

# As the arrival of her first child draws closer, (former) jockey Rosie Napravnik relishes her new role with husband/trainer Joe Sharp



Advocate staff photo by JOHN McCUSKER -- Jockey Rosie Napravnik is taking time off while expecting her first child but still exercises horses at the Fair Grounds for husband/trainer Joe Sharp.

**By Anne Lang**

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Two months after she announced her pregnancy and subsequent racing retirement to the world, nationally renowned jockey Rosie Napravnik was taking a rare break in the Fair Grounds office of her trainer/husband, Joe Sharp.

On Dec. 29 at 10 a.m., Napravnik and Sharp already had been in the stable area for five hours — tending (with staff) to the 28 horses currently under the care of former jockey Sharp. The 30-year-old went out on his own last fall after nine years as an assistant trainer — first for Mike Stidham, then Mike Maker.

Napravnik, 26, now is Sharp's official assistant trainer — a role she has fully embraced.

“It’s great to be able to work alongside Joe,” she said. “I try to be as useful as possible, and I’m learning a lot from him. It took a little while to get with the flow of things, because it’s been a long time since I’ve really been active in the barn. I had to get back in touch with my horsemanship side.”

That side dates to her youth, when she rode in various non-racing equestrian sports.

“It’s all coming back to me,” said Napravnik, dressed on this rainy morning in basic barn wear with a ballcap covering her red locks. “I really enjoy helping to take care of the horses. So much is involved in the process of getting a horse ready for racing, and the stable has grown faster than anyone could have hoped.”

Napravnik issued her stunning revelation in October — in the \$2 million Breeders’ Cup Distaff winner’s circle. She claimed the event aboard her “favorite horse of all time,” Untapable, on whom Napravnik also won the second Kentucky Oaks race of her career. The Distaff was the jockey’s second Breeders’ Cup win; in 2012, she captured the Juvenile on Shanghai Bobby.

The four-time leading Fair Grounds jockey couldn’t have ridden out on a higher note. On the day Napravnik retired (which actually was Nov. 1, the second day of the Breeders’ Cup weekend during which her mount was the runner-up in the \$2 million Juvenile Fillies), she was ranked sixth among North American jockeys with earnings of more than \$13.4 million in 2014.

Napravnik’s career earnings climbed to more than \$71.3 million in less than 10 years. She has broken numerous “only female jockey ever” records, and she has won track champion titles and other honors in a wide range of prestigious categories.

So right now, while Napravnik focuses on the baby’s expected arrival in June, countless racing fans are wondering if and when the popular jockey will return to racing.

The answer: Napravnik just doesn’t know.

“I feel like people think I’m keeping that decision a secret, but I’m really not,” she insisted. “I’m just playing things by ear. I’m really excited about the baby, and I’m having fun with what I’m doing now.

“At this point, I don’t miss being a jockey, but when Untapable starts racing again this year, I’m probably going to wish that I was riding,” she added with a rueful laugh. “But I’m just taking it day by day.”

Most of those days are spent in Sharp’s racing stable, which has done consistently well since its formation. During just four months of racing in 2014, horses from the multiple stakes-placed stable earned nearly \$500,000. Through Sunday, the Sharp-

trained horses' current-year earnings stood at \$172,110.

But Sharp and Napravnik know it's the day-to-day operation, decisions and attention to detail that result in the bigger picture of financial success. And although he already had a skilled and devoted staff in place before Napravnik's retirement, Sharp said he deeply appreciates having his wife on board.

"The thing that makes Rosie an especially big help is the fact that she comes from such a strong horsemanship background," Sharp said. "She's a good horsewoman, not just limited to her riding abilities. So for her, making this transition wasn't that huge, and she's always seen and heard how I do things around the barn.

"Still, Rosie's learned a lot of new things. She jumped right in and is good with the help. For as accomplished as she has been in her own career, when it was time to work with me, she was very good about being a student, an understudy, wanting to learn and not coming in with a chip on her shoulder.

"In a husband-and-wife setting, that would be tough enough — let alone when the wife is nationally renowned, and then she comes here to work for basic wages. But she's made the transition just great, and I communicate with her in the same way I do with any employee. Rosie didn't come in here expecting preferential treatment. When she rode for me in races, it was the same way. And I see a happier Rosie!"

Contributing to that happiness has been the opportunity to gallop several of the Sharp stable's less fractious thoroughbreds in the mornings. But the couple recently agreed to end that part of Napravnik's routine.

"We saw a couple of accidents on the track last week," Sharp explained. "So we said, 'Let's not push our luck.' Rosie will still pony horses for us in the mornings, until she gets to where she doesn't feel physically comfortable doing even that. We're starting to see a (baby) bump, but she's still very active here at the track."

Napravnik is active at home, too, during her limited hours away from the Fair Grounds. The couple owns a house in New Orleans as well as in Louisville, Kentucky, where Sharp's horses race from April to June at Churchill Downs. (In July, the stable moves to New York's Belmont Park and then to Saratoga Race Course in August.)

While many expectant mothers spend months decorating their nursery, Napravnik admitted that making sure all the basics are in place (crib, diapers, clothing) might be the best she can do while she's still working. But she's secure in the knowledge that she can devote much more time to additional details after the birth of the baby (a boy, as she and Sharp have learned), when her role shifts to stay-at-home mom.

"We'll prepare nurseries in both homes," she said, "starting with this one, and then

do the nursery in Louisville after we get there. I know everything will fall into place at the right time.”

As for what to name their baby, Sharp and Napravnik have only begun casual discussions on the topic, since there’s still plenty of time to make a choice.

“We’ll probably change our minds a lot before he’s born,” Napravnik said with a smile.

The couple’s son will find a doting half-sibling in Sharp’s 10-year-old daughter, Aiyana, whose mother is jockey Chamisa Goodwin. Aiyana divides her school year between the homes of both of her parents, and she spends summers with Sharp and Napravnik (with whom she shares a passion for riding in the hunter/jumper realm), so the children will have ample opportunities to bond.

“Aiyana is very excited about being able to help out with this baby,” said Sharp, who will be a willing hands-on partner to Napravnik when it comes to diaper changes and similar tasks, having served as a full-time dad during Aiyana’s early years.

Some of the owners in Sharp’s stable might seem like family members, too.

“We’re very appreciative of all the owners who’ve been supportive of our business and our relationship,” Sharp said. “We have a nice, broad group of owners who have been active in sending us horses, claiming horses and letting us run them where they belong. Those people have really helped us get off to such a great start.”

One such owner is Ken Ramsey, who helped launch Sharp’s stable by sending him 11 horses last fall.

“Joe is off to an outstanding start,” Ramsey said. “He started out winning more than 40 percent of his races, and he’s still winning at a very high percentage. I texted him the other day and said, ‘You’ve got a very promising future. Whatever you’re doing, you’re doing it well.’ Joe has the right work ethic, attitude, background and connections to be a success.”

Napravnik won the 2014 Louisiana Derby and other races on the Ramsey-owned Vicar’s in Trouble, who also was her Kentucky Derby mount. But the small horse drew the dreaded No. 1 post position and was repeatedly slammed into the rail to put him out of contention early in the race.

“It’s my opinion that Rosie will be back after she has one or two children,” Ramsey said. “I don’t think we’ve seen the end of Rosie Napravnik the jockey just yet.”

Sharp and Napravnik have indicated that they’d like to have two children together, and Napravnik said she’s hoping to have the second baby as soon as possible. After

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that, it's anyone's guess as to whether she'll make a comeback.

“Last summer, I said to Joe, ‘If I retire tomorrow, I would be a thousand percent satisfied with my accomplishments,’ ” Napravnik said. “And even after saying that, I won a Breeders’ Cup race on Untapable. So there would be no regrets if I never go back to riding. I don’t feel that there are any opportunities I didn’t get that I should have gotten, or that I didn’t take advantage of.”

Remarkably, the baby’s due date of June 9 is exactly 10 years after the day Napravnik (then 17) scored a win in her very first race, at Pimlico Race Course in Maryland. She marvels at all that has happened since.

“On that day at Pimlico, if you had told me that in 10 more years I would have won two Breeders’ Cup races and two Kentucky Oaks, ridden in the Kentucky Derby three times, be married and have a child on the way, I would have said, ‘There’s no way that life could ever be that good,’ ” Napravnik said.

Luckily, she would have been wrong.