

Courtney Hernandez represents female side of family of jockeys



Advocate staff photo by **BRYAN TUCK**

Courtney Hernandez comes from a family of jockeys, including two of her brothers and her father.

By Anne Lang

Special to The Advocate

Sunday, August 17, 2014 • theacadianaadvocate.com • The Advocate

Most people would be pretty upset if their colleagues ganged up to throw bucketfuls of icy water on them, topped by a bombardment of baby powder. But for jockey Courtney Hernandez, a shower of the finest Champagne would not have felt any sweeter.

Hernandez, 20, was the target of the gooey assault in March at Delta Downs Racetrack in Vinton, just minutes after scoring the first win of her thoroughbred racing career. The treatment, dished out by her fellow jockeys, is a time-honored

national tradition for riders making their winner's circle debut.

"It took me forever to wash that mess out of my hair," Hernandez said with a laugh as she relaxed in the women's locker room one recent afternoon at Evangeline Downs.

It didn't matter to Hernandez that her pivotal race at Delta was declared a two-horse dead heat at the wire. It still counted as a win — coming just three months after she'd acquired her jockey's license. Previously, she'd been winless in 13 starts.

"It was pretty nice because I'd been working so hard," Hernandez said. "And it was a really good feeling because my dad and my brother were there."

Having two of her family members on hand that day was particularly meaningful because Hernandez comes from a large racing-oriented clan. Her brothers Colby, 25, and Brian Jr., 28, are jockeys. So was her father, Brian Sr., 49, before he retired from race riding earlier this year. And Hernandez's grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather campaigned horses at Louisiana tracks.

For Hernandez, a lifelong Lafayette resident, there was never a time when she and her siblings weren't immersed in the equine world.

"My grandpa had some riding horses on his farm," she said, "and we had a Shetland pony named Trigger that we rode all the time when we were kids. My dad worked for (trainer) Dale Angelle, and my brothers and I would help him train. So my dad started me out with horses on the farm, and after awhile, I developed a feel for them.

"Dad never pushed me to become a jockey, but he and my mom (Stephanie) always supported my doing what makes me the happiest."

Hernandez was 13 when she began developing her first racehorse.

"My grandfather had a baby that I would work with and ride," Hernandez said. "Eventually, my dad took her and me with him to the training track, and that's how I got started galloping horses."

When she was 16, Hernandez was granted an exercise rider license, which allowed her to gallop horses in the mornings at the Opelousas track. Three years later, she earned her jockey's license.

But Hernandez's teen years weren't solely about horses. She played softball at Lafayette High School and danced for 15 years at a local studio. Hernandez and her brothers also took their schoolwork seriously.

“My mom always told us she’d support our riding as long as we graduated from high school,” Hernandez said. “She was a little less happy about me being in racing since I’m a girl, but she always knew this was what I really wanted to do.”

Hernandez’s fraternal twin, Corey, pursued a different form of horsepower — the type that’s embedded under car hoods at the Lafayette body shop where he works.

“He’s about 2 feet taller than me,” said the 4-foot-2 Hernandez, “and a totally different person. He’s the only one of us who isn’t involved with horses.”

Brian Sr. still rides, just no longer as a jockey. He conditions a few horses for his father and gallops for trainer Keith Bourgeois. “He’s also a valet for Colby and me, so he stays really busy,” Hernandez said.

Brian Jr. is a multiple-graded stakes-winning jockey (with 12-year career earnings of more than \$40 million) who lives in Kentucky and primarily races in that state. He’s best known for his win in the 2012 Breeders’ Cup Classic and his 2004 Eclipse Award for Outstanding Apprentice Jockey.

Colby is a multiple stakes-winning jockey with earnings of more than \$20 million during nine years. He lives in Carencro and races mostly in Louisiana.

At various times, Brian Sr. rode against each of his sons, and although he never raced against his daughter (who in less than two years has logged 22 wins and nearly \$300,000 in earnings on Louisiana tracks), Hernandez and Colby frequently find themselves in the same starting gate.

“Colby and I are really close,” Hernandez said, “because we’re at the same track all the time. He can actually show me in the mornings how to relax a certain horse or suggest something that I need to fix.

“He tells me to ride with confidence, even if I’m on a horse that’s going off at 100-1. But if Colby and I are riding in the same race, he doesn’t help me out at all because he’s very competitive.”

Hernandez was looking forward to the day when she would win a race in which her brother was racing. Her wish came true on July 19 in an allowance race where she led the pack from wire to wire, with Colby finishing in third.

“It was pretty neat because I finally showed him that I could do it,” Hernandez said.

Since then, Hernandez has won five more races that included Colby in the field, but he remains at the top of Evangeline jockey standings. (Hernandez is ranked 10th in the meet that ends on Aug. 30.)

Colby said he's seen an increase in his sister's skills.

"She's learning a lot, and she's riding some really smart races," he said. "Riding just comes naturally to her. Everybody around the racetrack helps her, and everybody loves her."

Hernandez credits brother Brian and her father for their ongoing advice and encouragement as well. And she appreciates the general support of other Louisiana jockeys, almost all of whom are male.

"All the boys take care of me," Hernandez said. "We're like family."

However, the 95-pound Hernandez admits that there's no special treatment for her during races, where jockeys aggressively jostle for position and often shout curses at one another. But she feels it means that they regard her as just another jockey, not as a female.

"And that's what I prefer," she said.

Hernandez doesn't deny that hers is an extremely high-risk profession, but that doesn't faze her. "Nothing really scares me," she said with a shrug.

Her mettle was tested at Evangeline on July 5, the occasion of her first stakes race — a \$100,000 futurity for juvenile fillies.

"My horse flipped over in the starting gate, and my leg was pinned against the side," Hernandez said. "I ended up going to the hospital, and I was pretty bruised up for awhile."

That wasn't Hernandez's first injury, either. "Last April, the horse I was riding reared up in the post parade, and her neck smacked me in the face," she said. "It broke my cheekbone and gave me a black eye that lasted two months."

The episode also triggered a temporary case of mild amnesia. But the plucky Hernandez rode the same horse the very next day.

On the superstitious side, Hernandez's unwavering tenacity is bolstered in part by a pair of tiny good-luck rings (a gift from a young fan) that she wears on a delicate gold necklace. One ring says "believe" and the other says "dream."

Above all, Hernandez is inspired by the loving support of her kinfolk.

"The most rewarding part of this job is knowing that my dad, my brothers and my whole family are proud of me," she said.