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Inexperienced jockeys are a danger

Tighter rules are being sought

By Jennie Rees • jrees@courier-journal.com • April 26, 2010

Ask a group of jockeys about their concerns on the racetrack, and most will agree on at least one worry: bad jockeys.

It has become too easy to get a jockey's license, according to those interviewed for this story, who argue that many of today's young riders do not have sufficient skills and expertise and, as a result, can create hazards for themselves, other jockeys and the horses they're riding.

"It is my opinion that I am deaf in one ear now because a rider who ran over me wasn't ready to ride yet," said Hall of Famer Kent Desormeaux, referring to a 1992 race in which a trailing horse kicked him in the head after he'd fallen near the finish line.

Like most rules of thoroughbred racing, a sport that has no national governing body, the requirements for jockeys vary from state to state.

The Jockeys' Guild, the trade association of U.S. riders, argues that jockeys should meet tougher requirements before being licensed. It also has urged states to implement a model regulation approved by the Association of Racing

Commissioners International in December 2008.

The model requires applicants to prove their competence and riding ability to the satisfaction of racetrack stewards, along with recommendations from the track's starter, head outrider and designated representatives of jockeys and horsemen. Even those standards are short of what jockeys once faced before being allowed to ride.

Jockey Richard Migliore, winner of almost 4,500 races in a 30-year career, recalled that, among other things, he had to spend weeks watching races with various racing officials before being OK'd to ride by the track stewards — the racing officials who oversee everything from the integrity and safety of the races to the licensing of participants.

Decades ago, new jockeys were under contract to a trainer, serving in some instances as almost an indentured servant but learning all the intricacies of horsemanship. Even when contracts faded away, there was an unwritten policy that a would-be jockey first must learn the sport from the bottom up, including caring for horses and working as their exercise riders.

LOWER EXPECTATIONS

Demand for jockeys changed interpretations

It's not so much that the language of regulations

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has changed, but how they've been interpreted. Terry Meyocks, the Jockeys' Guild national manager, said that as racing expanded nationally in the 1970s and '80s and more jockeys were needed, stewards seemed to lower the minimum expectations.

"Now it's 'Oh, he's light enough. We'll name him on (a horse to ride)," Migliore said. "... I'd say the vast majority aren't working with horses from a ground-level position. I just wish the stewards at a lot of racetracks would get control of it."

Two-time Kentucky Derby winner Chris McCarron, a Hall of Fame rider who founded the North American Racing Academy in Lexington in 2006, said he'd like to see states require more formal testing — written and physical — before granting a jockey license.

"I'm not suggesting they'd have to come to our school" to meet the requirement, McCarron said. "But I believe it's in everybody's best interest to have some sort of test in place to demonstrate competence."

Desormeaux agreed, suggesting a written test, as is required in Canada, along with a physical test in part demonstrating the jockey can "run at full speed, jump in the air and do a tumble roll. It's the first way to save your life if you're involved with a horse that goes down."

The issue is not just with young riders. The last jockey to die as a result of injuries suffered in a thoroughbred race was 58-year-old Mark Pace, last fall Oklahoma's tiny Blue Ribbon Downs.

Pace had been licensed as an exercise rider in Texas, and the Blue Ribbon starter and outriders had no objection to granting him a jockey's license. But the race in which he died was only his second documented mount at a recognized thoroughbred racetrack.

Pace appeared to get into a struggle with his mount, losing his balance and hitting the back of his head on the steel-pipe rail.

"I don't know that we did anything wrong, but I think we can do it better," said Oklahoma Horse Racing Commission executive director Tino Rieger. "Do a little more research to make sure somebody is qualified."

While part of a jockey's job is to make it more difficult for another horse to win, thereby enhancing his own chances, Migliore said a good rider won't make reckless decisions.

"But when it's somebody who doesn't know what they're doing or doesn't understand the repercussions, you have to ride your race around them," he said. "... When you've got somebody who is running into a (dangerous) spot and you're stuck in behind him ... now you're not riding to win, you're riding not to fall over the top of him."

Gary Stevens, a three-time Kentucky Derby winner and retired Hall of Fame jockey, said he quit riding lower-level races "because I knew what type of horse they were going to draw and what type jockey they were going to draw; and frankly, you take enough chances out there, and I didn't want to be a victim of somebody else's bad mistake."

Hall of Fame trainer Richard Mandella also said

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more should be done to ensure that penalties for dangerous riding are enforced. Some jockeys routinely appeal suspensions, postponing sanctions until a more convenient time.

STEWARDS QUESTIONED

Lack of experience

is cited by some

Some argue there is a related problem: stewards who don't have the background or experience to recognize potentially unsafe situations. Stevens and Desormeaux said that if the stewards at a track do not include a respected former jockey, one should be added.

"There are very few who can tear a film apart like riders who have ridden for a number of years," Stevens said.

Some stewards already are sending messages through lengthy suspensions.

When two jockeys got into a fight that included trading punches and one slashing the other with his whip in the midst of a \$7,500 claiming race Jan. 8 at Philadelphia Park, one rider was suspended for 200 days, the other for 90.

Last month, the Aqueduct stewards suspended the track's leading apprentice for 30 days for "gross careless riding" after he forced another horse and rider into the rail.

The Kentucky Horse Racing Commission last year implemented a policy that allows it to double a suspension if it feels an appeal is frivolous. (This applies to everyone, not just jockeys.)

California last year hired former jockey Luis Jauregui to be its "safety" steward, the first of its kind in the country. California also gives new exercise riders only provisional licenses until they complete a program, including a written test, to establish competence.

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Former jockey and owner of the North American Racing Academy Chris McCarron demonstrates how little of the jockey actual touches the horse during a race. (By Scott Utterback, The Courier-Journal) Apr. 14, 2010

Kentucky Requirements

To become a jockey in Kentucky:

You must be at least 16 years old and have worked at

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least one year with a racing stable.

A licensed trainer must certify in writing to the stewards that you have demonstrated sufficient horsemanship, based on your "control of the animal while mounting, riding and dismounting in a race and non-race conditions."

The starter must approve you as capable of starting a horse properly from the gate.

The stewards must determine that you can "ride in a race without jeopardizing the safety of horses or other jockeys."

If the above conditions are met, you may ride in three races on a probationary basis before applying for an apprentice license. However, stewards may suggest you need to further work on skills before allowing the move to an apprentice license. (Apprenticeships last at least one year and can be for more than two years, depending on how many races a jockey wins, before he or she becomes a full-fledged rider.)

If asked, you must provide a medical affidavit that you are physically and mentally capable of being a jockey.

In addition to what is specified in the Kentucky rules, the model rule approved by the Association of Racing Commissioners International would require recommendations from the head outrider and designated representatives of the jockeys and horsemen at the track before an applicant could pursue an apprentice license. It also would raise the minimum age to 18.

Demonstration of an applicant's ability would include:

Breaking with a horse in the company of another horse from the starting gate.

Working a horse in company around a turn and down the stretch.

Switching the riding crop from one hand to the other while maintaining control of the horse in a stretch drive.

Causing a horse to switch leads (the foreleg that goes first in each stride, with horses typically going from the left "lead" to their right coming out of a turn).

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