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Napravnik set for homecoming

BY ANNE LANG
Special to The Advocate

The title of Thomas Wolfe's 1940 novel "You Can't Go Home Again" doesn't apply to third-ranked North American jockey Rosie Napravnik. Not this week, anyway.

Although raised in New Jersey, Napravnik, 26, rode many of her early races in Maryland, where she has returned to ride in Saturday's Preakness Stakes at Baltimore's Pimlico Race Course (site of her career debut in 2005).

"Personally, if the Preakness is not above the Kentucky Derby at the top of my list of races I'd like to win, it's right there with it," said Napravnik, who earned the leading jockey title at the Fair Grounds for the past four seasons. Napravnik finished third in last year's Preakness on Mylute, trained by Fair Grounds veteran Tom Amoss.



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"If I were to win the Derby, it would mean so much to so many people," she said, "but if I were to win the Preakness, it would probably mean even more to me—being in the place where I came up, where all of my family and friends are, and having so many people cheering us on. To win it would really be incredible, so that's what I'm going to try to do."

Nappravnik will be inspired in that attempt by the poignant memory of the horseman who gave her a leg up in her career. Maryland trainer Dickie Small, who put the then-teenager on her first winner, had been Napravnik's longtime mentor before he died April 4. Will Napravnik be aware of Small's absence as she rides out for the Preakness?

"Everybody asks me that, and I almost cry every time," she said. "The answer is yes, absolutely. I'm always reflecting back on Dickie and my days working and riding for him, because I knew how proud he was, not only of me but of anybody he ever gave an opportunity to who then went on to take the next step."

"That's really the way that Dickie was rewarded for all the people he helped," she said, "so I definitely think of him on big race days, and even more so

at Pimlico. I have tons of great memories here, and it feels like home — but there will definitely be a void here this year."

If Small were still alive, he might predict Napravnik has a decent shot at lighting the board on the speedy Bayern, who's currently 10-1 on the morning line in the 10-horse field. Bayern's most recent start (with Napravnik in the irons) was a win in the April 26 Kentucky Derby Trial, but the colt was subsequently disqualified for interference and moved down to second. Yet not having run in the Derby has a potential upside, in that Bayern is presumably feeling more rested than many of his Preakness rivals.

"Yes, he's going to be fresher than the horses who ran in the Derby," Napravnik said. "But Bayern has been lightly raced all together, so I think he's still

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Rosie Napravnik



Associated Press photo by DAVID GOLDMAN

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learning and will continue to improve. He's kind of inexperienced (the Preakness will mark only his fifth career start), but I'm really excited about the way he's been moving forward, and the way he went in his last two works. This horse has continued to impress me in the morning, and I absolutely love him."

Hall of Fame trainer Bob Baffert, who will saddle Bayern on Saturday in an attempt to win his sixth Preakness, declared his support and admira-



Associated Press photo

Rosie Napravnik will be trying to put her last-place finish in the Kentucky Derby behind her at the Preakness.

tion of Napravnik in a Pimlico news release on May 15.

"I've had a lot of success with

her," Baffert said. "A lot of jockeys are intimidated when they ride for me. She's not.

"She just rides her horse. I ride her because she's a great rider and I think she's getting better and better. A great jockey like her keeps a good horse from getting beat."

Nappravnik said she feels fortunate to ride for Baffert. "We hooked up last spring when I was breezing some of his horses," she recalled. "Then they put me on one (to race) and it won, and they put me on another one that won.

"Then I won some stakes races for him. Bob and I just really hit it off. I love working

with him and Jimmy (Barnes, assistant trainer). Their whole team is great, and their horses are just quality, quality, quality."

One thing Nappravnik won't be thinking about on Preakness day is her disappointing last-place finish in the Kentucky Derby aboard Louisiana-bred Vicar's in Trouble. She said she prefers to concentrate on each race as it comes, and not dwell on the past.

"I mean, the Derby is the Derby," Nappravnik said. "Anybody can run first, and anybody can run last."

And so it will go for the Preakness as well.