

DOWN SOUTH ON TOP

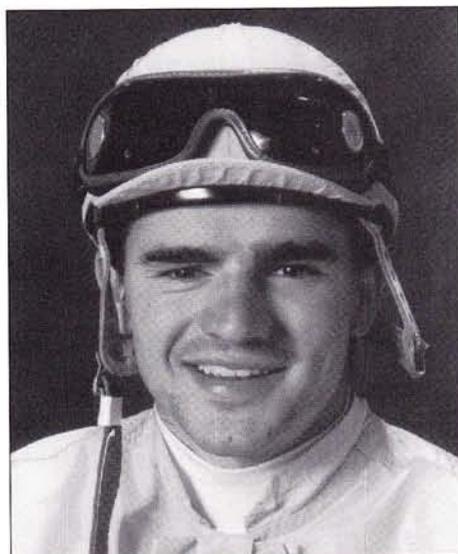
*Louisiana-born jockeys walk among giants
in this year's national reinsmen statistics*

By Anne Lang

Hotter than a splash of Triple-X Tabasco on a sizzling plate of crawfish Creole, native Louisiana jockeys are flaming with success this season. And El Nino's got nothin' to do with it.

At press time, the illustrious group was led (in earnings) by Kent Desormeaux, the current poster child of Bayou-bred jockeys who scored big-time on Real Quiet in the first two legs of the 1998 Triple Crown — only to lose the Belmont by an agonizing nose to Victory Gallop pilot Gary Stevens. But what Desormeaux's charisma and enthusiasm did in the initial two Classics to boost racing's public image is worth far more than any bonus offered by major credit-card race sponsors.

"Talk about a dream come true!" exclaimed Desormeaux between races at Hollywood Park, about a month after the Triple Crown was over. "Anything and everything I've ever done in my life was to get



Kent Desormeaux



Shane Sellers

to that day when I won the Kentucky Derby. If they could bottle the feeling of being in front at the wire of the greatest race on Earth, there'd no longer be any need for drugs; maybe even no need for sex! It's an amazing feeling, I'll tell you that."

Through the first week of July, 28-year-old Desormeaux was ranked third nationally by season earnings (more than \$8.5 million, including 17 graded stakes wins, from a lifetime of nearly \$113 million). Not one to rest on his laurels, however, Desormeaux declared: "Well, number three simply puts me closer in touch with number one. I am definitely striving for a fourth Eclipse Award this year."

Contributing to that goal will be the riding title Desormeaux won (for the fourth time) this year at Santa Anita, which along with the not-yet-contested Del Mar crown are honors that "are probably the most proud-bear-

BENOIT & ASSOC.

FULL STRIDE PHOTO © 98

ing ones for the jockey colony out here. It certainly stamps a statement on what you're doing, and it's very important to me."

Also important to Desormeaux are his Louisiana roots, to which he remains fiercely loyal.

"My mother's the glue for that," explained Desormeaux, a native of Maurice. "She's always made sure that I remember where I come from in every aspect. One thing she's said is to never, ever, be embarrassed by the way I talk; that it doesn't mean ignorance in any way. It's simply the way we speak."

Speaking summarily on the whole Triple Crown experience, "it definitely changed my life," Desormeaux stated. "I feel like if I had to, I could hang my saddle up for good tonight and hold my head high for the rest of my life."

Holding his head high as well this summer is Erath native Shane Sellers, 31, who as of early July was ranked fifth nationally in season earnings (more than \$6.1 million) and seventh by number of wins (155). The names of two of the many stakes horses he's won on this year — U Can Do It and Yes It's True — are fitting phrases for Sellers' accomplishments, which included back-to-back wins in the Louisiana and Florida Derbies, and a prestigious triumph in the second annual NTRA All-Star Jockey Championships on



Robbie Albarado



Eddie Delahoussaye



Mark Guidry

June 19 at Lone Star Park.

The latter event featured \$100,000 in prize money for four races in which a dozen jockeys — most of whom are world-class caliber — competed aboard evenly-matched horses, with wagers placed on the riders instead of their mounts. Besides Sellers (who won all but one of the races), the lineup included Louisiana natives Eddie Delahoussaye, Desormeaux, and leading Lone Star rider Marlon St. Julien. Rounding out the roster was second-place finisher Julie Krone; also Jerry Bailey, Gary Stevens, Pat Day, Chris McCarron, Laffit Pincay, Mike Smith and Sandy Hawley.

In an emotional statement after the final race, Sellers dedicated the victory to yet another currently "hot" Louisiana-born jockey, Robbie Albarado — who'd been badly hurt in a spill at Churchill Downs that week.

"Robbie's one of my best friends," Sellers told the Texas crowd. "[He's] my favorite to watch, and I think he's the future of horse racing. He'll be here some day. I didn't tell anyone [ahead of time], but I dedicate this jockey championship to Robbie, and I'm riding for him."

The gesture was a magnanimous tribute to the fast-rising Albarado, who's since recovered from the Churchill mishap and is now riding at Saratoga. (He returned to racing on July 4 at Thistledown, with a six-length win in the \$100,000

SUZIE PICOU OLDHAM

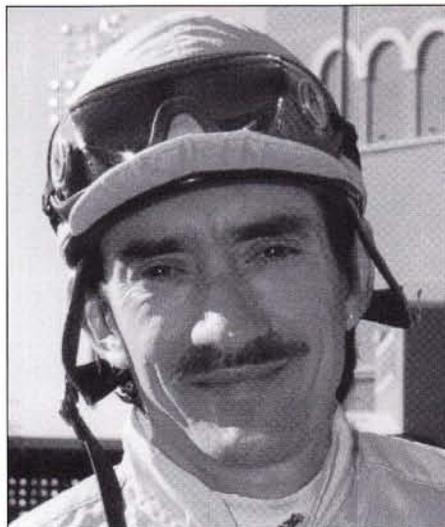
FULL STRIDE PHOTO © 98

PHOTO COURTESY OF SPORTSMAN'S PARK

Cleveland Gold Cup.) A product of Lafayette, the 24-year-old Albarado was ranked fourth nationally in early July by number of current-season wins (160), and 7th by earnings (more than \$5.2 million). His lifetime earnings have already galloped past the \$25 million mark, with no sign of slowing down.

Some of Albarado's most stunning victories so far this season have been aboard the Albert Stall Jr. trainee Joyeux Dancer, on whom Albarado won his first Grade 1 outing. That the milestone occurred in a race run just prior to the Kentucky Derby at Churchill (the \$250,000 Early Times Turf Classic) likely did little to diminish Albarado's elation. The pair's winning margins this season have been sizeable: 3-1/4 lengths in the Early Times, 7-1/2 lengths in the \$500,000 Col. E.R. Bradley Stakes, six lengths in the Grade 3, \$350,000 Explosive Bid Stakes, and 5-1/2 lengths in the \$125,000 Breeders' Cup Stakes. (The last three all took place on familiar home soil at Fair Grounds, where Albarado garnered the leading rider title.) And elite trainers such as Bill Mott have begun to offer Albarado rides on some of their most prized Thoroughbreds.

The next prominent Louisianan in the national jockey rankings is Eddie Delahoussaye, 46, whose mounts have bankrolled more



Ronald Ardoin

FULL STRIDE PHOTO © 98



Calvin Borel

© MATT GOINS



Marlon St. Julien

FULL STRIDE PHOTO © 98

than \$3.3 million so far this year (from a lifetime of nearly \$167 million). The Hall of Fame jockey — who has logged wins in two Kentucky Derbies, one Preakness, two Belmonts and seven Breeders' Cup races — was born and raised in New Iberia, where (like so many Louisianan jockeys) he began competing at the tender age of 10 aboard mixed breeds and Quarter Horses at the local bush tracks.

Delahoussaye said his most memorable win this year to date was the Grade 1, \$400,000 San Juan Capistrano Stakes at Santa Anita, "because I won it two years in a row. And it's always special when you win a big race like that."

As for the trainers Delahoussaye most enjoys working with right now, "Ron McAnally's put me on a lot of winners, but actually, all the trainers I ride for are special. In this business, some trainers will start to back off you a bit as you start to get older, even though you have the experience. I don't know why they do it, but I've seen it happen to a lot of other jockeys. So I think all my trainers right now are outstanding."

Delahoussaye is also quick to praise his home-state peers. "Shane Sellers, he's a young man who's doing really good; Desormeaux's having a good year; then there's (Calvin) Borel and Albarado..."

"Hey, there've been a lot of top riders who've come out of

Louisiana over the years," Delahoussaye continued. "It's like a jockey production company! Craig Perret, Ray Broussard, Ron Ardoin....And Ardoin's never left, you know? He probably would have done as well as anybody else if he'd left the state, but that's the thing with a lot of the Cajun riders — they don't want to leave home! There are a bunch of talented jockeys there who will never get a chance to show their true abilities, because they don't want to leave."

Someone who manages to race often at home as well as out of state is Lafayette native Mark Guidry, 41, who (as of July 7) was ranked 12th nationally with 141 wins in 1998. One of Guidry's more notable coups to date this year was a 2-1/2-length win in the Diplomat Way Handicap at Fair Grounds, aboard Precocity. Guidry's mounts have earned more than \$3.2 million so far this season.

Not far behind Guidry in the national rankings is Ron Ardoin, 45, a native of Carencro whose horses have won nearly \$2.4 million in 1998. Ardoin's most prominent current-year wins (from 125 as of early July) included the \$125,000 Davona Dale Stakes, the \$100,000 Tiffany Lass Stakes (both on Cool Dixie at Fair Grounds) and the \$50,000 Bob Jackson Memorial Stakes at Lone Star Park — a track that's obviously given him reason to at least occasionally leave his home state, contrary to Delahoussaye's good-natured remarks.

No mention of currently successful native Louisiana jockeys can be made without including Calvin Borel, who had a particularly rewarding season this year at Oaklawn — where he was runner-up in the final jockey standings. Borel's wins at the Hot Springs oval included the Essex Handicap and Southwest Stakes (both Grade 3 events), as well as the Martha Washington Stakes. At Churchill Downs, Borel booted home winners in the Grade 3 La Troienne Stakes and the \$250,000-added Jefferson Cup Stakes. Borel's 1998 earnings at press time were



Lonnie Meche

FULL STRIDE PHOTO © 98

more than \$3.3 million, with 116 wins.

As for young Louisiana-born jockeys who are on a steady rise, industry analysts have pointed to Marlon St. Julien and Lonnie Meche. St. Julien was the winning pilot in the \$200,000 Lone Star Handicap, the \$100,000 Mesquite Mile Breeders' Cup Stakes (by an impressive 6-3/4 lengths on Remember Ike) and the Grapevine Stakes, all at Lone Star. A 26-year-old native of

Lafayette, St. Julien has racked up nearly \$2.2 million in season earnings and ridden more than 100 winners.

Meche, 23 (who hails from Rayne), is riding high on the Southwest circuit with nearly \$1 million in 1998 earnings and more than 50 winners under his belt. Previously, Meche was perhaps best known for riding multiple-graded stakes winner Blushing K.D. throughout her career.

In an effort to define what has made jockeys from Louisiana such a consistent force for countless decades, Eddie Delahoussaye stated: "Generally, Cajuns are pretty tough. They get something set in their minds, and it'll take some convincing to get them to think or act otherwise. Sometimes you'll just never convince 'em, either. But that toughness is what makes winners."

Delahoussaye might well have been speaking for all similarly-bred reinsmen when he added: "I love the people of Louisiana; I love my family. They're all still there, and I try to go back and stay for a few weeks every year. I always enjoy going back home. Louisianans are hospitable, hard-working folks. It's pretty hard not to like 'em."

Texas-based freelancer Anne Lang has contributed to numerous national equine periodicals, including Daily Racing Form, The Blood-Horse, Thoroughbred Times, Horseman's Journal, The Backstretch, Spur and Equus. She is a former editor of Texas Thoroughbred Magazine.