

JUMP JOCKS

STEEPLECHASE JOCKEYS

by

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Photo by James Carr

Imagine this: you weigh 145 pounds; you're on a horse that is 1000-1200 pounds of pure muscle; you have a small piece of metal in his mouth for control; you're standing in a saddle comprised of only a few pounds of leather; you are galloping down a hill going about 20-25 miles per hour on slick ground; in front of you is a fence that is nearly four feet tall and just as wide; and there are six other horses beside you, in front of you, and behind you all bearing down on that same fence. Are you terrified? You should be. But the young men and women whose lives are defined as the steeplechase jockey do this weekend in and weekend out up

and down the East Coast. These remarkable young people are as fit as any athlete you will find in any sport. They have to maintain a specific weight. They have to eat to sustain strength but work endlessly to burn fat off while maintaining muscle, stamina, and balance, to say nothing of courage. Many steeplechase jocks are considered professionals. Those who are considered amateurs have jobs in other walks of life and ride for fun.

So how did these jocks get started in their demanding vocation? Some are from England or Ireland and grew up pony clubbing, or working as exercise riders at racing stables in the Cheltenham and

Newmarket areas, galloping on the downs. Many from the U.S grew up in horse areas such as Virginia, and spent their youths fox hunting, eventing, or pony clubbing. There are racing families that produce many young hopefuls such as the McCarron dynasty with Matt McCarron, the winning jockey; his father; and Hall of Famer, Chris McCarron, his uncle. Some have grown up on racing farms such as that of Paul Fout of Middleburg. Virginia is a racing area with many pony clubs, so many young jocks come from Virginia and its neighboring states.

Fitness and stamina are critical concerns for the jocks as they may be riding 4-7 races a day, each of 2-3 miles with 15 or more fences. Lack of fitness can mean a fall if the horse stumbles, chips in





Jockey being placed on his saddle by his trainer

at a fence, baubles on the other side, or initiate any number of unintended maneuvers. And when a rider falls while going 20-25 miles per hour, surrounded by six other horses moving at the same speed, he can be in serious trouble. So the goal is to maintain a level of fitness that will reduce the odds of a catastrophe.

How do these jockeys stay fit? Colvin “Greg” Ryan, an active and renowned amateur rider whose real job is in the insurance industry, gallops in the morning before going to the office. He

gets up at 5 AM, is galloping at 5:30, and arrives at the office by 8:30. He also works out with an equi-xisor in his basement. When he travels for business, he frequently exercises for the barns in the area to stay fit.

Most of the jockeys will ride for a particular racing stable and trainer. Every day, they ride exercise sets starting from 6 AM till early afternoon. They will saddle each horse and often attend to other stable-related jobs. Many also run or go to the gym after a full day of riding. These

young people keep a rigorous and demanding schedule. After a full week of riding and working, they may be competing the entire weekend, riding four races on Saturday in Middleburg, and then travel to Pennsylvania to ride in four more on Sunday.

Injuries are the scourge of these athletes. Broken collar bones, ruptured spleens, broken backs, and head trauma are not uncommon. Often these types of injury require long periods of rehabilitation. However many of the jump jocks I know have little time for rehab. They are back up on the horses long before a reasonable person would consider returning to competition. Injuries, however, have been substantially reduced due to the mandatory body protectors all jockeys now wear. Jockeys also learn how to fall. They instinctively know to tuck into a ball and place their hands over their heads. They want to remain as small a target as possible, as there may be five other horses that need to get past them.

The U.S. Steeplechase and Point to Point circuit is basically located on the East Coast, so most jockeys live in the mid-Atlantic states. This is not a business for the shy and retiring. In order to ride, a jock has to hustle and sell himself and his talent. According to Donnie Yavanovich, winning jockey and trainer, most trainers prefer jocks that they like or who can get along well with a particular horse. Some exceptional jockeys can mount a horse for the first time at a race, jump over fences and gallop to the post. They are that attuned to the horse and his needs. The trainers will also look for jockeys that suit their methods and style of training. Some trainers will groom their own young people to become jockeys. These are called *bug riders*. Jockeys that have proven themselves will ride primarily for one stable. Such is the case of Christopher Read who rides for Neil Morris at Kinross

Stable. Chris will ride several Kinross horses at a race but will also pick up a ride here and there from other trainers when Neil does not need him. Greg Ryan says that when he first got started he would call trainers whose names he saw on the *overnights*, and see if they needed a jockey. It paid off, as he is just ten wins away from breaking the winningest amateur jockey record.

Steeplechase jockeys are an equal opportunity group with women afforded the same opportunities as men, riding against each other in a race. There are also series of races such as the Ladies' Timber just for women. In these races, the *crème de la crème* of women jockeys compete. Many of the women jockeys are very well regarded and have been the main jockey for some famous horses. Blythe Miller and Lonesome Glory is a perfect example, though Blythe has now moved on to motherhood.

Trainers and owners also want a jockey who will pay close attention to the horse's persona during a race. Is the horse going well, sounding and breathing normally, jumping well, not too tired? If there is a problem, the jockey should recognize it right away and pull the horse up. Sometimes the wiser course may be to come back to fight and win another day rather than finishing at all cost. The welfare of these valuable horses is in the jockeys' hands, and they need to make practical decisions concerning the horse to avoid disasters. All of this, of course, while galloping and jumping fences at 25 miles per hour in the midst of rival horses. This takes multi-tasking to a new level.

How do these jump jocks' careers end? Age is certainly a factor as is body development. Some young people just mature past the height and weight that make it possible for them to meet the standards. Injuries are another reason.



Greg Ryan and his fellow jockey suiting up for the day's riding

Sometimes the broken bones and head injuries just get to be too much, and the body cannot take any more abuse. Then there is the fear factor. The fear is no longer a constructive fear; doubt begins to creep into the riding, and the heart goes. The insatiable thrill for the run over the fences is lost. They can still do it, but it is different, and that difference makes it no longer viable. Having done the job for so long, these young men and women are perceptive enough to know when quitting the racing side of the sport is the prudent move. Life-altering and deadly accidents are not unheard of in the Sport of Kings. Most jump jocks have enough sense to get out while they are still in one piece.

So what's next for these athletes? Many turn to the other side of the sport - training. The trainer has a different relationship with the horse and a lot more responsibility. An example of a successful transition is Donnie Yavanovich of Middleburg. Donnie grew up in the horse show ring and played soccer in college. While studying for his masters degree, he

Weighing in



decided to take a summer and ride horses. He worked out an arrangement with Betty Bosley Bird in Unionville, Pennsylvania. He thought he was going to be schooling her show horses but ended up riding her race horses. He had a surprisingly successful summer, and when school reconvened, he found himself on the *overnights* as the jockey for several of Betty's steeplechase horses.



Christoph Read galloping to post

Donnie Yavanovich and jockey Molly White



“Oh! You’ll be just fine,” Betty assured him. Thus in 1973 Donnie began his illustrious career, and moving to Virginia in 1978, incorporated training into his life. He stopped racing in the mid-1990s at the behest of his family, having accomplished what he wanted and having won all he needed to win. He still exercises and works all of his own horses on a daily basis.

Donnie says that the best jockeys

do not always make the best trainers because they may not have learned the fundamentals of training as they are so busy riding. Those jockeys that spend more time taking care of the horses in the barn are usually the better trainers, as they tend to know the horse better.

The last questions would be, *why do they do this sport? What makes it fun?* Thrill is an obvious answer, and what a thrill it is! For many, winning is the incentive, but to most of these jocks, the fact that the horse improves and makes strides to become a better horse gives them a great sense of accomplishment. To some it is the great people they meet and work for. Greg Ryan put it very succinctly: “You get to communicate with the horse, and with some horses that communication is so complete they make you feel greater than yourself.”

In my estimation there are few greater athletes than these impressive young men and women who entertain us in the Sport of Kings. At the next race you attend, I hope you will look closely at these jump jocks, observe what they accomplish during a race, and appreciate the work and personal sacrifices that go into making them successful.

Jane Porter Fogleman was born and raised in Albemarle County and is an avid life-long foxhunter. She hunts with Farmington Hunt Club, Keswick Hunt Club and travels to other Virginia hunts whenever possible.