

Early risers put horses through practice paces

By DOUG FUNKE

They call it "the back side" of thoroughbred horse racing. Days start at 5 a.m. There is no glamour unless mud, the odor of horse manure and bone-chilling mornings are your idea of the good life.

Horses and jockeys don't just suddenly show up at the starting gate come post time.

In fact, the couple of hours of the day during which the ponies gallop for pay are relatively serene compared with what goes on from sun-up to approximately 10 a.m. daily at the Detroit Race Course.

Things are hopping from the barn to the racing secretary's office to the track. Horse and foot traffic are heavy, as everyone goes about his business as usual.

NANCY BRAMBLE is a jockey's agent and has been for three years. Her job is to find mounts for the two jockeys whom she represents — Grady Overton and Lorrie Katz.

Overton is a journeyman jockey, a veteran. Katz is what they call a "bug-boy," an apprentice.

"An agent can have (represent) three jockeys. It's good to have a rider with experience and a young one."

The first thing that Bramble does when she arrives is to get coffee in the track kitchen. Even at an early hour, many jockeys and exercise boys are inside drinking coffee, reading the racing form, playing pool or pinball and just visiting.

A steady stream of horses and riders heads from the barn to the track and from the track back to the barn.

"If a jockey gallops a horse in the morning, he rides it in the afternoon (during a race)," Bramble explained. "It (exercising) is a way to pick up mounts."

Bramble is constantly on the move, either on foot or in a golf cart. She searches out trainers and owners looking for practice mounts and races for Katz.

"ALMOST EVERYONE has an agent," said Bramble. "An agent has to pick the right horses. A bad horse makes a bad ride — it makes the rider look bad."

Bramble admitted that an apprentice like Katz will probably not get the cream of the racing crop to ride.

Toward 7:20 a.m., Bramble checks in with the clerk of scales in the racing secretary's office to confirm who and in what races Overton and Katz will be riding that afternoon.

Other agents do the same. Most agents earn money by getting a percentage of their jockeys' winnings. In Bramble's case, it's 25 percent.

KATZ FINDS it to his advantage at this stage of his professional development to be a bug boy. Apprentices receive a five-pound weight allowance per race.

To become a journeyman, Katz must ride 45 winners or wait until a year after his fifth winner, whichever takes longer.

"At first, I didn't think about becoming a jockey," he said. "I worked with horses in Toronto. I worked with track horses, show horses and every kind of horse there is."

"When I found out about racing, I thought I'd take advantage of my size and go where the money is."

"In this business, it's all luck. I've

been last lots of times. It's not often that I get a good horse, so I go out and learn with the bad ones," said Katz.

"They (trainers and owners) figure that for the same money, they can get a top jockey. I understand that. If I were a trainer or an owner, I would want the best."

"I've been riding every day," Katz continued. "Back home, I was lucky to ride once a week. They don't appreciate bugs like in the States. I like to keep working. Once you sit around, you don't feel like working any more."

Katz, who is generally up between 5:30 a.m. daily, won the fifth race of his career during the last meeting at Hazel Park.

The jockey of a winning horse generally receives 10 percent of the horse's winnings. Those who finish second earn \$50-\$55 and third \$40-\$45. If a jockey finishes out of the money, he will receive \$30-\$35 for the ride.

DEBBIE BRYANT is what is known as a pony girl. Actually, she's a woman, who has been leading horses from the barn to track for practice runs and leading a mount and jockey from paddock to starting gate during races for 20 years.

Why is she needed?

"Some trainers don't want weight on their horses in the morning. Walking is a form of stretching the horse's muscles without it carrying weight," said Bryant.

"I try my very best to get the horse to the gate (prior to a race) in one piece. Very few horses will hurt you. I'm also there to help the rider get in the gate so the rider doesn't wear out doing it."

"The job comes down to this — you're supposed to out-think the horse. Horses have patterns and you can get to know them," she said. A happy horse is a successful horse.

It's just a chain. Someone mucks the stall, someone walks and rubs the horse, someone gallops the horse, the pony (girl) gets the horse to the gate and the jockey gets it to the wire."

JERRY BENNETT is currently involved training a stable of between 15 and 20 horses. He's been at it five years.

"The first thing I do when I come in is check every horse," he said. I check to see if they ate their supper. If he looks listless, I'll check his temperature. I'll check the legs — knees, ankles and tendons."

"Then, if everything checks out, I'll tack him up and bring him out for exercise. The trainer will tell the exercise boy what he wants done. Some horses will run a stiff mile. A good



Bantering goes along with the work among those cleaning stalls in the stable area.

horse will run. A cheaper horse will sore up."

VICTOR GELL has been a jockey 12 years. "This (morning workout) is the most important part (of racing), I suppose. Unless you train the horse in the morning, he won't run well in the afternoon," he said.

Gell said that most horses are just walked the morning of the day in which they are to be raced. He said that two percent may get a hard workout the morning of race day.

Gell said that most horses will race once a week. Every day, though, they are galloped or jogged.

ALAN ANDRZEJEWSKI is an exercise boy. At 6-1, he is too big to be a jockey, so he stays close to the racing scene by running horses in the morning.

"I like to ride a lot," he said. "First I groomed, then I became a rider." Andrzejewski, who resides in Hazel Park, said that most of the exercise boys and girls at DRG live in the metro area.

Bramble added that some stables have their own exercise people who travel from track to track.

Do jockeys ever consult with exercise boys on the status of a horse come race time? "Some jockeys do, but most don't," said Andrzejewski.

Exercise boys are paid \$4 per lap for riding a horse around the track. An-

drzejewski had nine rides the morning we talked, all before 9 a.m.

JON BRYANT can be found at his spot near the first turn on the track at 5 a.m. every day. He is the clocker, employed by the Racing Form. Bryant (no relation to Debbie) times a horse when requested by a trainer during practice.

Bryant has a book with color-coded entries of every horse who will run at DRG this meeting. It is obvious that he takes pride in the manner in which he keeps tabs on the horses.

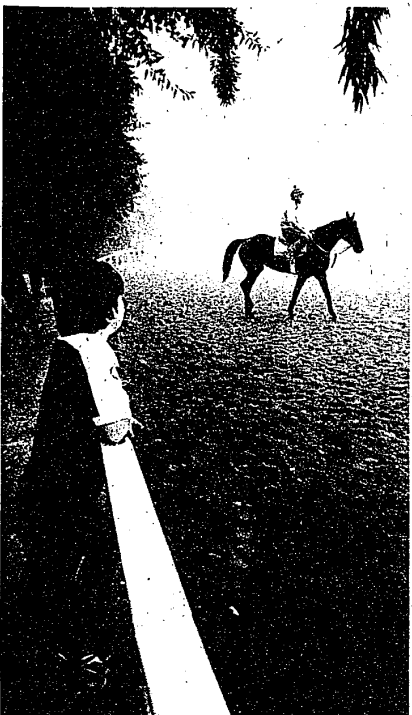
"Some people place a great deal of value in workouts," he began. "Some horses run like it's life-and-death. Others don't want to work."

"Some are morning glories," he continued. "They work hard in the morning, but you can't find them with a search warrant in the race."

Bryant said that for the protection of the betting public and for safety on the track, several officials are concerned about goings-on during a race.

"Three people are continually watching the horses — the track vet, the starter and stewards," said Bryant.

In the event that a horse doesn't perform safely, he'll be placed on the steward's list. The horse will not be permitted to race again until it can be demonstrated in the morning practice sessions and qualifying races that he will not be a detriment on the track.



Michael Jones, standing at the rail like a veteran handicapper, watches a mount walk toward the inside of the track prior to starting a workout.

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