



ON A SUMMER morning at Monmouth Park, the muffled beat of hooves punctuates the silence as exercise riders lead the magnificent animals through their paces.

In the trackside tower, trainers and owners gather to scrutinize and assess, judge and calculate, as the sleek creatures on which fortunes rise and fall get their first workouts of the day.

On the other side of the course, the grandstands gleam green and white under the blue sky. It's a clear day made for a horse race, but the stands are empty.

Wherever they are at this early hour, the gamblers and day trippers who will later come to witness this living carousel are likely still rubbing sleep out of their eyes, hours away from paying their admissions and picking up their racing forms.

But here on the back side, it's already mid-day.

Track workers are creatures of the morning, familiar with the odors of hay and manure, familiar, too, with hard work and the physical agony that sometimes comes with it.

Like the crowds who will fill the stands by early afternoon, these trainers and owners, stable hands and hot-walkers are drawn to the drama of the track.

They are addicted to its beauty; to mornings like this, and to the potential for reward that lies in the marriage of muscle and courage that makes a winner.

Horse racing is under attack these days, facing competition from all sides in the form of gaming that lures gamblers away from the track and into the casinos.

But to these men and women, there is no contest. Racing isn't only a gamble, it's a way of life — one whose impact extends far beyond the fencing that surrounds Monmouth Park.

In New Jersey, horse racing is a \$3.2 billion industry that employs more than 6,000 people, feeding some \$700 million into the state economy each year. For those who spend their lives there, the track is a culture unto itself, with its own language, its own myths; its own heroes and villains, its own hierarchy and its own rules.

You enter as a stranger, and you earn your way. You take from it what you want, and then you pay for it.

A Place Like No Other

Many of us have such places in our pasts; places we return to, physically or in spirit, places where our lives changed course irrevocably and forever.

For Jacquie Dalton-Fiorito, the track is that place. On this August Saturday, she has come bearing donuts for the stablehands, eager for the chance to chat with the old friends she left here a dozen years ago.

The Ocean Township native arrived at the track in 1993, a high school dropout with limited options and a history that belied her blonde and blue-eyed good looks.

she was dating told her, “You’re short – you should be a jockey.” To Jacquie, it sounded like a plausible enough idea.

“At 17 or 18, you want to get from A to Z without all of the in between, especially if you come from a background that doesn’t teach you about hard work.”

The Bug Girl

Through a connection of her boyfriend’s, Jacquie was directed to John Forbes’ stable at Monmouth Park to seek an apprenticeship.

Born in Maryland to parents who were themselves trainers, Forbes had spent his entire life on the track.

By the time Jacquie walked into his barn, he was well known in racing circles as a winning trainer who combined a strong



TO BE A JOCKEY

By Eileen Moon Photos by Joan LaBanca

“Growing up, I was very popular,” she says now. “I was Miss NJ Cheerleader 1987. I was always very outgoing. I had a lot of friends. But if you don’t have the proper parental upbringing and guidance, it’s threatening to your environment.”

It actually becomes easier to hang it up and dumb yourself down.”

Her father was a stock car racer and a cowboy. “He wore grease-stained Levis, had dirt under his fingernails and smoked Camel cigarettes,” she says.

Like any little girl, Jacquie needed her father’s attention, and so his love of horses became her own. She was an Eastern cowgirl, a western show rider like her Dad.

It wasn’t a pursuit that earned her any points with her mother, Jacquie recalls.

After her parents divorce, “My mother was trying to keep the heat on and pay the phone bill and keep a roof over her head,” Jacquie says. The family functioned in survival mode, with little emotional capital left over for preparing for the future.

It was a life that taught her “the language of the poor,” Jacquie says now, a toughness that holds down hurt and responds with suspicion to any aspiration to succeed, an overriding belief that “I don’t need an education. I’ve got street smarts.”

“These are defense mechanisms,” Jacquie says now. Dropping out of high school in her senior year, she got a job at a deli. A boy

sense of personal integrity with an equally strong dedication to the sport.

At 4’10 and 93 pounds, Jacquie had two qualities critical to a jockey’s success: she was short, and she was light. But she was an absolute beginner in a game that, even today, remains a predominantly masculine one.

She dresses carefully for her visit to the track. “I’m thinking horses – cowboy, right?” she says. She wears a pair of cowboy boots two sizes too big, and her show-riding belt.

She approaches Forbes and tells him, ‘I want to be a jockey.’

“I didn’t know that *everyone* on the track wants to be a jockey,” she says.

Forbes wasn’t interested. “Nope, don’t do that anymore,” he told her. Instead of walking away, Jacquie stood her ground. “I thought, ‘he’s done it before.’ I went out and sat on his bench for four hours.”

Even with the success of female riders like Julie Krone, girls who wanted to be jockeys still faced an uphill climb. “We really didn’t think girls were strong enough or tough enough,” Forbes admits.

But it wasn’t her gender that caused Forbes to say no that day. He just wasn’t interested in taking on another unschooled rider, or what is known at the track as “a bug.”

“You hire them and you pay them and you can’t do anything with them. You have to pick every single horse (for them). You can’t put a stick in their hand for the first

six months. It’s worse than trying to teach a horse about the gate.”

But Jacquie had found an ally in Forbes’ assistant, Pat McBurney. It was a few weeks before Forbes caught on.

“They had hidden her for two or three weeks,” Forbes recalls. “They had her riding around the shed. I said, ‘Don’t tell me that’s a bug rider, because we’re not doing that anymore. Not bug boys. Not bug girls.’”

But eventually, Forbes, too, relented.

Too Well, Too Fast

“I wound up aligning myself with one of the most prominent trainers in the area,” Jacquie says. In Forbes and McBurney, she had also found the father figures she so desperately needed in her life.

From then on, she would work hard to please them; so hard, that she would succeed almost too well, and certainly, too fast.

“John’s goal was to get me a few hundred races worth of experience,” she says. “My instructions were to learn how to get some dirt in my face and just don’t fall off. In 1993, I rode my first race, and won. Basically, the odds were 21-1, and I won.”

It was heady stuff for a high school dropout with little sense of self-worth, Jacquie says, recalling that the headline in the Asbury Park Press the next day read, *Dalton Rides Dream Race At Monmouth*.



She had raced hard and won fairly, and she believed she had found her calling. She was wrong.

Trouble on the track

Forbes was known as the man who put Julie Krone into the game and made her a winner.

Forbes downplays his role in Krone's accomplishments. "People say that, probably because we brought her to New Jersey. We had a couple of clients who decided that she could ride their horses. But Julie Krone was going to be a success at whatever she did."

With the memory of Krone still fresh in their minds, some at the track were watching Forbes's new girl bug – and they didn't like what they were seeing.

Jacquie was a natural talent, Forbes says now. But she was still an inexperienced rider, and, in a dangerous game, inexperience can be deadly.

"All riders get hurt. We weren't looking forward to the day that (Jacquie) got hurt. We knew at some point there was going to be an ambulance ride."

Inexperience wasn't Jacquie's only handicap. She was also a girl – and a certain kind of girl – or so some of the other jockeys thought.

In their eyes, she wasn't just a bug – she was a privileged wasp. With her perky personality, her blonde hair and her blue eyes, she certainly looked the part. "They thought I was well spoken, articulate. That's exactly what they thought of me: "We're going to teach her what it's really like to be a jockey."

Some jockeys, like Angel Cordaro and Eddie King, were mentors and friends to Jacquie, showing her the ropes, looking out for her on the track.

Others were the opposite. Being a jockey is a kind of indentured servitude, says Forbes. It's a rough life, and it attracts its share of rough characters who don't necessarily believe in playing by the rules when no-one's watching. The stakes are high. No-one gets in the game if they don't intend to win it, and some will do whatever it takes to make sure things go their way.

A small group of Spanish-speaking jockeys had taken a particular dislike to Jacquie, and they didn't care who knew it.

Like Jacquie, many Hispanic riders are drawn to the sport because they are light and small. For them, the stakes are higher still, because they are seeking to make their lives here, and winning is what it takes.

"There was an element at the racetrack that didn't necessarily want to see another Julie Krone come to be," explains Forbes. "There was some slander, some threats, some rough riding. It's something that even in the best of conditions is a very dangerous sport."

She was a winner, and that made her a threat.

Fair Game

In 1994, Jacquie returned to Monmouth Park for her second racing season. There was trouble from the start. Things escalated from harassment to outright threats from a small number of jockeys.

"Jacquie Dalton wasn't really an apprentice rider anymore. She became a target for these guys," says Forbes. "It kinda got to be that if you put Jacquie Dalton on a horse, there's going to be a problem."

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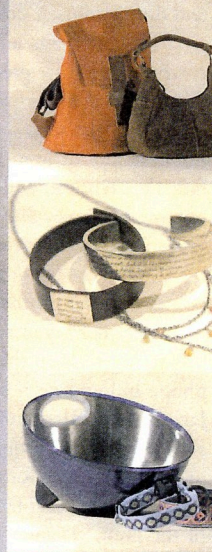
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One jockey told her, "I'm going to kill you, Jacquie. I'm going to put you through the fence."

"It just won't stop," Forbes continues. "That's race fixing. (I decide) I'm gonna get them charged under RICO. What do these punks think they're doing playing bumper cars with my jockey?" The Racing Commission's visit to Forbes doesn't go unnoticed. "One week later, I got pushed through the fence," says Jacquie. Riding into a turn on the track, she sees another rider coming up fast, and close.

"(I thought) What's he doing? It was slow motion. He bumps me, and my horse stumbles. My horse flipped his heels and I went flying over the fence." Jacquie didn't know it yet, but she was done.

After an investigation by racing officials, the rider who clipped her, Chuck Lopez, was suspended for three days. "He got three days' suspension and I didn't have any more fight," she says.

She would heal physically, but she had lost the most critical element a jockey can possess.

"I might have known I lost my heart that day, but I didn't know what it was like to have it gone until I tried to ride again six months later." Riding a race at the track in Gulfstream, Florida, Jacquie had a panic attack. "I realize I'm the only girl here," she says. "I was losing it."

"If your heart's not in this," Forbes told her. "If there's any doubt at the back of your mind that you are going to do this for a very long time and for the rest of your life, we can skip an ambulance ride.... Go home

and look in the mirror and say 'Would you like fries with that?' She threw her helmet down and walked out of the barn because we were such bastards."

In the space of less than two years, Jacquie had gone from the Winner's Circle to restaurant work, waiting on owners and trainers she used to ride for. It was humiliating, but there was no going back. "I never wanted to be in that position again," she says. "I never wanted to want like that. I never wanted to try like that. I thought, 'Dear God, let me just find a way to make a decent dollar. I'm a failed jockey and a dropout.'"

The Way Forward

With Forbes' parting remark still ringing in her ears, Jacquie studied for her GED, enrolling at Brookdale Community College in Lincroft after earning her high school equivalency diploma.

In an English class, she encountered another mentor who would help her to find the way forward: Professor Carl Calendar.

She gradually began to see herself as someone who could succeed in college. She told no-one that she had been a jockey, but Calendar knew. He encouraged her to write what she had seen and experienced on the track. And he encouraged her to file a transfer application to Northwestern University. "Carl shifted my mentality from being a high school dropout," she says.

Jacquie was one of two students out of 1,000 applicants to be accepted to Northwestern for their junior and senior years. Two years later, she graduated with honors, fifth in her class.

Jacquie now lives in Little Silver with her husband, David Fiorito, who worked in the banking industry until establishing his own hedge fund after 9/11. They are now the parents to two-year-old twins.

With her business partner, Mona DiPasquale, Jacquie owns her own communications firm, Lyrical, which provides promotional assistance to cultural organizations.

And she is writing a memoir about her life on the track, and the larger story of the track itself; its color; its culture; its place in the greater world.

A Return to the track

Jacquie is a visitor to the track these days, but one who walks the backside with the confidence of a jockey, and the wisdom of a woman who has come to terms with the lessons she learned there. She bears no-one ill will. After years of therapy, she has come to terms with the past and her own place in it.

"The story is done for me, to some extent," she says. "But what the story drives has just begun. I'm nobody of any importance. I'm just a girl that used to ride horses." But on a blue sky morning at the track, there's time to indulge in a what if or two.

"If we had forced you to stay and keep doing it, they would have eventually accepted you," says Forbes. "You were going to be a top rider. You were going to go through a lot. Some of it you shouldn't have had to go through. (But) you had the natural talent to be a top rider. Overall, don't you still love racing and aren't you glad you were a part of it?" Forbes asks.

"Why do you think I'm here?" answers Jacquie



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offended by it to refer to the poet as "that rascal Freneau." The publisher's success was again interrupted when yellow fever hit the Philadelphia area and he had to flee, returning again as always to Mount Pleasant. In 1795, *Poems Written Between the Years 1768 and 1794* was a collection of 287 poems, self-printed and published by the author on his own Mount Pleasant printing press. According to a reference by California State University, the collection comprised "never-before-published poems as well as revisions of earlier poems, omitting Latin mottoes to speak more directly to the common man." Freneau and booksellers anticipated high-volume sales, but the work was a flop.

A Collection of Poems, on American Affairs was Freneau's two-volume collection of previously unpublished works released in response to the War of 1812. The poems reflect the author's strong patriotic fervor. Though raised by a Calvinist and mentored by a Christian, Freneau, like many

of the nation's founders, was a deist. He believed in one God The Creator, who could be known intellectually and revealed himself through nature. His deism is expressed in his *On the Universality and Other Attributes of the God of Nature, On the Uniformity and Perfection of Nature, and On the Religion of Nature*, all written in 1815. Three years later Freneau's beloved Mount Pleasant caught fire and was destroyed. Afterwards the family settled on a 100-acre farm in Freehold, which they rented from one of Eleanor's brothers.

According to an alumni profile of Freneau by Princeton's Emory B. Elliot Jr., most agree that Freneau could have gained a greater reputation as a writer if his poetry had not been overshadowed by the energy and talent he expended on political activism. Others, including Kish, say that perhaps Freneau was too itinerant for too long. "In a way, though," says Elliot, "he had fulfilled his father's hopes for him, for he had devoted his life to public service as a guardian of the morals of his society and as a spokesman for the needs of its people." ■