

Students are graded on their ability to control a horse



# EARLY TRAINING

North American Racing Academy celebrates 10 years of grooming riders and horsemen

BY LENNY SHULMAN / PHOTOS BY ANNE M. EBERHARDT

**A**T FARMS, STABLES, AND RACETRACKS around the country dozens of graduates of the North American Racing Academy (NARA) are excelling as managers, exercise riders, assistant trainers, and jockeys, fulfilling the vision of those who started the program or today work at furthering its goals. NARA is enjoying its 10th anniversary this year (it started late in 2006) and has evolved into a well-tuned educational opportunity for students nationally and internationally to pursue their dreams of working with horses.

The brainchild of retired Hall of Fame jockey Chris McCarron, NARA started as basically a school for prospective riders but today offers an additional path for those wanting to enter the equine industry with goals of becoming trainers, farm managers, or bloodstock agents as well. A full two-year program provides students with college credits they can use if they wish to pursue their studies at a four-year university and also giving them hands-on experience in the care, health, and performance of the horse.

The seed that grew into NARA was planted when McCarron visited a jockey school in Tokyo while riding in the Japan Cup (G1) 30 years ago. He was impressed by its full curriculum and the



NARA leaders, from left, Dixie Hayes, Remi Bellocq, and Alicia Benben

opportunity it gave its students to gain a well-rounded education. Two years later, while he lay in a hospital with two broken legs and one broken arm from a racetrack spill, McCarron pondered his future after race-riding. Although he excelled in the saddle another dozen years, he also visited jockey schools around the world and, in 2005, began the process of securing funding for his dream in Kentucky.

Eleven students made up the initial class under the auspices of the Kentucky Community and Technical College System. Today NARA is accredited under the Bluegrass Community & Technical College banner, which is part of KCTCS.

“There was a dire need to educate students, not just about riding but about different aspects of the racing industry,” McCarron said. “What’s equally as important about this is not just teaching the skills of being around a horse but teaching all the things that go with being a success in life.”

McCarron left NARA about three years ago, but the foundation he helped construct has been built upon by the current leadership, which includes Remi Bellocq, the executive director of racing

“  
***Our job is to prepare students for their first day on the job with a trainer.***”

— REMI BELLOCQ

programs; and Dixie Hayes, program coordinator and lead instructor. Both worked for years at NARA alongside McCarron.

NARA’s equine facility is located at the Thoroughbred Training Center just outside Lexington, which serves local trainers. NARA shares a barn with Don Combs (who conditioned Dust Commander to win the 1970 Kentucky Derby) and Geoff Mulcahy. The barn is plenty large to accommodate horses at the walk and trot, and, in fact, that’s where the students were recently demonstrating their riding abilities for midterm exams.

The dozen horses ridden by the students are considered teachers by the staff

and are donated from local operations; most are retired Thoroughbreds, but some are still active. NARA works with New Vocations to find new careers and homes for them after they’ve served a couple of years with the school. Alltech helps NARA by contributing feed.

While NARA has set up exchange programs with riding schools in Europe, it differs from most international programs. In many countries there is a school that riders must attend in order to secure a license. That is not the case in the U.S., where each racing state has its own licensing procedures.

“We don’t capture all the talent and teach them one way,” said Bellocq, a former rider in Europe who has also served as head of the national Horsemen’s Benevolent and Protective Association. “So we’ve developed this into a workforce training program that includes kids that weren’t built to be jockeys.

“They can come here and improve their job prospects by knowing how to gallop a horse even if their ultimate job is as an assistant trainer. That’s valuable because trainers can send them with a string to, let’s say, California, and know that person can exercise those horses. So we’ve changed the program to produce those kinds of graduates. We still take a kid who wants to be a jockey, but we’ve created a different kind of school.

“Kids need to understand that even if they succeed and become jockeys, their careers at best might be 15 years in most cases,” he continued. “If they want to work with horses, they have to figure out what they’re going to do at age 30 or 40. They might change jobs a couple of times, and we’re going to give them the tools to do that.”

Students come from as far away as



**A student tacks up a horse prior to a riding midterm exam**

India, Norway, and Canada. The rider pathway tends to have very few Kentucky residents while the horseman pathway is just the opposite, with mostly local participants. Some 85% of the students are female.

The training is rigorous for the rider program. Work ethic and fitness are stressed.

“We have a hard line on fitness standards,” noted Hayes, a former brood-

mare manager and trainer who has been with NARA for six years. “Many graduates come back here and say that was the big thing they gained from the program. We teach them horsemanship and riding, but the work ethic is what really moves them up the chain. That’s what can set them apart and help them get a management position.”

Students in the jockey pathway must be able to run five miles at a nine-minute

pace, do 200 sit-ups, 75-100 push-ups, and hold a two-point position on the equisizer for 10 minutes. Once they demonstrate fitness, students take a racehorse care lab class, learning to work around horses, cleaning stalls and grooming.

Other fundamentals include adjusting the girth and stirrups, tying their knot on the reins in a specific amount of time, and learning how to mount the horse gently. They must demonstrate a sense of control and calmness with the horse.

On a tack room table are dozens of different types of bits, shoes, cups, and blinkers that must be learned. They work on bandaging. There is much to consider before they even get to ride because when NARA sends a student out in the field to work for a trainer, the staff wants to be sure that student can meet the trainer’s expectations.

The midterm exam we observed is strenuous as riders must take their mounts through various gaits in a progression. Hayes and academic coordinator and instructor Alicia Benben watch them like hawks. One student loses points for not going through the progression correctly. Another is penalized because her knees touch the saddle.

“We create a standard formula to produce a student that has great fundamentals,” said Bellocq. “When we send a stu-

## JUMPING INTO THE SADDLE: EX-ARMY PARATROOPER TAKES TO THOROUGHBREDS

Where does a former U.S. Army paratrooper go when he wants to fulfill his need for a profession filled with thrills?

Apparently to the North American Racing Academy to learn to become a Thoroughbred jockey. At least that’s the path traversed by Jerick Ello, 23, a San Diego native who spent three years in the Army at Fort Bragg, N.C., jumping out of planes and operating radar.

“We’d jump from 2,000 feet, but at 115 pounds I was too light and would just be

floating in the air until I finally came down,” Ello said. “I wasn’t hitting my target.”

Ello went online and found NARA, or “the Chris McCarron school,” as he put it, and decided to put his light weight to good use. Under the G.I. Bill he came to Lexington to study how to become a horseman and how to ride.

“When I was real young, my father and grandfather would take me to Del Mar,” said Ello. “They were betting a lot and my mother didn’t want me around gambling that



**Jerick Ello is a natural around horses**

much, so I really had no exposure to horse racing at all. I guess after the Army I was open to trying something new and thought



The midterm exam requires students to handle horses at various gaits



Benben teaches in the classroom as well as online

dent to a trainer, they're going to learn that particular trainer's system. Finishing school is different for each student, depending on where they go. Our job is to prepare them for their first day on that job. It's best for the good ones to move on. We can't provide the variety of horses that a full-fledged barn can. That's our approach now—for a kid who wants to have a career as a jockey or exercise rider, we act like a feeder system and place that kid."

There are some 25-30 active jockeys that have come out of NARA. Jacqueline

and Dylan Davis, although children of rider Robby Davis, both went through the NARA course.

"I learned an incredible amount there," said Jacqueline. "My riding skills were nowhere near what they are now."

McCarron mentioned Andrew Wolfson, who is riding at Hollywood Casino at Penn National Race Course and Laurel Park, as one of the most successful graduates, and opined that he is ready for a bigger circuit. He also noted watching a race from Turfway Park where graduate Corey Olm had his rein break

early in a race and still came on to win from far back while holding on by the throat latch.

"It was a fantastic display of confidence and courage," noted McCarron. "You get so proud of them. It's indescribable to see these kids go on and succeed. Our graduates have won more than 3,500 races so far."

Trainers such as Joe Sharp and Todd Pletcher have taken multiple NARA students into their operations as exercise riders and assistants.

"NARA does a good job sending in

I'd see about being a jockey."

Today, after 10 months at NARA, Ello works as an exercise rider for trainer Joe Sharp, currently at Fair Grounds Race Course & Slots. He is having the time of his life and this summer will leave for Newmarket in England on an exchange program for a few months, furthering his riding education.

It's been a meteoric rise for Ello, who admits to knowing precious little when he started at NARA.

"I was a hot mess," he stated. "I was active and fit, but I was so green in anything to do with the horse. I was really struggling early. Through patience and listening to Remi (Bellocq) and Dixie (Hayes), I was able

to get great feedback as they pointed out my weaknesses. I followed what they were saying, and it just connected at some point, after all the runoffs and getting dumped plenty of times."

Sharp, who has employed several students out of the NARA program the past couple of years and is himself a former rider, was giving a lecture there last year and got to witness all the students riding in a field. He immediately picked out Ello and told Bellocq he wanted to hire him.

"Jerick is great," Sharp said recently. "He's very athletic and has a fantastic work ethic. Riding isn't second nature to him, but he's a natural and amazingly talented for the short amount of time he's been doing it. He'll need

to learn some finishing techniques to get to be a good jockey, but for how he looks on a horse and how he gets along with horses, it's incredible how quickly he's developed."

Ello noted he is gaining invaluable experience getting on a wide variety of horses with a different assignment for each and is able to learn not only from Sharp but from the trainer's wife, former jockey Rosie Napravnik.

"I'm surrounded by so much knowledge and talent," Ello noted. "I've really found my confidence riding every day and continuing to build on what I learned at NARA."

It will be one proud family back in San Diego when they get to see Ello living his dream on horseback in a race.

—By Lenny Shulman

people who are well-rounded in various aspects of the business,” said Sharp. “Chelsea Heery is my main assistant now at Fair Grounds, and she came out of the program two or three years ago knowing how to gallop horses, but she was also geared for other things. She can breeze horses and is a great assistant around the barn as well. To me she’s the poster child for the program.

“The program is good for us horsemen,” he said. “It’s hard to find those in the younger generation to do this work, and you know these students are motivated because they’re paying to learn about the business. It shows they really want it, and that’s a good start.”

Heery said the NARA program taught her to go the extra mile.

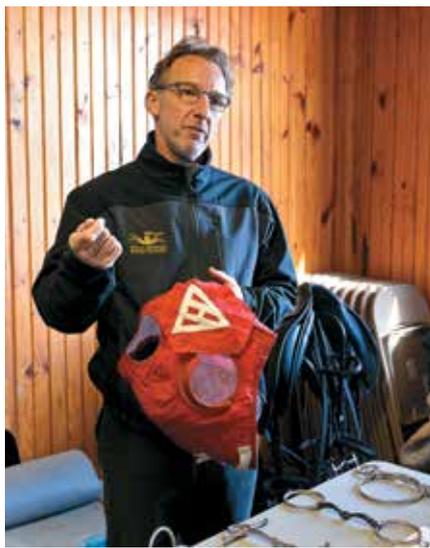
“I learned to stay busy and always try to be useful around the barn; always be looking for something to do,” she said. “That gains you respect. I absolutely love what I’m doing. It’s a way of life more than it is a job.”

Bellocq noted that NARA gives students a taste of the work and the lifestyle that await them, which tests their true motivation to continue in the horse business.

“We do the preliminary work for the trainer that will hire them,” Bellocq said. “When it’s January in Kentucky and it’s nasty and 5 degrees, they have to show up. If it’s a holiday, show up. The student can figure out whether he or she really wants to work in this business over their two years here. We put them in a situation where they can figure it out without going through four years of college.”

The students enrolled in the horseman’s pathway also have the opportunity to take riding classes, and they must pass the basic racehorse care lab class.

But they also learn about the licensing process for trainers, conditioning racehorses, entry procedures, and practical application in



**Bellocq counsels students as a former rider himself**

the barn. Their classroom work is geared toward equine science, covering topics such as equine nutrition, equine physiology, and bloodstock—conformation and evaluation of horses.

Benben also heads an online program of classes for students who want to get started on their studies before they arrive in Kentucky. The online component has also been used by students in the Dubai International Thoroughbred Internship program and allows students to cover classes at their own pace.

Graduates have gone on to work at leading farms as well as for prominent trainers. Bellocq said that for students who have graduated from the two-year horseman’s pathway program, NARA’s placement rate is 100%, notwithstand-



**Classroom work is geared toward equine science**

ing whether those students ultimately decide to stay in the industry.

Matthew Cady took a job with Stone Farm near Paris, Ky., two years ago after coming out of the program. He has moved up to assistant broodmare manager.

“He’s doing a great job,” said Stone Farm owner Arthur Hancock III. “Matthew is conscientious and meticulous. He’s very dependable; he’s on time, steady, and a nice person. He’s got responsibilities such as being involved in foaling. I called Chris to get his opinion before hiring him and Chris spoke up for him, and he was right.”

The staff at NARA like nothing better than to hear that their former pupils are succeeding.

“That for me has been the ultimate satisfaction,” Hayes said. “When it’s freezing cold here and one of our students sends us a picture of them galloping in Florida, I love it for them. I’m so happy to see them getting along. They’re happy and passionate and doing something they love, which is rare. But these kids are getting that chance.”

Bellocq added that the relatively small classes of students at NARA allow the staff to take a hands-on approach with each of them.

“We’re expanding,” he said, “but we’re not so big where we don’t have a personal stake in recruiting these kids. We host

them and their families on tours; we do the admissions process ourselves. When they have a bad day, we see the tears. When they get through all that, and you can call up a trainer and tell them we have a kid that can work for them, the trainer trusts us and accepts them. That whole cycle is so satisfying.

“We’re not just instructing them; it’s soup to nuts here, and we’re involved in the whole cycle of events. You really hit a home run when that kid succeeds.” **BH**