Gina Perri:
2006 Jonathan Kiser Scholar by Laurel Scott

Determination, hard work and the will to succeed: These are the characteristics that set Gina Perri apart from the average horse-crazy 15-year-old.

These are also the qualities that earned the Kennett Square, Pennsylvania resident the 2006 Jonathan Kiser Memorial Scholarship. Created in memory of a national champion jump jockey who got his start in Maryland, this award honors a junior race rider whose sportsmanship and talent are worthy of cultivation.

A Unionville High School sophomore with long, dark hair and an infectious smile, Perri is serious about horses, and it shows. "She's a great kid, and a beautiful rider ... and she's very attentive to what's going on," said the North American Point-to-Point Association's executive director Regina Welsh. "Her parents are financially behind her, but she really works hard for what she has. It's kind of rare these days that you find that."

Top trainer Tom Voss seconds that motion. Under the terms of the Kiser scholarship, Perri spent a week riding at the Voss family's Atlanta Hall Farm near Monkton. "She was delightful, absolutely delightful," he said. "And right now, she's about as determined as anybody I ever saw."

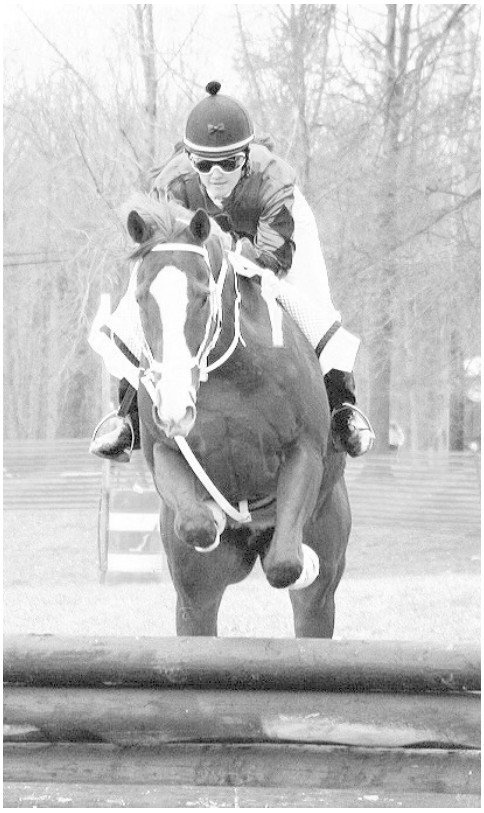
From Ponies to Saratoga

Like most Kiser scholars, Perri started riding young and owes her love of horses to her parents. Father Frank is the family "race-a-holic," while mother Donna is a former barrel racer-turned-English rider.

After starting out in Pony Club, Perri advanced to eventing and jumper classes, riding mostly her own horses. "I started eventing when I was 10," the young equestrian recalled. "My first horse was Cheyenne; he was a retired police horse, so he was pretty bombproof, and he taught me a lot."

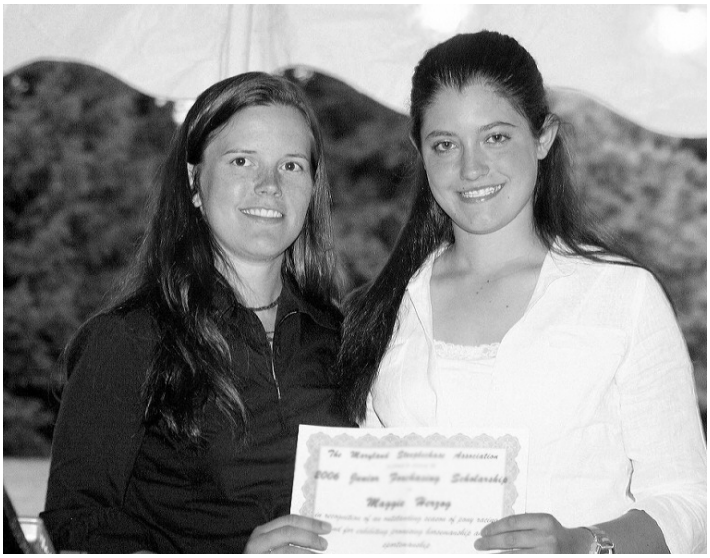
The racing bug bit her early, too. "My dad had always liked racehorses, and we went to Saratoga [NY] one year when I was 9," Perri explained. Enthralled by the venerable track's mystique, she decided then and there that this was the life for her. "I said that I wanted to be a racehorse trainer when I was older, not knowing that it would lead to all this!" she recalled.

By 2003, Perri was on her way, winning the medium pony race at the Pennsylvania Hunt Cup with Sahara Mist. "It was my first race ever, and I never expected to win, but I did," she said. Soon, Perri was attracting the attention of trainers like Regina Welsh, whose junior racing clinic and camp she has attended. Welsh was especially impressed with the young rider's organization and efficiency. "She e-mailed me her training schedule; she had it all written out two months in advance, and she was like, 'Should I be doing this?'" she recalled. "Nobody does that – *I* don't do that!" she said, laughing.



Robert Keller Sr.

Up and over: Gina Perri and Fire N' Ice en route to victory at Howard County-Iron Bridge.



Robert Keller Sr.

Regina Welsh, left, presents Gina Perri with the coveted Jonathan Kiser Scholarship at the 2006 Governor's Cup awards dinner.

Perri's mother isn't surprised. "She is the most determined, diligent, persistent 15-year-old I have ever met," she noted. "We don't see her at the dinner table until each horse is perfectly 'set up' for the evening."

Pennsylvania jockey Harry Vega (of Xtra Heat fame) also took Perri under his wing. "He and his wife Amy boarded their pony here, and they knew that I was interested in racing, so they invited me to come down to Philadelphia Park and watch him," Perri said. "He would also come out and give me lessons on Sahara Mist. He would jump on and actually show me [how to do things]. I've been to the track with him a lot."

It was through the Vegas that Perri and her parents met flat trainer Mike McCarthy. In the summer of 2004, Perri started working for him at the Fair Hill Training Center. "Michael would have her do everything from walking and riding in the shedrow to cooling the horse out to feeding, etc.," Donna Perri said. "She absorbs the racing side of training like a sponge, and lives for her times with these trainers."

As the younger Perri enthused, "It was a really good experience."

Opportunities in Maryland

Marylanders first glimpsed Perri aboard a blaze-faced chestnut named Fire N' Ice, a relative latecomer to point-to-pointing. "We didn't really know what he had done on the track, because his tattoo was illegible," she explained. After eventing him through the Novice level, however, Perri discovered that he had some speed. "I was out cross-country racing my friend, and we thought that he was fast – so we decided to give [racing] a shot," she said.

Through Wendy Kinnamon, for whom she also rode, Perri learned of opportunities for Fire N' Ice in Maryland. As she observed, "There aren't that many races in the Delaware Valley for [junior] horses."

They started their season with the junior field master's chase at Howard County-Iron Bridge. As Perri recalled, that day did not begin auspiciously. "It took three hours to get there, and we were there really, really early, because we expected it to start earlier than it did," she said. "Then [Fire N'

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Ice] wouldn't stand on the trailer, and we had to walk him and graze him. He got all lathered up and everything."

After all that, the other competitors scratched. Perri and her horse won in a walkover – or, truth be told, a "run-and-jump-over." For, as she pointed out, "I did complete the race and jump the jumps!"

From there, it was on to the Green Spring Valley Point-to-Point at Shawan Downs, a course Perri especially favors. However, Fire and Ice proved a bit hard to handle "between the flags." "He's tough, and I could only use a snaffle, because if I used anything harsher, he would rear up," the junior jockey explained. "It was hard to rate him and hold him behind the field master. We had to stay pretty far behind; I could barely let him see the other horses."

Ultimately, they were forced to pull up – but through no fault of their own. As Perri explained, "They ran the large ponies and the horses together, and someone fell off in front of me and was just laying on the jump, so we had to stop."

Then, the day before the Marlborough Hunt Races, Fire N' Ice came up lame and Perri had to take him out of training. "That's when I started point-to-pointing All in All," she said, referring to Pete Lizarzaburu's large pony, which she steered to a championship on the Delaware Valley circuit.

Though Perri's time in Maryland was short-lived, the experience taught her much. Likewise Fire N' Ice, who had given her lessons in leg work and the financial realities of racing. "We had him for four years. He was a nice horse, but he was really hard to keep sound, and all the vet bills kept piling up," she explained. "We unfortunately had to give him to [the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation] because he became very lame."

Opening Doors

At season's end, no one was more surprised than Perri when she won the Jonathan Kiser Scholarship. "I didn't think that I could, just by going to two races," she exclaimed. Her parents were equally thrilled. "The scholarship really opened a lot of doors for her and allowed her to meet some wonderful people," Donna Perri said.

As part of her scholarship, the young horsewoman got to work with Tom Voss – one of Kiser's own mentors – last July. "I got on easier horses first, and I was fine with them; so he put me on more difficult ones," she recalled. "The first one I got on was Dynaway ... and then I got on Gryffindor, and he was my favorite. He just had a real personality. I galloped and jogged him."

That week was one she will never forget. "Mr. Voss' place is really, really nice, and [the indoor track] was really cool," she continued.

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"I had never ridden in one of those before, and the staff was really nice and helpful to me."

Some of the lessons Perri learned at Atlanta Hall Farm pertained as much to training as to riding. "[Mr. Voss] trains differently than I was used to; he would jog longer and gallop a little shorter," she explained. "At Michael's, we usually jog three laps around the Fair Hill track and gallop one. At Mr. Voss', we use the hills and ride around the property; it's a real advantage to have your own farm."

Voss had only praise for Perri. "She can ride a pretty tough horse; she had beautiful hands, and she knew how to ride," he said. "She's also very easy to be with. She just likes to be around the barn, and she's the first [Kiser scholar] that didn't want to be a jockey; she wanted to be a trainer.

"I haven't seen too many people like that ... especially in this world we're living in now," he continued. "And she would be there all day, like very few people are anymore."

'She was put to the test and she passed with flying colors.' – trainer Tom Voss

Later in the summer, the Vosses invited Perri to spend a week with them at Saratoga. There, she was reunited with Gryffindor and got to ride the celebrated flat horse Dreadnaught.

As another benefit of her scholarship, Perri attended the North American Point-to-Point Association's Young Rider Steeplechase Camp (*see related story in this issue*). The camp entitled participants to visits with mid-Atlantic steeplechase trainers, as well as some top New York conditioners. Perri was especially struck by the beautiful rolling track at trainer Doug Fout's Virginia farm. "I thought that was really cool," she said. At F. Bruce Miller's Pennsylvania spread, she saw horses swum in a pond after training. "I'd never seen that done before, either!" she remarked.

Then, last January, Perri got the surprise of her life. What started as a trip to visit the Vosses ended up in an impromptu foxhunt aboard former Maryland timber champ Sam Sullivan. "She came on a Friday night ... and I guess we had a bunch of timber horses to hunt, so we threw her in the pack, and off we went," said Voss, who is also joint Master of Foxhounds for the Elkridge-Harford Hunt. "I think that just blew her mind. It was one of those days where you jump one big fence after another, and I didn't know what she'd done jumping-wise, but she was put to the test and she passed with flying colors."

"It was a blast!" Perri recalled. "I had never been foxhunting before, and I had so much fun." As for Sam Sullivan, "He was a super mount – he is a wonderful horse," she said. "I think he knew that I didn't know much about foxhunting, and he did everything I asked him to do. I loved it!

"When I got home, I told my mom how much fun I had, and that I wanted to buy a foxhunter," she continued. "She said I had enough horses, but I am still trying to convince her."

A Future in Racing

Training racehorses is still Perri's dream. "I'd like to do mostly flat horses, I think – but maybe a few jumpers," she said. As she learned with Sahara Mist, Fire N'Ice and others, training involves more than workouts and the winner's circle. A recent stint rehabbing her father's allowance horse has been an especially valuable experience for Perri. "Gina rides him five to six days a week and does all of his care – wrapping, poultices, magnets, etc. So I guess she is already training!" said mother Donna.

Perri also has a new horse, a New Zealand warmblood named Morcheeba, for whom she has high hopes. "I'm trying to qualify her for Pony Club Nationals this year, either in eventing or jumping," she said. Although Morcheeba's unsuited to racing, the young rider has another prospect she's considering for that role. "Pete [Lizarzaburu] offered me a filly named Afleet Huntress to train, and I'd get a percentage of owning her," she said. "I don't know if she jumps! But we'll see."

Meanwhile, Perri – who's going for her C-3 Pony Club rating this year – takes dressage lessons from Colleen Grey and jumping lessons from Laurie Jakabauskas. Though she's thought about working in those disciplines, racing will always be her first love. "I just like the excitement of going neck and neck with a horse and pulling away at the last second!" she said.

Age 16 can't come soon enough, but when it does, a license to gallop at the tracks is on her wish list. "My mom says I can be a flat jockey at the point-to-points, but she's not too sure about the jumping yet," Perri said.

Whatever the future brings, her proud parents are behind her. "How could we not [be]? It is in her heart and soul," mother Donna said. Perri is grateful for all the support. "I also want to thank the Vosses, Regina Welsh and NAPPA for allowing me this great opportunity," she said. ■

The Jonathan Kiser Memorial Scholarship

Awarded to a young rider in the Maryland Governor's Cup series in recognition of his or her race record, horsemanship, sportsmanship, talent and dedication to the sport of steeplechasing

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