

by Anne Lang

All-Stars Shine At Lone Star

The North Texas racetrack played proud host to the inaugural National All-Star Jockey Championship

The most elite echelon of athletes representing America's broad cross-section of professional sports generally are granted super-star status by society, sometimes to the point where the ultimate in prima-donna behavior is forgiven and even expected. Entourages, limousines and bodyguards are frequent accoutrements of the game, and are often accompanied by a prescribed lofty attitude that's evident among players who blithely saunter right past huddles of adoring school-children seeking autographs; athletes who eschew training camp requirements, income tax laws and/or family commitments; and the few over-the-toppers who commit extreme acts such as biting off part of an opponent's ear.

Enter the American racehorse jockey, in a class all by him/herself. Devoted racing fans and industry insiders have long been aware — and appreciative — of the arguable claim that race-riding is the most difficult and dangerous sport of all. It's therefore ironic that even the best of the best jockeys in any given year lack glamorous lifestyles or inflated egos. And while a good number of top jocks manage to bankroll a fairly sizeable salary, their pay doesn't even come close to that of the top players in the major leagues of mainstream sports. Lucrative product endorsements? With the rare (and short-lived) exception of, say, nasal breathing strips, the jockey-as-pitchman remains an elusive concept.



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Presumably, then, the vast majority of jockeys do what they do out of sheer passion for the sport. Never mind the enormously high element of risk, the nagging injuries, the constant weight battle, the nomadic way of life, the erratic schedule, the cruel jeers of losing bettors, the fickleness of trainers. They're doing what they love. Thus in the spirit of such awesome dedication to racing was created the National All-Star Jockey Championship, the first-ever horse-race competition specifically featuring a sampling of America's leading Thoroughbred jockeys.

The invitational event took place on June 27, bringing together seven Hall of Fame riders and five other jockey standouts to compete in a four-race, \$100,000 series on a regular Friday evening card at Lone Star Park at Grand Prairie. Gary Stevens was the overall winner, adding to the list of amazing feats he'd already accomplished in 1997 (including his induction into the National Racing Museum's prestigious Hall of Fame; winning the first two legs of this year's Triple

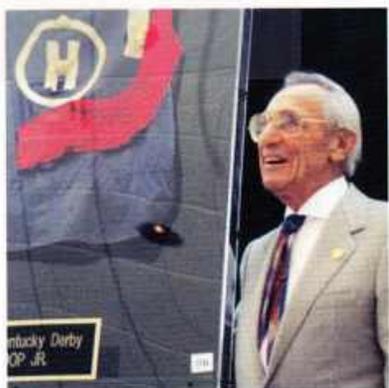
Crown aboard Silver Charm; and, at press time, enjoying status as the nation's second leading rider, whose mounts had earned nearly \$7 million since January.) Although he won not a single race in the All-Star series, the 14 points Stevens accrued from a second and two thirds garnered him the eventual top spot and \$25,000 in prize money.

Runner-up Chris McCarron earned 12 points and \$15,000 from a win and a 4th-place finish. But according to the 12 jockeys who participated, a far greater reward than the prize money was the honor and fun of taking part in such a special event, in which riding assignments were carefully issued to ensure that all riders would compete on an equally rotating variety of horses rated by past performances.

"It was an exciting and highly competitive night," Stevens declared from the winner's circle after the final race. "We had a lot of fun, but the pressure was definitely there, too. Lone Star did a fantastic job of closely matching horses for these fields." (Dramatically tight finishes were recorded in all four of the varying-distance races.) Stevens congratulated McCarron, referring to his colleague — who just weeks before had narrowly outridden him in the Belmont Stakes — as "a class act. And there are 10 other class acts here tonight, too. I was just fortunate enough to ride four horses who all gave 100 percent.

"My number-one priority is to get fans back to this sport," Stevens continued. "And if that was the goal here tonight, I'd say it was met. (About 15,200 people, a record Friday crowd for Lone Star, showed up for the jockey championship.) I really felt, for the first time ever, that I had a fan base rooting for me. I'll definitely be here next year. And as current president of the Jockeys' Guild, I feel authorized to say that Lone Star will have number-one priority in hosting this event."

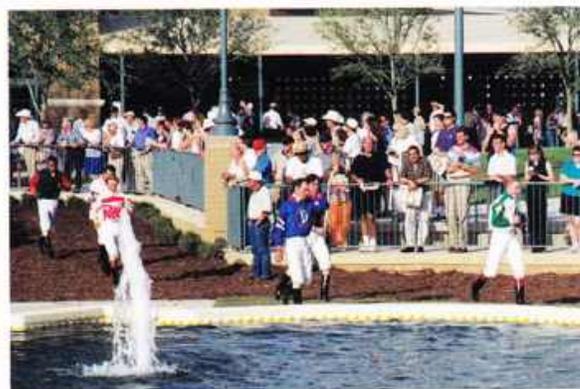
The 3rd-12th-place finishers in



order of final standings were Mike Smith, current national leading rider Jerry Bailey, and Pat Day (each of whom won one race); followed by Lone Star leading rider Ronald Ardoin, Eddie Delahoussaye, Kent Desormeaux, Lone Star second-leading rider Marlon St. Julien, Shane Sellers, Laffit Pincay Jr. and Jorge Velasquez. All but Smith, Desormeaux, Sellers, Ardoin and St. Julien are Hall of Famers. Collectively, as of late June, the 12 athletes had won more than \$1.5 billion in purses, 58,000 races, 35 Triple Crown stakes, 48 Breeders' Cup races and 14 Eclipse Awards.

All day, the jockeys basked in the unaccustomed glow of the spotlight. They chatted amiably with fans during well-attended autograph sessions, postured with comic energy in front of the stands during opening introductions, threw goggles from the winner's circle to a churning sea of eager hands, and verbally jabbed one another with friendly challenges before the races — which were called using the jockeys' names, rather than the names of the horses.

Each rider received at least \$5,000 in prize money. Also, \$60,000 was raised to benefit the Jockeys' Guild Inc. fund for disabled jockeys — derived from one percent of the four-race handle, individual jockey sponsorships, autograph-session donations and proceeds from a luncheon charity auction. At the latter function, held in honor of 81-year-old retired jockey legend Eddie Arcaro, a select audience of



bidders vied for items such as the silks Arcaro wore in his winning ride aboard Hoop Jr. in the 1945 Kentucky Derby. The silks were the auction's sale-topper, bought for \$9,000 by TTBA member Leland Cook of Corsicana.

Arcaro proved to be a charismatic luncheon speaker as he reminisced about riding "some of the best racehorses of the century," including Citation, Whirlaway and Swaps. Describing what it was like to ride in adverse weather without the benefit of the modern-day goggles, Arcaro quipped: "At least we were all in the same boat, coming back blind from about half of the races. My strategy was to keep my eyes shut until we turned for home, then I'd pull my horse out into the center of the track and hope for the best. Evidently, that worked more often than not!"

The winner of 16 Triple Crown races admitted that "my juices still start flowing when I hear the call to the post." Now a resident of Florida, Arcaro frequents the racetracks in that state, although he describes himself

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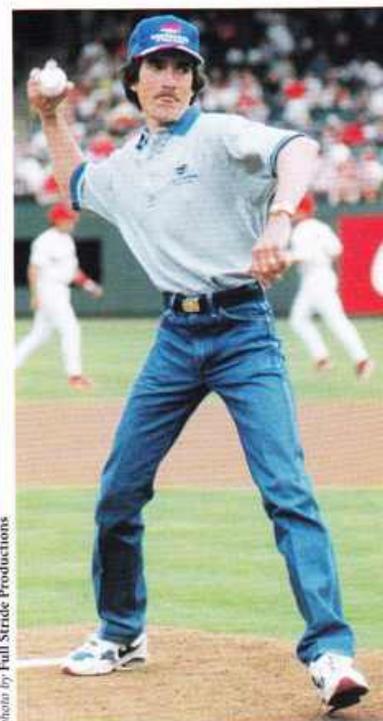
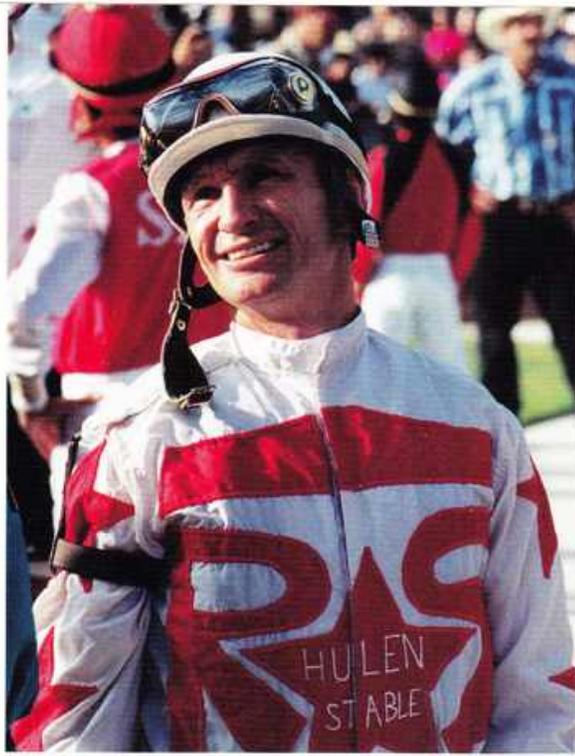


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as "a terrible handicapper!" Arcaro served on the panel of industry experts that selected which jockeys to invite to the inaugural All-Star event. Fellow panelists were Chick Lang, a prominent national racing consultant; Larry Craft, director of racing for Lone Star; Pohla Smith, president of the National Turf Writers' Association; and Julie Sarno, president of the Turf Publicists of America.

Overall, the All-Star series was "sensational," said John Giovanni, who was in attendance as national manager of the Jockeys' Guild Inc. "The jockeys loved it and had a great time. So did the fans, apparently. It was amazing to watch them scrambling for those goggles as if they were hundred-dollar bills. Lone Star officials did a tremendous job of putting this all together, and there's no question that it should be an annual event."

Reinforcing Giovanni's comments was McCarron, who — obviously overcome by the moment — exclaimed that "this day was even more fun than winning the Kentucky Derby on Alysheba!" Pat Day summarized the event by first commending Lone Star's management team for putting on a flawless show. "I'm proud to be a part of all this," he emphatically added. "God bless Texas. It's wonderful to be riding here." 🐾

Anne Lang is a regular contributor to **Daily Racing Form**, **Spur Magazine**, **Horse & Rider** and other national publications. She was editor of **Texas Thoroughbred** from 1982-89.