

The jockeys' locker room at Labroke DRC in Livonia is a place to shoot the breeze before a race for Anthony Russo Jr. (left), color man John Rupert, Richard DePass and Tim Jessup. Rupert passes out the

colored caps that go over the jockey's helmet for each race.

photos by STEVE FECHT/staff photographer

JOCKEYS

Spills, thrills in the fast lane

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

One leans against the counter with his hand cupped on his chin. The other stands with his arms folded watching television.

There is probably only 16 feet of space separating the two jockeys as they wait between races in the lounge at Labroke DRC in Livonia. In the starting gate of experience, though, they're 16 years apart.

Richard DePass, 35, who lives in Bedford Township during the thoroughbred season, carries the scars of 17 years as a journeyman jockey with him to the counter. He carefully measures his every move climbing up on the stool.

Mike Allen, 19, who lives in Livonia, is still somewhat wide-eyed and restless. He shed his apprenticeship or "bug" status a few months ago and now has to prove himself.

The ring of the bell, the thunder of eight horses, the flying dirt and the finish line await both.

"WHEN YOU'RE riding in a big race, you don't feel nervous or excited when the bell rings because it's started," said DePass, a Jamaican-born jockey who has the distinction of being the only rider to win seven races on seven mounts in one day. "It's like boxing. You're nervous and excited, but once the bell rings you forget about it and fight. It's the same in riding."

And as in boxing, wins are a jockey's only credentials. Potential is code for "you haven't done it yet in thoroughbred racing circles."



Mike Allen walks Curtin Act back after the second race. The curtain fell on Curtin Act, which finished well out of the money in that particular race.

Agents sell a jockey's service to the horse's trainers. A winning horse receives 60 percent of the purse, 10 percent of which goes to the jockey. Win or lose, a rider receives a \$40 mount fee.

So a jockey with more than 1,000 wins, such as DePass, is a hot commodity.

DePass will ride in five to six races per day. Allen averages around two a day.

WHEN DEPASS comes in during the morning, he knows he'll have a full slate of races. Allen doesn't.

"It's really hard to tell," said Allen, considered one of the top apprentice riders at DRC last year. "Saturday, I rode in five races, and I won one of them with a horse that I won three races with last year."

Allen's main goal is to become a No. 1 jockey "here or anywhere." The backstretch to the top is paved with long hours of work.

Allen, whose father, Ronnie Allen Sr., is a well-known trainer at DRC, comes to the track at around 7 a.m. He'll work with some of the horses and help his father around the stable.

A lot of time is spent in the lounge while he waits to ride, either sleeping or watching television. The other jockeys, half of whom are foreign, spend their idle time playing cards and discussing races.

Some of the riders slide up to Allen and share their experiences.

"They usually come out and tell me what I'm doing wrong," Allen said. "They give me tips on little things. I learned most of the important stuff from my father and my brother (Ronnie Jr., who is also a jockey)."

SECRETS To success, for the most part, though, are guarded. Friendliness aside, the jockey business is competitive.

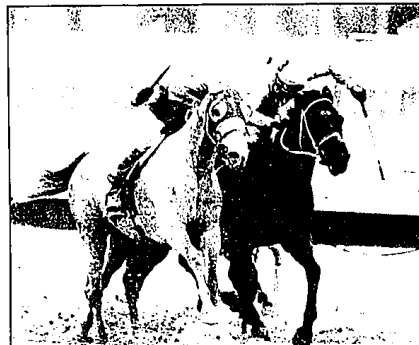
Rivalries build between the No. 1 and No. 2 jockey because certain perks exist for those on top.

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Jockey Mike Allen of Livonia prepares for the second race at DRC. He is placing rubber bands around his wrist to keep his shirt

sleeves from getting in the way during the race.



Sheila McKenna-Santago (left) rides Waco Gray down the home stretch to nose out Bring on the Rain and jockey Ronnie Hirdes in a recent race at Labroke DRC in Livonia.

Little guys, big appetites

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

An eatery for jockeys would seem to have as much potential as a sno-cone salesman in Fairbanks, Alaska. Au contraire. These pint-sized pursuers of the finish line can pack a pretty mean appetite.

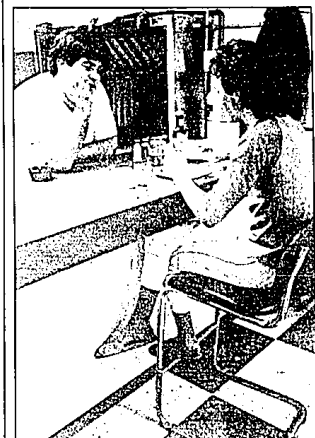
Just ask Chris Clowits, who runs the kitchen in the jockey's lounge at Labroke DRC. "Yeah, some of them eat a lot," joked Clowits, 30, of Farmington who serves up anything and everything the riders ask for. "Sometimes everything I got."

CLOWITS SAID that most jockeys have regular diets, eating anything from fruit to cheeseburgers. Some, though, are very weight conscious. "They eat just like the rest of us," Clowits said. "They have a lot of fruit and juices. They're just regular folks."

Clowits has been a regular in the lounge since he was going to Birmingham Groves High School. He worked with his parents, who operated the grill until three years ago.

Clowits, whose parents still own the business, now runs the operation full time. He cooks, and the jockeys eat, putting it on a tab.

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Chris Clowits (left) prepares a between-race meal for jockey Mike Allen.

Lady Luck's on her side

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

For Sheila McKenna-Santago, it took more than lady luck and a four-leaf clover to make it as a female jockey in Irish thoroughbred racing circles.

Ireland, hardly a place where Gloria Steinem would be welcome chugging Guinness Stout in a Dublin pub, has women pegged for more traditional roles. And being a jockey isn't one of them.

But that stopped McKenna-Santago (she goes by McKenna at the track) about as successfully as cheesecake would stop a Mack truck.

"We lived on a thoroughbred horse

farm in (County Meath) Ireland," said McKenna-Santago, who lives in Oak Park. "My father had been a rider all of his life. When I was growing up, all I ever imagined myself to be was a rider."

McKenna-Santago, who has since made her mark as a jockey state-side, was one of the first women ever to work at a track in Ireland. Being a jockey made her a novelty there — but not a trendsetter.

"IN FACT, it's very difficult to this day (to be a female jockey) in Ireland," said McKenna-Santago, 34, considered one of the top riders at Labroke DRC. "It's very chauvinistic."

She has been a dominant force in

thoroughbred circles, both in the United States and abroad. She's raced at tracks such as Hialeah, Gulfstream Park, Oaklawn, Louisiana Downs, Meadowlands, Monmouth, Atlantic City, Keystone and DRC.

McKenna-Santago also won 11 races in the Japan Ladies Cup Jockey Competition. With the wins, though, came some pain.

In 1976, she broke a vertebra in her neck and was later kicked in the face by a horse. Only a few injuries kept her from riding.

During the first three months of pregnancy with her daughter, Erin, McKenna-Santago rode a hot streak

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