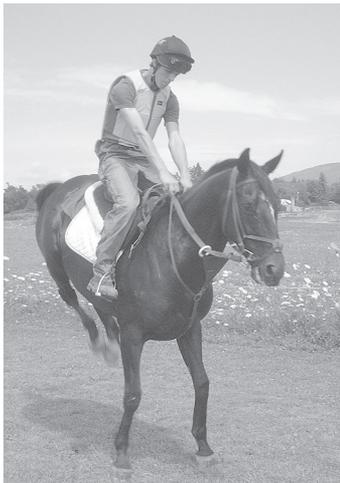
Steeplechase racing as a vocation is a lot of hard work, but is one of the most rewarding things you can do, especially if you have a long term relationship with the horses you are riding or training.

Nothing is better than riding a good horse over a good course on a good day...and winning.

Don't forget that this is a business and that people are out to win. Play fair, but you don't have to play nice.

Seek out the good people and surround yourself with them. They will bring you up a level.

Many thanks to the following trainers and jockeys: Jack Fisher, Jonathan Shepherd, Blythe Miller Davies, Joe Davies, Alicia Murphy, Ann Stewart, Matt McCarron, Bruce Miller, Gregg Ryan, Tom Foley, Doug Fout, Jim Bergen, and Arch Kingsley.



Fritz Boniface on the bouncing Holtzman, retired Timber standout.

Day 4—Saratoga Springs, N.Y. (Part 1)

As we pulled into the majestic Saratoga Racecourse grounds, the kids were overwhelmed with excitement, as everyone eagerly waited to explore. The “Spa” is the home of world famous Thoroughbred racing and holds two steeplechase races a week. After a quick tour of the steeplechase barns, the campers escorted trainer Kathy Neilson’s horse to the paddock for the “jump race.”

McCarron, who rode in the race, met them in the paddock

and explained how he thought the race would unfold. With “riders up!” being called, the campers found their way to front row box seats, provided by the Jeffords family.

The fun didn’t stop at the racetrack. Greg Ryan, owner and amateur jockey, demonstrated how to ride a finish and keep fit on the Equicizer. Jockeys use this large wooden horse that moves with one’s body motion for conditioning. Top jump jockey Tom Foley also gave key pointers to the future jockeys. The day came to a close with a visit to a local rodeo.

Day 5—Saratoga Springs, N.Y. (Part 2)

Another day at Saratoga Racecourse. NSA President and leading trainer Jonathan Shepherd shared his opinion on what makes a good steeplechase horse, pointing out the differences between the flat and jumping “types.” Trainers Doug Fout, Richard Valentine, Tom Voss, Kathy Neilson, Sanna and Ricky Hendriks, among others, met the group and offered their thoughts on steeplechasing from the riders’ and trainers’ viewpoints.

Before the day’s races, the campers stopped to tour the National Museum of Racing across the street from the track. There they had the unexpected privilege of meeting renowned racing cartoonist Pierre Bellocq, perhaps best known simply as “PEB.”

The camp/clinic ended after the steeplechase race that day.



Lauren Feldman learning how to put on ice boots.

Post Camp

For the camp driver and counselor, 1115 miles in a van with six teenagers and a case of Mountain Dew seemed like an eternity. The once clean van smelled of stinky socks and

stale Oreo cookies. At some point, “Saratoga or Bust” was fingered into the thick dust on the back window.

But taking a week off to play “mother hen” and chauffeur the kids around was worthwhile. Everyone who came into contact with the NAPPA Steeplechase Racing Camp/Clinic group was impressed with how eager the riders were to learn, and how much they already knew. The trip, which was the first of its kind, was deemed a success, and plans for the 2005 session are in the works.

2005

To apply for the 2005 Racing Camp, please visit www.NAPTP.com. The 2005 Kiser Scholarship winner will receive tuition for the 2005 Racing Camp. ■

Regina Welsh is the trainer of the 2004 Maryland Hunt Cup winner and Maryland Novice Timber Champion Bug River and is the Executive Director of the North American Point-to-Point Association.

Harnessed to History: More Horses in the Frame

Everyone has seen the long-bodied trotters pulling sleighs through the snow in holiday prints, or admired the slender horses harnessed between the traces of old-time, big-wheeled buggies. People usually nod and say, “Currier & Ives,” yet they would be hard pressed to tell exactly how the names of Nathaniel Currier and James Ives, came to be linked together in history.

Now comes a local opportunity to see a collection of their lithographs in “The Story of Harness Racing by Currier & Ives,” on display through April 30 at the Waters House in Germantown. Admission to the museum is free.

One of the most popular subjects among the Currier & Ives prints was the trotting race, the casual bragging matches that proved one man’s horse was faster than another, at least for that day. Those trotting races foretold of today’s fast-paced world of standardbred racing. In this exhibition, with 33 Currier & Ives originals on loan from the Harness Racing Museum & Hall of Fame in Goshen, N.Y., the early days of the trotting race are celebrated, as these lively prints depict horses appearing just as eager as their drivers to cross the finish line first. The exhibit, which opened Feb. 19, is presented by the Montgomery County Historical Society.

Currier & Ives were not the artists of these works: Currier was a printmaker, Ives a bookkeeper. Beginning in 1857, their company published the prints, drawn and lithographed by others, that reflected 19th century life with charm and accuracy. After the partners’ deaths, their sons carried on their work until 1907.

Most appropriately for an exhibit on harness racing history, the Waters House History Resource Center was once the home of the Pleasant Fields Stock Farm, where top Standardbreds were bred and raised.

For more information, visit www.equinery.com and click on the Waters House link.