

THE SUN



PREAKNESS STAKES

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FACES OF RACING



Unbridled devotion

ONE RIDES A HORSE TO THE FINISH LINE IN FRONT OF A CROWD of cheering fans, and another is aboard when the only spectators are the early-morning denizens of the racetrack. • One is in charge of getting the thoroughbreds out of the starting gate, and another quite literally helps get them started, matching up sires and mares. • One sits in a corporate office, running the place, and another

stands guard at a gate late into the night. • Different people, different jobs, yet all the same in one important way — their lives are entwined with horse racing. Their hearts beat to the rhythm of hoofbeats. • On racing's most important date in Maryland, Preakness Day, *The Sun* is telling the stories of 10 people to represent the many who have been bitten by the racing bug and don't want any cure.

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(SUN REPORTER)

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(SUN PHOTOGRAPHERS)

Stewart Nickel, owner



You don't get much more new age than owner Stewart Nickel, who relies on his Web site to attract investors for his horses.

es. And yet you won't get much more old-fashioned than the way Nickel first became attached to horse racing.

"I was 10," he said. "And horses were still running at Timonium as part of Maryland's regular racing circuit. Every day, I'd walk home from Timonium Elementary School and I'd stand outside the racetrack fence on York Road and watch the last race of the day. I just loved it."

"Sometimes, I'd sit there, not too far from the horses, and listen to the thundering hooves. ... I just thought they were beautiful. To see them run, it was more about the beauty and my fascination with the horse than anything else."

Sometimes, his father would take him to the racetrack and he'd collect non-winning tickets and bring them home.

"Then we'd invite all our friends over and have our own races," he said. "We had the tickets, and we'd just run around the backyard and have our own horse races."

Nickel, an entrepreneur, co-founded a company called OTG Software, which was acquired in 2002, setting him up for life.

Now, at 36, he supplements his income with real estate ventures and has fun with his racing partnerships.

His late father also owned horses, though not successfully.

"Dad didn't live to see his first winner," Nickel said. "We won a week after Dad died. He didn't pick the right horses, but he had a good time."

Nickel, who lives in Potomac with his wife and twin daughters, took a more aggressive approach, buying a couple of horses that turned out well and his stable got on a roll. It grew to as many as 10 horses and produced Smart and Noble, a two-time state champion.

Though Nickel has won 85 races and his horses have banked \$1.5 million in purses, he said owners shouldn't be counting on a big return.

"I tell everyone who is interested in investing, don't do it unless you can afford to lose the money you're investing," he said. "There is potential for gain, but I'm very clear it's for entertainment. The mind-set has to be fun. Making money can't be the reason for going into it."

Damon Gladden, groom



in a row for me. But in his next race, he had to be put down. That horse broke his leg, and he refused to quit. He ran on three legs and finished third and had to be vanned off the racetrack.

"That was a couple Septembers ago, and it hit me hard. It drew tears. I couldn't stop the tears. That's really when it hit me, how much I care about these horses."

Gladden said he "wore blinkers and blinders" when he visited his grandmother who lived near the track and didn't start paying attention to Pimlico until he needed a job.

He was a senior at Douglass High School when he climbed the fence with a friend to get a job hot walking the horses in 1986. Now, he's preparing to take his assistant trainer's exam.

"I was here three years before I knew what a horse was," Gladden said. "I didn't know their value. It was just a dollar, a way to make a buck. But then you come to love it. It becomes your life."

Gladden, who is divorced, said he likes working at Pimlico because it allows him to be near his four children, Shakira, 17; Morgan, 14; Darius, 9; and DeMarco, 6.

He also said he looks forward to the Preakness each year, because Pickett usually gives him the day off if no horses he cares for are running.

"Oh my gosh," Gladden said. "The Preakness, it's just like Christmas."

When Damon Gladden climbed the Pimlico Race Course fence about 21 years ago looking for a summer job, he said, he couldn't have cared less about racehorses.

Things change in two decades, however. Now 38 and a groom for trainer Crystal Pickett, Gladden, who grew up near Druid Hill Park, has been overwhelmed by the thoroughbreds he cares for.

"I adore the animals," he said. "There was a horse I rubbed for four years, Clipping Coins, and he won three

Donnie Long, assistant starter



It was a call from his grandfather, Eddie Blind, that got Donnie Long into the business.

"Behind the scenes, my mom had asked him to call me after I graduated from high school on Long Island," Long said. "She didn't know what was going to become of me, and my grandfather was the starter here in Maryland for 34 years before he retired in 1980. He called and offered me a job."

"I thought it was going to be as a hot walker or rubbing horses, and I said, 'No, thanks.' But he said it was as assistant starter and that it paid \$200 a week. Two hundred a week in 1964. I felt like a millionaire."

Long, 51, was simply going into the family business. His uncle Frankie was a starter at Timonium and his uncle Coley still works in the racing office.

Donnie Long grew up hearing wonderful racing stories, and though he might not have realized it, he was forming an understanding and an attachment to the game.

He has grown fond of the animals he handles, especially the 2-year-olds who develop their skills in the starting gate and learn gate etiquette through his teaching.

"You see them slowly progress until they're ready to run in a race," he said. "It's then you can see the finished product of your labor."

For Long, it has been a dangerous career. Each of his rotator cuffs has been operated on twice, and he is "one more bad horse" from a career-ending injury. Because of that, he has become the designated guy on the back gate on race days, closing the doors behind the horses.

The last horse he held in the gate at the Preakness was Funny Cide, the 2003 winner. But Long said Preakness Day is special, no matter what your job.

"However small, you're a little part of racing history," he said. "And no matter how long you've been doing it, it's a thrill. When I'm standing [by] the front of the gate and hearing the words, 'Lock 'em,' my heart races and I'm breathing quicker. 'Wow. This is it!'"

Eric Camacho, jockey

Eric Camacho had been around horses most of his life, because his father, Enrique, was an exercise rider. But while growing up, Camacho didn't envision his future at the racetrack.

"I'd watch my dad gallop a lot in the mornings, and I'd go to the races with him in the afternoons," Camacho said. "And I loved horses. You have to love horses to do this. But when I came out of Arundel High School, I was a soccer player and I looked at a couple of colleges for soccer."

But he didn't pursue soccer. Instead, he followed another passion, cars, and went to Lincoln Technical Institute to study automotive technology.

"I really didn't think I'd be a jockey," Camacho said, sitting on the terrace outside the jockeys' room at Pimlico Race Course. "Then one day, it just popped up. I bumped into [jockey Alberto] Delgado and started talking,



He was the motivation I needed, and the next day I was at the racetrack."

He got a job hot walking horses for trainers Tim Salzman and his father, John, and then one day trainer Tony Aguirre booked him to gallop a horse on the track. It was the start of a career that has led to riding titles at Laurel Park (winter 2005) and at the 2004 State Fair meet at Timonium, when he was also the top apprentice in the Maryland jockey colony.

And Camacho, 23, longs for a Preakness mount.

"The Preakness is a dream," Camacho said. "Just riding on Preakness Day, there's nothing like it, with 110,000 people here. It gets your heart pumping. When I was a kid, my brother Enrique [Jr.] would make videos of the Preakness and we'd watch it over and over and over just for the fun of it because we enjoyed it so much."



Henry Mesias, security guard

Give Maryland Jockey Club security guard Henry Mesias an opportunity to be near horses, and he'll take it, day and night.

"I love being around the horses," said Mesias, 60, a native of Santiago, Chile, who has been working at racetracks since he was 12.

Horses and racetracks provided Mesias with a way out of hardship and into a good life. In Chile, he left school "after 13 grades" to earn money to help support his mother and younger brother. Growing up watching American movies — falling in love with the likes of cowboys Roy Rogers and Gene Autry — he dreamed of coming to the United States, and racing brought him to America as a contract rider in Charles Town, W.Va., in 1969.

He has lived and worked in Maryland since 1987, and about 10 years ago, while working as an exercise rider at Laurel Park — a job he still performs for trainer Larry Murray — Mesias realized he needed to make more money in order to send his son, Henry Jr.,

to the University of Maryland at College Park.

He applied for guard duty and was given the overnight shift. His son and his daughter, Candida Willis, are out on their own, but Mesias still pulls guard duty. He patrols the drug test barn when races are running at Laurel Park and works at the stable gate and in the grandstand when the track is closed.

"Racing has been good to me," he said. "All my life, it is what I do. I love the horses. They are like my own son, and it is how I make a living. I like to get up early in the morning and breathe the fresh air, to go to the track and my very favorite, to get on the horses. And in the afternoon, my security job still allows me to be around the horses."

The only disappointing thing today, Mesias said, is he won't see the Preakness. No televisions are allowed in the guard office.

"You've got to pay attention to your work," he said.



Forest Boyce, exercise rider

Forest Boyce is a drawing major at the Maryland Institute College of Art, so she's drawing horses.

"I'm taking a painting class right now," she said, "and this year I was encouraged to make my artwork more personal. Horses, they're the one thing I know really well."

They're also the thing that keeps her focused.

Boyce, 22, has been an exercise rider for Pimlico-based trainer Dickie Small for the past four years, off and on. She went away to school at the University of North Carolina in Asheville, but she found it difficult to concentrate without being near thoroughbreds.

"There weren't any horses around," she said. "I grew up around horses. But, at college, I had so much time on my hands and I started going hiking to fill the spaces and the classes seemed to fall away."

"Last spring, I came home [to Monkton], and my parents realized the horses are really good for me."

Her contact with racehorses goes back to her grandfather, Gittings Boyce, who was a trainer at Pimlico in the 1940s and 1950s, and her father,

Lambert Boyce, who used to gallop horses. Her uncle, Timmy Boyce, runs the Fasig-Tipton sales in Texas.

Since she has returned from Carolina, she has been back working for Small.

"She marches to a different drumbeat," Small said. "She's delightful and she can stay on any horse. Horses have straightened her out."

"It's seven days a week working for Dickie," said Boyce, 5 feet 4 and 117 pounds. "I'm up at 4 a.m. every morning. And then, once I'm at the track working, well, when I'm done, why not go to school since I'm there and awake?"

But her choice of art subject does present problems.

"With people, if you get a person to model for you, they'll pretty much stand still," she said. "A horse won't stand in the perfect pose. I'll bring a sketchbook to work with me in the mornings at the track and try to draw them, but it is difficult."

Boyce, two years away from her degree, still is deciding on her future.

"I haven't got a clue quite yet," she said. "I'm trying to find a balance between the riding and the drawing."



Billy Boniface, breeder

Billy Boniface grew up surrounded by the beautiful rolling hills of Bonita Farm in Darlington. And almost all of his childhood memories include the farm, his family and the horses.

It became clear to him early on that his favorite part of the family business, which included training and breeding, was breeding.

"I fell in love with the breeding process," said Boniface, 43. "I started out in the training division, but it became clear pretty early that I really liked the mating, the process of matching the mares to the stallions — studying the genetic lines and pedigrees and then the challenge of getting the mares in foal. The timing has to be just right."

His ambition to breed the best was honed early. At age 15, he and his father, J.W., who is 65, took a trip to Kentucky to bolster their stallions. At Spin Drift Farm, they looked at Calibdo and farm manager John Williams offered Traffic Cop as part of the deal.

The Bonifaces came home and bred Traffic Cop to their mare, Proof Requested. The result was Deputed Testimony, the last Maryland-bred to win the Preakness, in 1983.

Deputed Testimony is still enjoying his retirement at Bonita Farm. Boniface said he is "getting long in the tooth, but his eyes still have their glitter and he's still supervising us from his paddock."

Boniface, who still helps deliver every foal, has been in charge of the Bonita Farm breeding operation since he was 17 and a senior at John Carroll High School. That year, he'd go to the barn before school and check on the mares and line up the vets. After school, he'd come home and look at the notes and figure out who needed to be bred.

All these years later, Boniface is still doing his research, still trying to create the next great Maryland horse. And maybe create some more great memories like that 1983 Preakness.

"Those were some wonderful times," he said. "I still get goose bumps when I think about that day. It was so special. ... Winning that race is what we strive for here."

Lou Raffetto, track executive

If Lou Raffetto had been allowed to buy a motorcycle while he was a senior at Georgetown University in 1972, he might not be at the racetrack today. And that's no reflection on his driving ability.

When Raffetto's parents balked at the cycle, he took the \$1,200 he'd saved and bought a share of a racehorse at the Charles Town, W.Va., track. It was the beginning of the end of his aspirations to go into politics.

"A Monmouth official and trainer, Floyd Snyder, and I went into partnership," said Raffetto, 57, chief operating officer and president of the Maryland Jockey Club, which runs Pimlico Race Course and Laurel Park. "We claimed Ginchees Chance for \$2,250. We raced him back in a stakes, and he won. I was there to see it with a group of my friends from school. It was such an unbelievable experience. It's still hard to describe. An unbelievable high."

And a sudden change. "It was a metamorphosis," he said. "I went from someone who wanted to go to law school and into politics to someone who wanted to train horses for a living."

He got his degree in American government and began rubbing horses at Atlantic City.

"I was president of my freshman class," Raffetto said. "Four years before, Bill Clinton was president of his. My running



gag is my choice was to be an attorney or work at a racetrack and I took the more ethical route."

He took out a trainer's license in 1973 and, two years later, realized he didn't want to work seven days a week. When an offer came to be a placing and patrol judge in the racing office at Monmouth, he took it and began working his way up the ladder.

His success at restoring Suffolk Downs in Boston as executive vice president and general manager impressed Joe De Francis, now the Maryland Jockey Club CEO, and he offered Raffetto the job as the Jockey Club chief operating officer in October 2000.

"I love the people I deal with in this business," said Raffetto, who was named MJC president a little more than a year ago. "They're in it for the right reasons — the love of the game. It's not to make money. Grooms, hot walkers and trainers aren't making a fortune, and the owners made theirs before they got here."

"Love for the game. It's what makes racing so special."