

Steeplechasing 101: Diary from Young Rider Camp

by Regina Welsh

Editor's note: The author is the executive director of the North American Point-to-Point Association, co-chair of the Junior Maryland Hunt Cup, and trainer of two-time Maryland Hunt Cup winner Bug River. Her fellow camp organizer, Anne Hambleton, is an amateur jockey with a winning record over timber.

What does it take to be a steeplechase jockey or trainer? That's what three enthusiastic 'chase fans learned last summer when the North American Point-to-Point Association accepted applications for its third annual Young Rider Steeplechase Camp. Three 15-year-old equestrians were chosen to participate. All boasted great credentials, including letters of recommendation from industry professionals, resumes of their riding abilities, and essays detailing why they wanted to attend the camp. This is the story of what those three aspiring jockeys experienced.

DAY 1 – The Plains, VA

This adventure in steeplechasing began near The Plains, Virginia at Great Meadow, home of the Virginia Gold Cup. Until that afternoon, Jane Terryberry of North Carolina, Gina Perri of Pennsylvania, and Ellen Halle of Maryland had never met each other. After being introduced to amateur owner/rider Anne Hambleton and Regina Welsh (that's me) they were presented – much to their dismay – with

a brief written test to assess their overall knowledge of horse care, training, and steeplechasing in general.

Then the real fun began, and the girls were set loose on the racecourse with accomplished amateur owner/rider Colvin "Gregg" Ryan and retired professional jockey Calvin McCormack.

This was the first time that any of them had seen the impressive Gold Cup course, and they were in awe. Gregg and Calvin made learning to ride a race fun and interesting, physically reenacting some of their favorite race riding techniques and strategies, which the girls got a kick out of.

After a quick dinner at the course, Anne and I drove our budding jockeys to Gregg's farm, where they got to spend the night in the infamous "bunkhouse," complete with a three-level, queen sized bunk bed. Before they hit the sack, Gregg and former Olympian Linden Wiseman showed the kids some old racing and eventing videos, including footage of Gregg clinching the Colonial Cup on Eclipse Award winner Flat Top and Linden riding in the Kentucky Three-Day Event.

DAY 2 – Middleburg, VA / Glyndon and Monkton, MD

Experiencing the life of a jockey became more of a reality for the girls when the alarm rang at 5:15 a.m. However, they did assemble quickly and with minimal complaints for our morning drop-off route. Today was the day when they would get to



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Legendary flat racing jockey Angel Cordero, third from right, joins the NAP-PA campers and friends at Saratoga Springs, New York. From left, Fielding Jenks, Ellen Halle, Oakley Clark, Cordero, Gina Perri, Jane Terryberry.

become part of a real steeplechase operation. Ellen and Gina spent the morning at the training facility of Doug Fout, home of Eclipse Award winning Hirapour. Meanwhile, Jane had the pleasure of riding out at Whitewood Farm and learning everything she could from trainer Richard Valentine.

When it came time to pick them up, Anne and I knew this trip was already a hit. They just couldn't stop chattering about their mornings. "Doug let us gallop on the track!" Ellen and Gina repeated. "It was SO cool." Jane was beaming from ear to ear because Richard let her "pop some logs" on an old-timer horse.

Seeing how fractious racehorses could be, Gina told the girls that she learned from Doug Fout's assistant James Pieper "how mentally fit a horse also has to be for him to be able to run to [his or her] full potential."

Exhausted from the super hot August morning, we headed north to Maryland where our group joined up with Liz McKnight, a Maryland Hunt Cup winning jockey and Master of Foxhounds, for a mounted session on race starts. Dan Colhoun and his family generously lent us their polo ponies as substitute racehorses so the girls could learn how to properly line up at and move away from the start. As an extra bonus, they got to do all of this on the My Lady's Manor race course.

To wind down the day, the girls were joined by trainers Joe Davies and Alicia Murphy, former champion jockey Blythe Davies, and rider/trainer Billy Santoro for a little Q and

A session. Race tapes from Blythe's famous riding career were reviewed, as were other tapes where the experts pointed out major mistakes that riders make in races. The group retired to bed full of pizza and wisdom from some of steeplechasing's greats.

DAY 3 – Monkton, MD / Unionville, PA

Our stellar steeplechase students thought this steamy summer morning was a piece of cake. They didn't have to wake up until 6:30 a.m., there was minimal barn work to do, and they went on a really fun cross-country ride with Blythe and Joe. "But then two wagons of straw showed up," Ellen said. "They made us unload straw on the hottest day of the summer!" Joe had conveniently arranged for not one, but *two* loads of straw to arrive before the girls got away.

Next, sweaty, tired, and itchy from the straw, they suffered through a quick bandaging lesson at Northwoods Stable (where I train). At one point, Gina and Ellen were snickering about something and not paying attention. Anne and I were very impressed when Jane piped up and told them. "Come on, you guys, be quiet. I have to learn all I can while I am on this trip, because they don't have stuff like this at home."

After lunch, it was on to Anne and Michael Moran's Applewood Farm in Unionville, Pennsylvania. Anne gave us a tour of her state-of-the-art facility, which, with features like a high tech horse exerciser and an all-



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The campers gather around jockey-turned-turfwriter Sean Clancy for a lesson in studying racing form.

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weather gallop, is certainly fit for a king – like their Eclipse Award winning McDynamo. As an extra treat, Anne, a Maryland Hunt Cup winning rider, walked parts of the Pennsylvania Hunt Cup course with our group, pointing out some major dos and don'ts.

This was all followed by an evening of race videos, questions, and answers at Sam and Lornie Slater's house, where the gang met several more 'chasing experts. Charlotte Brooks shared tales of her riding career, while National Steeplechase Association starter Barry Watson explained how he starts a race. Trainers Bruce Miller, Louis "Paddy" Neilson III and Kathy McKenna were also on hand to discuss their careers and experiences.

DAY 4 – Unionville, PA

The girls rose at 5:00 a.m. for their day of mentoring by champion trainers and jockeys. Jane and Gina were delivered to Bruce Miller and Ellen to Sanna Hendriks. Both trainers have won national championship titles and the girls were excited to soak up their knowledge.

Gina and Jane were the first on the minivan pick-up. Their weariness from the heat didn't stop them from describing how they'd learned to operate the "jogger," which is a giant revolving horse exerciser. They also learned the importance of shipping horses on a regular basis to keep them from thinking that they are going to the races every time they set foot on a van. As Gina explained to us, "Bruce ships his horses almost every day, even if it's just around the corner, to train."

Ellen's morning had been a little sentimental. She related how she'd ridden two horses owned by Irv Naylor. "I've known Mr. Naylor since I was little, and I've always held a lot of respect for him, so it was cool to be able to gallop two horses that he owned, and in a sense give something back to him," she said.

They was plenty of praise for the hardworking trio from the barns that they visited. But this wasn't the last time they'd see Bruce and Sanna, because both of them were headed to our next stop, Saratoga. Thankfully for Anne and I, the long ride

to "The Spa" was a fairly quiet one. I may have even heard a few snores from the back seat.

Though we had some seriously tired soldiers on our hands, all of their heads popped up after we passed the last New York Thruway toll. The pinnacle of the trip, Saratoga, was now a reality. And it got even better for the girls, whose eyebrows lifted when Fielding Jenks and Oakley Clark, two handsome young jumper riders that Anne knew from Vermont, joined our group.

With all of the sweat and barn work behind them, the group enjoyed having dinner with three champion jockeys, Danielle Hodsdon, Sean Clancy, and Matt McCarron. These accomplished equestrians took more than two hours out of their evenings to talk to our group about anything and everything related to steeplechasing. From how to read the *Daily Racing Form* to how to ride a finish properly, they covered it all. As Anne explained, this was her favorite part of the trip because of "their encouragement and stories about their mentors, mistakes, how to learn, the good and the bad and ultimately the passion and joy the sport has brought to them despite the road being somewhat long and full of hard work and a few bruises here and there. They were so genuine, funny and heartfelt with the kids – it was a really special night."

DAY 5 – Saratoga Springs, NY

We pulled into the dusty barnyard at the Oklahoma Training Track Annex just in time to catch up with Danni and Jonathan Sheppard. Jonathan, who is both a Hall of Fame trainer and president of the National Steeplechase Association, took a few moments out of his morning to give the kids the lowdown on picking out horses suited for jump racing. He also gave them an idea of what it was like being a trainer. We all lined up along the outside rail of the training track and watched Danni work one of Jonathan's horses. Unfortunately, we couldn't stick around too long, because we had an appointment to meet big-name flat trainers Todd Pletcher and Kieran McLaughlin.

Needless to say, Pletcher and McLaughlin are well acquainted with the winner's circle. Major Grade I Stakes winners like Flower Alley, Bluegrass

Cat, and Jazil were all on hand for our group to check out. We were all surprised to learn that unlike the jump trainers, neither Kieran nor Todd had ever really ridden anything besides their lead ponies. They gave us a very different perspective on how they prepare horses to run on the flat. Retired Hall of Fame flat jockey Angel Cordero even stopped by to visit with us. Angel introduced us to Todd Pletcher trainee The Green Monkey. The most expensive (\$16 million) 2-year-old colt purchased in the United States, he is exercised exclusively by Angel.

Our trip came to a close shortly after we attended a full day of flat and jump racing at the Saratoga Race Course, the country's oldest track. Steeplechase owner James Brady was kind enough to provide us with his finish line box so we could see everything "up close and personal." Gina and Jane were thrilled to watch the Bruce Miller-trained Best Attack win the jump race. They had watched him train on the farm the day before while working for Bruce.

"I had so much fun in this camp, and it also taught me a lot," said Gina. "The most valuable advice I learned was to follow your dreams and let them take you wherever you want to go. It is also important for your parents to support you. Bruce Miller gave me that advice. [I am thankful] for the great experience!"

Ellen concurred. "It was great to know that all of the well-known professionals and legends were willing and able to help out young people who are interested in the sport and in the business," she reflected.

Hopefully we'll be seeing the names Gina Perri, Jane Terryberry, and Ellen Halle in future race programs. For now, Anne and I are already reserving the rental van for next year, when we plan to do it all over again.

This year's Young Rider Steeplechase Camp is tentatively set for July 29-Aug 2. For an application and a list of requirements, please visit www.equierey.com and click on "News & Resources." ■