

Networking does pay off



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When pony girl Mary Ann Burke traveled with her father's racing stable to Rockingham Park in 1953, she encountered a puzzling track policy.

Women were not allowed to escort horses to the post.

Not one for succumbing to perceived injustices, the 18-year-old Burke questioned stewards as to the purpose of such an absurd restriction. They explained that one day in the past, a pony girl had worn a particularly tight t-shirt while guiding her charges postward.

Numerous patrons expressed their offense at what they felt was a flagrant display of exhibitionism. Hence the rule.

Burke responded by leading her (few) female counterparts in a calm protest, and scored a surprising triumph when the policy was permanently removed. Known today as Mary Ann Cooper, she became one of the first women to receive a Kentucky trainer's license, ending a modestly successful racing career in the late 1980s to become an associate college professor in Louisville.

Cooper's victory was a small but meaningful step toward widespread acceptance of females at all levels of the industry. The relentless push for inclusion by outspoken pioneers like Cooper is signified by the burgeoning number of women in today's racing-related jobs.

If general acceptance was the only thing women in racing desired, it would be gratifying to look back at episodes like the one at Rockingham as measuring sticks to gauge how far we've come since the 1950s—when the subjective snugness of a pony girl's outerwear was enough to shock the sensitivities of an entire grandstand.

Among modern-day racetrack patrons, even the appearance of a scantily-clad Madonna at the bridle of a claimer in the fifth would hardly evoke more than a few raised eyebrows. But acceptance was simply the first hurdle for women in racing. Equal opportunities, achievements and subsequent rewards will remain elusive goals unless we keep pushing for changes in the system.

While cases of sexual discrimination similar to the one Cooper chose to challenge are rare these days, women in racing are stuck in a frustrating rut—idling somewhere between the pervading exclusion of past decades and a wide-open road to advancement awaiting us in the distant future.

We just might be our own worst enemies. For too long, we've been under the mistaken impression that it's every woman for herself. Meanwhile, the men have been shrewd subscribers to the value of networking—a practice that cultivates contacts, which lead to increased opportunities, which boost the odds for success.

Even Cooper understood the necessity of consolidating the tiny contingent of Rockingham females in order to deliver her message with maximum impact.

Cooper and others like her got the ball of change rolling for women in racing. Now let's start working and talking with one another to ensure it doesn't stop.

Let me know how it's going.

Anne Lang is the Texas breeding correspondent for Daily Racing Form.