

Local Hall of Fame jockey now training student riders

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LEXINGTON, Ky. — It's 6:50 a.m. and retired Hall of Fame jockey Chris McCarron, 58, is in a dark, chilly stall in Barn 30 at the Thoroughbred Center. His collar is up, his Red Sox cap pulled down low. A blue-collar worker in blue jeans, he is raking horse manure into a wheelbarrow.

The founder of the North American Racing Academy, the only college program in the country for jockeys, does this every weekday alongside his students.

Why does a two-time Kentucky Derby-winning jockey who won more than \$263 million in purses over a 28-year racing career clean up horse dung?

"Why not?" says the pride of Dorchester. "I love horses. I love getting up in the morning. I love NARA program director Dixie Hayes says McCarron is the real deal. "He's just old school," says Hayes, who teaches equine science and horseman training courses.

Outside the Thoroughbred Center, darkness still hugs the track and shadowy horses are like equine Stealth bombers, easier to hear than see. White vapor coming out of flared thoroughbred nostrils marks their trail. The jockeys seem invisible. It's almost as if the image portrays what's really happening: that the American-born jockey is disappearing.

There are only 1,000 jockeys racing regularly in the United States, says McCarron. The majority of them are Hispanic, according to the Jockey Guild. Many of them have been schooled in riding academies in their native lands.

"Gosh, we're being infiltrated," says Jessica Oldham Stith, a graduate of the NARA program who named her daughter McCarron. "We need some more US riders."

NARA, which is part of the Bluegrass Community and Technical College, offers courses in nutrition, fitness, finance, communication, rules of racing, and technology. Graduates of the two-year program receive an associate's

degree in Applied Equine Science.

“The teaching thing has been every bit a learning thing for me,” says McCarron, who uses walkie-talkies to communicate with riders in the field while maintaining visual contact. He also videotapes practices and has critiques. Afternoons are spent in the classroom, then it’s back to the barn to feed the horses.

“He’s not what I thought he was going to be,” says student P.J. Leggett of Carlsbad, Calif., who shows up at the barn even earlier than McCarron. “I thought he was going to be kind of scary but he’s just really fun to hang around with and he’s an amazing teacher.

“He can see what you’re doing wrong in the slightest second and he knows how to correct it. He’ll tell you the right things to do, but only at the right time when you’re ready to hear the truth.”

A matter of trust

One thing is for sure, McCarron is hands-on. During a workout on the Equicizer mechanical horse, he challenged a student to shake him off. It could not be done.

Pound for pound, jockeys may be the best athletes in sport, but they never get credit for that, says McCarron.

“It’s an incredibly specific set of skills to get a horse to go with someone on its back,” he says. “It’s not understood by the public, which leads to a lack of appreciation for our craft.”

McCarron works the students until they are gasping for breath.

“Bend your chest down, lean a lot forward,” he says. “Establish a dominance. Slide your hands slightly forward.”

STAN GROSSFELD/GLOBE STAFF

This collection of hardware reflects well on Dorchester’s Chris McCarron, who rode more than 7,000 winners in his time.

He doesn’t mind if students have never been on a horse before. There are no bad habits to break.

“I teach a very simple concept,” he says. “We all get in a horse’s way. As soon as we get on their back, the horse cannot perform to the degree he’s

capable of performing by virtue of the added weight. It's all about cooperation and establishing dominance and trust."

The academy, now in its seventh year, is a win-win situation for the racehorses, too.

"We provide a post-racing-activity career for these retiring thoroughbreds," says McCarron. "Thoroughbreds are by nature incredibly vivacious. It's in their blood to run and to be aggressive and active."

McCarron was criticized early in his career for using his whip too much, and he learned that he could accomplish the same thing with a well-timed yell.

"You could coax them instead of make them," he says.

He also became a trained observer.

"I became very adept at getting into a horse's head and figuring out what makes it tick," he says. "If I get the horse to like me more than any other guy who's rode him in the past, I'm going to get him to run faster."

McCarron got the idea to start the jockey school after winning the Japan Cup aboard Pay the Butler in 1988. He was invited to speak at a local jockey school in Japan.

"I was blown away and very impressed they had an academic program as part of their education to work around thoroughbreds," he says. "That opened my eyes."

So did a couple of brushes with death.

On June 3, 1990, at Hollywood Park, he was run over in a nasty spill that broke his left femur for the second time, his right forearm, and his right fibula. He had plates, rods, and screws in his banged-up body and just a flash of mortality.

"I'm thinking, what would I want to do next if this was the type of injury that would end my career?"

Going out on top

McCarron ended his racing career in dramatic Ted Williams style in June 2002. He won his very last race, a stakes race aboard Came Home, whom he had ridden to a sixth-place finish in the Kentucky Derby. It was a

Hollywood ending at Hollywood Park, and it came an hour after he addressed the fans in a tearful goodbye. Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days" was the soundtrack he picked to play.

He was 47 and the sport's all-time money leader. He had 7,141 wins, six Triple Crown winners, two Eclipse Awards, and nine Breeders' Cup victories. Three times he led the nation in wins.

But he knew it was time to go.

"I didn't have the heart anymore," he says. "I'm incredibly satisfied. When I decided to retire, I was totally satiated."

The Dorchester kid had become the biggest little man in California. He talked horses with Ronald Reagan. He raised money for disabled jockeys with comedian Tim Conway. He hung out with Cary Grant and was invited to fancy parties where Johnny Mathis would croon by the piano. He told Michael Dukakis why he lost the 1988 presidential election ("You're too short").

He raised three beautiful daughters and had a wonderful marriage that lasted 34 years before an amicable divorce. Today he lives in a beautiful home on a golf course with enough engraved silver bowls to give fellow horseman Paul Revere a run for his money.

Like Revere, McCarron's path to greatness began in Boston, in his parents' house on Shenandoah Street in Dorchester with his eight brothers and sisters. At 4 a.m., he'd leave the house rain or shine to bike to the corner of Ashmont and Dorchester Ave. to pick up his stack of Boston Globes to deliver for 25 cents an hour.

He played all sports but loved street hockey. As the other kids in the hood kept getting bigger, his hope of being the next Bobby Orr faded.

"I got my ass kicked," says McCarron. "They outran me, outmuscled me, outshot me."

His brother Gregg, seven years older, became a well-respected jockey, with 2,403 victories. But he once got kicked in the face and spent a month in Massachusetts General Hospital. He still has a plate in his face from the accident

Chris was terrified of horses, but in the summer of 1971, he became a hot walker and groomer at Rockingham Park and learned the trade at Suffolk Downs.

He shakes his head at the mention of Suffolk and the recent defeat of the casino proposition in East Boston.

“It’s an absolute travesty that they didn’t approve it in East Boston,” he says. “Instead of creating a few thousand jobs, they’re probably going to lose a few thousand.”

Sentimental touch

The first time McCarron tried to ride at The Rock, aboard a Peter Fuller-owned filly, he froze in fear, and somebody had to rescue him. But before long he was back in the saddle.

By January 1974, he was an apprentice jockey. He finished dead last in his first race but by year’s end, he set a record by winning 547 races at Laurel Park.

He rode two of the greatest thoroughbreds of all time — the legendary John Henry and Alysheba, who ran only hard enough to win.

“John Henry was a mean, dirty, rotten son of a gun,” says McCarron with a smile. “But he was a gem to ride, he was a real gentleman, a real pro. As long as you were up on his back, he was great.”

He also liked to bite.

“He would definitely hurt you,” says McCarron. “It had nothing to do with being ridden. When you’re in his stall, that’s his domain, that’s his spot. You either deal with it or leave.”

McCarron visited John Henry before the horse was euthanized in 2007. “I loved him,” says McCarron. “You know, he was part of my family for two years.” He admits he is a softie at heart.

“I wept when they retired John,” he says. “I wept when they retired Alysheba, I wept when they retired Tiznow, I bawled my eyes out [at the Hall of Fame] because my mom and dad were sitting in the first row and she started crying and then all of a sudden all hell broke loose.

“The real reason is, I think, I’m a very passionate person.”

After McCarron retired, he served as race designer for the 2003 movie “Seabiscuit,” and in it, he played the jockey riding War Admiral. McCarron’s horse was supposed to come in second. But director Gary Ross wanted the scene to be really authentic.

McCarron couldn't help himself; his horse finished first. Annoyed, Ross reshot the scene. McCarron's horse finished first again.

"What can I say, boss? I still got it," McCarron told Ross. As the light faded on the third try, they got the proper 1-2 finish.

Now he devotes himself to making sure his students finish in the money. Academy graduates have already won more than \$37 million for their owners.

McCarron keeps track of when and where his jockeys are riding nationwide. Sometimes he calls them with encouragement and tips.

Andrew Wolfsont, 25, credits McCarron for his success. Once a bricklayer outside the Saratoga track, he has already won 100 races this year, earning more than \$1.8 million in purses.

"I just had a dream of being a jockey and going to the school," he said. "Chris set me up on the right path, got me connections, and that's why I am where I am today. "

How old school is McCarron?

In every e-mail he sends, he includes a quote from Roman scholar Lucius Annaeus Seneca, who was born five years before Christ:

"Luck happens when preparation meets opportunity."

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