



Behind the Scenes

*Backstretch workers
help put on
the show despite
tough conditions*

BY TERESE KARMEL / SKIP DICKSTEIN PHOTOS

They are the ones sponging soapy water along the chestnut's flanks, slathering thick ivory cream on the roan's ankles, and leading a spirited 2-year-old bay filly round and round the shedrow whether it's 10 or 100 degrees. Their feet might be killing them, they may be limping from an injury incurred from one of their charges, yet their care for the animals is critical to the success of the horses we see race every day.

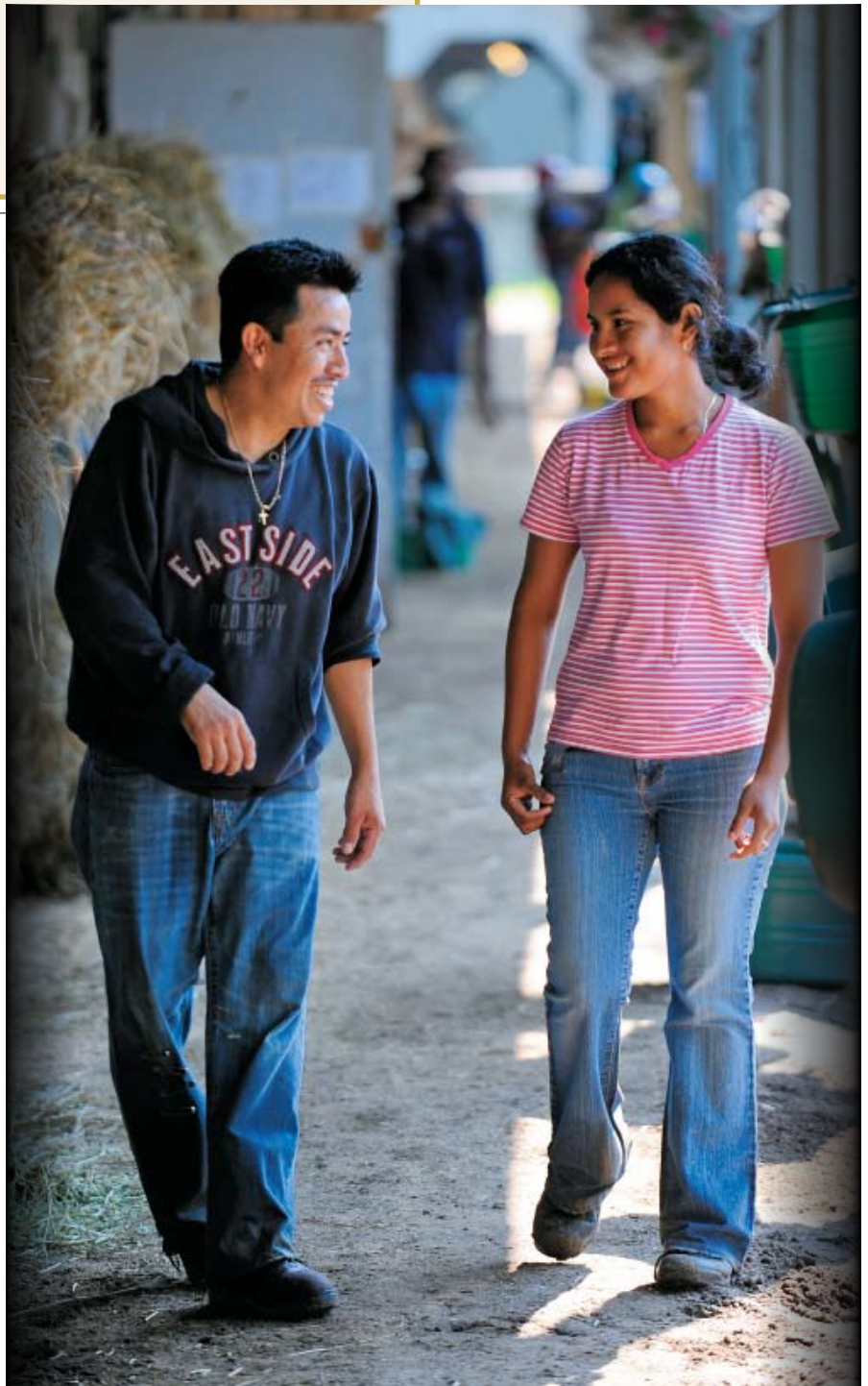
Backstretch workers are the glue that hold a stable together, whether it's a far-flung operation like Todd Pletcher's coast-to-coast megalopolis or a small trainer's two-horse stable in the American heartland. Each morning, well before first light, thousands of workers, the preponderant number Hispanic immigrants, get the horses ready for the day, walking them, preparing them for workouts, feeding and bathing them, leading them over to detention barns. Then, after hours of strenuous labor, the workers gather what little energy they have left to bathe, feed, and care for their own bumps and bruises. The next morning they're back in the barns tending to animals whose monetary value eclipse their own personal worth.

Here is a look at the lives of a few of the people who have spent many years on the backstretch making life better for the Thoroughbreds and, hopefully, themselves.

Yanet Loeza whips out a pink cell phone from the pocket of her pale green and black parka and flashes a picture of a little boy dressed all in white. Her smiling son, Luis Antonio, brightens this otherwise teeth-chattering morning on the Aqueduct backstretch. Luis is 8; Loeza, 24, has not seen him since he was 4. That's when she left him in the care of her family and came to America from her small Mexican village to seek a better life hotwalking for New York-based trainer Gary Contessa. She came at the urging of her boyfriend, Fredi Ramirez, 34, who had been a groom with Contessa for four years. The two had been together in Mexico and it had long been Ramirez' dream that the couple reunite in New York.

Ramirez, slightly more fluent in English than his girlfriend, said it took time and patience for him to convince Loeza to join him, but the difference in earnings was so radical, she eventually agreed to come. In Mexico she earned \$20 a week taking care

of peoples' houses; in America she earns \$400 a week taking care of Thoroughbreds. (She also picks up a few extra bucks selling food in the backstretch cantinas.) Through a translator, she talks of how hard it was to leave Luis, but every two weeks she sends money home "so he can have what he wants." Loeza and Ramirez are among the lucky workers who get to leave the concrete jungle of Aqueduct and spend their summers in Saratoga. "They're super workers, two of my best," said Contessa. His assistant, Marcello Arenas, said the pair works non-stop. "They're always



Yanet Loeza came to work in New York at the urging of her boyfriend, Fredi Ramirez

doing something. They're quiet and respect everyone."

Sometimes Loeza speaks of Luis to Arenas or shows him pictures of her son; this makes her sad, Arenas said, because she is reminded of how often Luis asks her when she is coming back.

Early during the Saratoga meet, the rain, which started in monsoon proportions during the night, continues to fall, turning the Oklahoma training track into the Great Lakes. The weather, however, is of no matter to the people who work on the backstretch. Hotwalkers lead horses in slow, lazy circles; water slops out of big white pails, mingling with the rain; rakers try to keep mud under control in front of the stalls. Ramirez is filling royal blue tubs from a wheelbarrow brimming with feed. He is small and slight, like a jockey, and his hair is spiked with gel. Loeza is helping co-workers paste charts into a record book, her day nearly done. She is pretty, with a broad face, her hair pulled back into a loose ponytail. Later, she and a co-worker haul 25-pound bags of feed from one end of the shedrow to the other, carefully stepping around puddles.

A week later it's hot and sunny and, working as a team, Loeza holds and chatters away to the filly Far Isle while Ramirez soaps her down with a large beige sponge and works the tangles out of her mane and tail with a red comb. He scratches at nicks in the horse's rear until it is smoothed over, and with a special hammer-like object knocks and scrapes dirt off her shoes. With him always are the tools of his trade, packed into a wooden carrying case that resembles a shoeshine kit.

Loeza and Ramirez are in good moods, as is Far Isle, who paws the ground and wiggles to show contentment. "She's happy," Loeza said, imitating her with a shake of her hips. Ramirez is important to Contessa's operation, entrusted with some of the top horses. One of them, Lord Kipling, had two starts at Saratoga early in the meet; in his first start he didn't do much; a week later he won a two-mile marathon as the favorite and was claimed, his stall quickly filled by another horse shipped in from downstate, although Lord Kipling's name is still on the tag. Is Ramirez sad they lost the "Lord?" Yes. "He was quiet." Most people connected with horseracing want their charges to be full of energy in the afternoons, but backstretch workers put a premium on calm, manageable horses in the mornings.

After work Loeza and Ramirez will go to their separate dormitories for men and women that the New York Racing Association provides cost-free for backstretch workers. Regulations prohibit unmarried couples from living together. At Saratoga, Loeza shares a small 12-by-12-foot room with another worker in a two-story cinderblock building facing Contessa's stable,



Tom Williams, Bruce Levine's assistant, grew up as the son of a jockey

adjacent to the men's quarters. Two mattresses are on the floor; clothes are piled everywhere; there's barely room to move. In the evenings they get together with workers from other barns and share meals, go to movies in a recreation center, play soccer, and renew acquaintances or make new friends with workers from all over the country whom they only see in the summer. When they've saved enough money, Loeza and Ramirez plan to marry, buy a home, and bring Luis to America. The short-term goal is to return to Mexico in December to spend the holidays with their families. Loeza is worried her son will forget who she is even though she speaks to him two nights a week, a concern she expresses to Arenas when she shows him her

Gulfstream Park, zips over to Keeneland for a brief stay, and then heads for Saratoga as soon as the Oklahoma training track opens in mid-April. Now 54, he has been on the backstretch since he was a young boy, at first trailing after his father, W.B. Williams, a contract rider for Darby Dan Farm, who got second call after Hall of Famer Johnny Longden.

"I never finished a year in the same school I started," Williams said, recalling the life of following the horses from Florida to Kentucky to New Jersey to Ohio, where he is from originally. He had hoped to follow in his father's footsteps and be a jockey when, as a young teenager, he weighed just 100 pounds. But his junior year in high school, he gained 60 pounds and grew eight inches, so that was the end of that dream. Among his first jobs on the backstretch was rubbing horses for the late Elmer Cowan, an old-fashioned trainer on the Ohio circuit who taught Williams a lot about Thoroughbreds.

"Back then they used all home remedies for an ailing horse, and Elmer had a cure for everything," Williams said. And a keen eye. "He could watch a horse go down the road and tell you exactly what was wrong with him. It was fun to learn in that atmosphere."

Williams has clearly inherited Cowan's keen eye. On a spring morning at Saratoga, his hair as gold as freshly cut hay, Williams is patrolling the shedrow with a private word for each horse. "You have a funny old foot on you, don't you buddy," he tells a horse that is leaning out of his stall to greet him. "There's a pretty girl," he tells one horse. "Don't be so mean," he tells another. "Look at this poor baby's eye," he says to one, turning the head of Blue Destiny, whose eye is so cloudy it resembles

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TOM WILLIAMS

latest pictures. For now, the horses are her "children." "Come," she motions a visitor as she splashes down the shedrow to show off the filly Higher Incentive, whom she escorted to the races one day when Ramirez, her regular groom, was off. "She won," Loeza said proudly. She is whistling now and embracing the horse's large head, kissing her and saying "mama" over and over.

ON TOP OF EVERYTHING

For Tom Williams, a top assistant to trainer Bruce Levine, the horses are also an extended family. Williams winters at

a cotton ball. "Some trauma on the farm probably," he explained. Who knows if she'll run, but to Williams she is as valuable as Zenyatta. "If you're in this game, you'd better love horses. You can't be in it to get rich."

During the meet he starts each morning around 4:30 going over horses' legs to make sure nothing has happened overnight. He spends a few extra minutes feeling a small lump on the left ankle of a horse that is to run in the next few days. "There's some kind of strain here," he tells his groom. "What have we got here," he asks, pigeons scattering as he strides toward another horse. He pulls something out of its nose—hay, dust, who knows—and says in his best Tom Durkin voice, "Jim's Applemartini in front," reflecting his desire for a win later that day. (He didn't.) Much of his time is spent directing traffic—getting horses and riders to the track for scheduled workouts, making sure horses racing that day are going to the detention barn on time. As the Saratoga meet wore on and the barn remained winless, Williams had a new job: cheerleader.

"Sure, the barn gets a little down," he said. "This morning I told them, 'It'll happen sooner or later.'" Does the discouragement lead to slacking off? "If anything, we're working harder. No one wants to leave with that embarrassment."

Backstretch workers are, in general, good-natured and subtle about the competition among trainers, but they're well aware of who is hot and who is not. And it finally did happen. On Aug. 30, the 4-year-old gelding Soda Pop Kid won a six-furlong event on a muddy track, giving Levine his first win in 41 starts at the meet. Though there was no celebration that night, the next morning Williams treated the staff to deli sandwiches.

Levine had about 40 horses stabled at Saratoga. In the past years, he has entered the ranks of the well-respected national trainers, working his way up from a prominent New York claiming conditioner. Williams has been at his side for the last four of those years, important years, in which he has become a trusted right-hand man.

"He's very conscientious," said Levine of Williams. "He does the worrying for you—he's on top of everything, every detail." Levine relies on Williams to take care of the 2-year-olds. "He's got patience, which is the key factor with them."

When Levine is at another venue (he's one of the top conditioners at Monmouth Park every year), Williams saddles the horse and instructs the jockey as he did during the second week of the Saratoga meet when Rosie's Promises was favored in a six-furlong contest. Williams is nervous before the race, which, as with all of them, he watches on a large television screen at the foot of the stairs leading up to the owners' section of the clubhouse. As

the horses are loaded, he shifts his weight from foot to foot and says this is the tensest time for him. When his charge posts a :21.19 first quarter, he knows there's trouble ahead. In the stretch, he's urging jockey Ramon Dominguez to "go to work now," but Rosie's Promises is caught at the 16th pole, a fate all too familiar this meet for the Levine barn. Williams is Zen about it. "Oh well, you can't win 'em all," he says to no one in particular.

Tom and his wife, Carole Williams, a pony girl for several trainers, have known the joy of winning and the pain of losing with their own small string of horses when they trained in Ohio. "We were just making a living, but there were other places we wanted to see, like Saratoga and Del Mar. We came up here and we liked it," he said, indicating that put an end to his own stint as a trainer.

He hooked up with Levine and he's been content ever since, although the dream of having one or two horses of their own is still alive, especially in Carole Williams' mind. She'd be happy with a small rig and a couple of allowance horses that could take them from track to track on a win-as-you-go basis so they could make a living at it. But she's a realist and knows this is a tall order.

Skepticism about earning a living as a horse trainer was expressed by her dad

time to relax, but when they get an hour or two in the afternoon, the Williamses take their kayaks to a nearby lake for some peace and quiet. But the horses are ever-present. "I call back in the afternoon even if I have it off," he said. "Heck, they're part of the family."

Often he returns in the evening to help feed the horses or just walk the shedrow. At night he finds a far different atmosphere than the mechanical rituals of the mornings. The place comes alive as workers sit around picnic tables playing cards. Bike riders are everywhere, cruising the flat paths that wind among the stables. Dressed to party, many gather from different barns for a potluck supper, the tortillas sizzling in hot oil in electric fry pans. Salsa music booms; some dance to the rhythm while the horses peer out at them from their stalls.

DOING IT IN STYLE

Bertha Quinonez is always dressed like she's going to a party. On the same circuit as Williams, she winters at Gulfstream, summers at Saratoga. This day the solidly-built 61-year-old is lugging two white pails of steaming hot water to the bathing area, where a horse's groom will take over. She has biceps, she has triceps, and she has the responsibility for hotwalking some of the most successful Thorough-



Backstretch workers are the backbone of the Thoroughbred racing industry

when, in the mid-1980s, Williams asked for her hand in marriage. "How are you going to support my daughter?" he asked. "I have no intention of supporting her myself. She loves horses too," he replied, referring to her years of riding, galloping, and helping train horses. "I thought the phone went dead," he said. The couple owns a small cottage, which they share with their dog and cat, in Gansevoort, near Saratoga, and a home near Payson Park in Florida.

During the Saratoga meet, there is little

bred in the country as a backstretch hand in the Kieran McLaughlin barn.

"That's my horse," she said as Bluegrass Princess is brought back to McLaughlin's Barn No. 17 on the Saratoga main course backstretch after a workout. Like a baton being passed in a relay, the exercise rider hands "The Princess" over to Quinonez, who will then walk her 10 times around the shedrow before setting her up for a bath. After that, she will walk her another 10 rounds. Does she get tired as she walks?

At this point it's 10 a.m., near quitting time, and she's been on the job since before 5. "No. It's good for my circulation," she responds in a thick Spanish accent, suggesting flashes of sun-drenched Acapulco, near where she was raised.

She sings as she walks around the barn, happy because it's a beautiful, crisp day in the 70s and she's doing what she loves best: working with horses. Quinonez has been with some of the game's most successful trainers in her decade on the backstretch: Shug McGaughey, Nick Zito, James Bond, and, for the past four years, McLaughlin.

"She's a very good walker," said Rajeev Lakshmanan, McLaughlin's foreman at Saratoga. "She has a lot of experience with horses."

Quinonez likes her present job because the stable has winners and she likes her bosses. Saratoga is her favorite venue. "The people are nice and the flowers are beautiful," she said.

McLaughlin's outfit is truly international: Lakshmanan is from southern India; exercise riders were in for the summer from Ireland and Great Britain; and the trainer specializes in Thoroughbreds owned by the rulers of Dubai. Quinonez is friendly and seems to know everyone. Because she is one of the few backstretch workers with a van, every week she drives other workers to the local supermarket to shop and, while she's out and about, brings others phone cards and other necessities, making a few bucks either way.

Perhaps her added income contributes to her appearance, by all accounts among the most stylish on the backstretch. In a job which is typically undertaken in mud-pocked jeans and rugged, weather-beaten jackets and shirts. Quinonez prefers rich velour hoodies, stylish crossover blouses, and other colorful print tops. But most of all, Quinonez loves jewelry, whether it's gold chains around her neck, sparkling in the Saratoga sunshine, or an ornate necklace with a cross pendant.

"She doesn't look like she's a horse walker," said Lakshmanan. Her small room in a backstretch dorm reflects her sense of style: a colorful floral lei hangs on the front door, a welcome mat on the floor. The room is filled with the scent of perfume; flowers are everywhere, lace pillows rest on the bed along with a floral coverlet, and pictures and china are on the shelves.

When she's not working, she's shopping at a nearby mall or getting her nails decorated. If she gets some mud or something else God-awful on her clothes or breaks a white-tipped sparkly nail, that just comes with the job and she gets over it. "I'm used to it," she said.

But Quinonez had an unexpected ex-

Bertha Quinonez' recent health-care costs were covered by the Backstretch Employee Service Team

perience this past summer when she had a lump removed from her throat area at Saratoga Hospital and missed two weeks of work. As often happens, the painful experience had a silver lining because her daughter, Gabriela Quinonez, 35, whom she hadn't seen in several years, came from Mexico to help her mother. They shared Quinonez' double bed in the women's dorm on the backstretch of the Oklahoma track and spent the days watching her flat screen television, reading, and talking. Quinonez kept on top of things even though she wasn't at the stable. "That's my boss," she said of Justenuffhumor's win in the Bernard Baruch (gr. IIT) for McLaughlin's barn.

Two weeks after she had arrived, Gabrielle, as attractive and stylish as her mother, was back home and, a week later, Quinonez, a filmy red, pink, and white striped



Bertha Quinonez

scarf covering the scars from her surgery, returned to work, stripping bandages in the pouring rain, her bright strawberry blonde hair held by a black embossed clip and hanging down her back. Quinonez, who is separated from her husband, will stay in Saratoga until the barns close in mid-November, when she'll return to Florida,

where two of her four grown children also live. But that state has sad memories for her. Four years ago Quinonez' boyfriend, also a backstretch worker, was killed near Payson Park when he was run over by a car. Since then she only goes back to Payson Park if she has no other choice for work. She hopes to retire to Florida in five years on a backstretch pension, if one is available. But she knows she'll miss the horses very much.

Quinonez' recent health-care costs were covered by the Backstretch Employee Service Team, which runs medical clinics at Saratoga and Belmont and, like other humanitarian organizations, is dependent on volunteers, contributions, and racetrack subsidies. Although employed by the trainers, workers and their living conditions have garnered more attention recently from the racetracks where they work. Backstretch conditions have increasingly been the target of investigations by federal and state organizations that have brought vast changes, including day care centers for workers' children, new dorms, retirement plans, language and computer labs, assistance with securing work visas (they vary from six months to several years), lending libraries, and other amenities at tracks throughout the nation. New dorms at Saratoga are among the proposals for VLT revenue, when it comes through. VLT revenue helped underwrite a dental plan for Indiana backstretch workers and, in Kentucky, state law requires that revenue from all uncashed tickets (last year that amounted to \$2.2 million) be turned over to the Kentucky Racing, Health and Welfare Fund, which helps cover medical costs and provides services to those in need.

Sometimes, small gestures that don't take a ton of money serve workers well as an appreciation for their back-breaking work. Each summer, for example, Williams and his crew grow a vegetable garden behind the dormitory next to Levine's stable. In the past, tomatoes, squash, peppers, and melons have flourished in the small patch of ground. This year, however, because of a chilly spring and an erratic summer, the garden, like the horses in Levine's stable, was slow in coming around. But as the meet wound down, small red tomatoes and long green peppers began to appear on the vines for the workers to make salsa as they prepared for summer's end. The vegetables are annuals; they won't reappear next spring without the care and feeding of those who tend the garden. But the fruits of their labor, whether horses or chili peppers, will surely return when the snow has melted and the smell of spring flowers once again fills the air. 🍷