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A roller coaster ride for Diaz

It's been a helluva year - actually, closer to two years - for Stephanie Diaz.

Racing industry watchers may recall a news item involving freelance journalist Diaz and New York trainer Nick Zito that appeared in trade journals around the time of the 1992 Belmont Stakes. Diaz, as part of a national magazine assignment that was intended to produce a behind-the-scenes diary of life in a major racing stable, had been spending long days on the backstretch with Zito and his crew.

As Diaz tells it, one afternoon during a lull on the shedrow she decided to ask Zito what he might recommend as a christening gift for her godchild. She began by inquiring: "Your kids are baptized, right?" His response, she says, was to haul off and slug her in the mouth with a rolled-up program, splitting her lip.

Astonished and frightened,

Diaz ran off. With fresh blood still spattered on her face and shirt, she told several people in the Belmont

Park press box what had happened, then filed a report with the Nassau County police before heading to the hospital for stitches.

When the only known witness to the incident - one of Zito's grooms - told authorities that Zito had actually hit a fence and not Diaz, local police refused to investigate any further. Outraged, Diaz filed a \$12 million civil suit in Nassau County Supreme Court accusing Zito of assault, battery and affliction of emotional distress. But over the ensuing months, when her attorney failed to pursue outside testimony for a solid trial presentation, an exasperated Diaz simply

ANNE
LANG



dropped the whole issue.

"Nick and I both know the truth of what happened, and it's a powerful

thing to know you're right," Diaz says now. But that philosophy was slow to develop after months of being ostracized by fellow writers and industry insiders for going public with her story. Only after she began to receive other racing feature assignments did Diaz realize it might be possible to resume her professional life with at least some measure of self-esteem.

One of those assignments was a piece for *Backstretch* magazine on Sham who, although an exceptional racehorse in his own right, will forever be memorialized on quiz cards as the horse who couldn't quite catch Secretariat. The topic of Sham was close to

Diaz's heart, as she'd spent countless hours visiting the horse in his Kentucky paddock years ago. And her eloquence in recounting the story of his life impressed a distinguished panel of judges enough that she recently was awarded the 1993 Eclipse Award for outstanding magazine writing.

So while Diaz may have lost the battle, she arguably has won the war. Because while some people always may refute her Zito story, they can't take this achievement away from her, and they can't claim she didn't earn it.

As for Diaz, if she had the whole incident at Belmont to relive, would she handle it any differently? Her answer is immediate.

"Yeah, I'd hit him back. Much harder. And I'd leave it at that."

□ Anne Lang is the Texas breeding correspondent for Daily Racing Form.