

# Jerry Bailey

## THE LONG JOURNEY HOME

Hall of Fame jockey Jerry Bailey returns to his native Texas to ride and reminisce

by Anne Lang

It was a fitting homecoming.

At the inaugural National All-Star Jockey Championship held on June 27 at Lone Star Park, native Texan Jerry Bailey booted home the winner in the first of four races in the series. It mattered not that this would turn out to be the best race he'd have all night, culminating in a 4th-place finish (of 12) in the final All-Star standings. Bailey was literally back on his home turf. And it felt terrific.

"It just doesn't get any better than this," exclaimed a flushed, grinning Bailey amid the chaos of the winner's circle. "I'm sure glad to come back to Texas and not get shut out." This is the first time something like this has been done with these kinds of riders, and it's a wonderful thing for horse racing."

Jerry Bailey is a wonderful thing for horse racing, too, as probably everyone who witnessed his appearance at Lone Star would attest. Ever since the talented rider left his El Paso childhood home at the tender age of 17, industry watchers have charted Bailey's steady rise to the rank of world-class jockey. As of mid-July, he was at the top of the 1997 national standings, having won more than 150 races on mounts earning more than \$8.9 million. If the trend continues,



Lang photo





Bailey will again secure a title he's garnered for the past two years: overall leading jockey by purses earned.

There have, of course, been countless other coups along the way as well: four Breeders' Cup Classic wins, two Eclipse Awards, two Dubai World Cup wins, induction into racing's Hall of Fame, two Kentucky Derby victories, one Preakness, one Belmont, one Breeders' Cup Juvenile win, more than 4,000 career wins, numerous graded stakes triumphs and, last but not least, 16 consecutive wins on two-time Horse of the Year Cigar.

But it all began in Texas.

In the small town of Hillsboro (located about midway between Waco and Dallas/Ft. Worth), Bailey was born in 1957 to James, a dentist, and Betty Sue Bailey. The family lived in Hillsboro until Bailey was four, but the jockey has vivid memories of that early phase of his life: particularly of riding Lady, his back-yard Shetland pony. The youngster's exposure to horses continued with the family's move to El Paso, where his father began acquiring Thoroughbreds and Quarter Horses to campaign at nearby Sunland Park. Father and son spent lots of time at the track and on the backside.

"I know I enjoyed being there and being around the horses," Bailey recalled as he relaxed in the jockey's lounge at Lone Star on All-Star race day. "But in those first years, I honestly didn't envision someday working at the track as a jockey or exercise rider. I do remember thinking I might make some good money working there in a general capacity."

In fact, where sports were concerned, the versatile-minded Bailey had his sights set on becoming a football player — preferably for his favorite team, the Green Bay Packers. When he didn't bulk up enough to play that game at even the mid-school level, he simply

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changed his focus to basketball. But all the optimism in the world couldn't add upward inches to young Bailey's slender frame. His philosophical acceptance of that fact, coupled with support from his parents, helped plant the seed for pursuing the jockey profession.

The competitive riding world wasn't at all new to Bailey, as he'd had numerous fun experiences riding in Quarter Horse match races with other local adolescents. And so it was that after high school graduation, Bailey found himself headed toward an apprentice career aboard Thoroughbreds in New Mexico. As the 1970's progressed, so did Bailey, eventually moving his tack to other Southwest tracks, then to Florida, New Jersey and finally, New York.

But despite the passage of time and evolution of success, Bailey never lost touch with his roots. "People would ask me if I was a New Yorker and I would say, 'No, I reside in New York, but I'm a Texan who has to make a living here,'" Bailey stated. "To this day, I feel like my personality is Texan, as well as my morals and ethics. I don't have a Texas accent, though, because there really isn't a Texas accent in El Paso."

Fellow native Texan Bill Shoemaker remains on Bailey's list of all-time sports idols (along with former Green Bay Packer quarterback Bart Starr and baseball legend Nolan Ryan). Does Bailey have much opportunity to visit his old home state?

"Not nearly enough," he said wistfully, adding: "But I've got lots of extended family members who still live here; in fact, 39 of 'em are upstairs cheering me on today!" At the top of that roster is Bailey's wife Suzee and their son Justin, age 4. "What little time I have off, I spend at home with them," Bailey explained. "Suzee and I tried for seven years before we were blessed with a baby, so Justin is extra-special to us."

Coming back to Texas to actually ride at a major-league track definitely counts among Bailey's career highlights, he insisted. "It was so frustrating watching from a distance during all those years when Texas kept trying, then failing, to pass pari-mutuel. And even when it finally happened, things just didn't seem to take off like they were predicted to.

"At that point, to be truthful, I had my doubts whether there would ever be big-time racing in Texas, and whether I'd ever have occasion to ride here," Bailey continued. "So I was certainly thrilled to see all of this develop [with a gesture toward the Lone Star plant], and to have the opportunity to come here and compete." Bailey added that he's not yet visited Retama Park or Sam Houston, but said he hopes those two tracks will also flourish in the coming years, and that he wouldn't rule out riding at either one if circumstances warrant.

"It's so wonderful that a headline event like this is taking place at a Texas track," Bailey said. "I don't know if people fully realize the things that you wish you'd done differently. But on the whole, I think I needed to go through everything I've gone through — both the positive and the negative — in order to get to where I am today. And you know what? It's not such a bad place to be."

