



op/ed

by mark cramer

THE LEGACY OF JORGE HERRERA

A 2009 study of the Medical Journal of Australia found that being a jockey is more dangerous than being a boxer, with only the job of an offshore fisherman having more risk to lives. I suppose that being a race rider is probably safer in the USA, though 19% of the active riding members of the Jockeys' Guild were out for some time on temporary disability.

I was thinking about such things after what happened on July 5. A \$5,000 claiming horse at Pleasanton, ridden by jockey Jorge Herrera, clipped heels, catapulting the rider onto the ground where he was trampled to death. Herrera, from Jalisco, Mexico, was 33 years old but only had 55 career victories. He began riding as a 27-year-old apprentice in 2005. Herrera's life and career resembled those of many of the jockeys I got to know 12 years ago when I lived in a cinderblock backside dormitory at Canterbury Park. Canterbury had offered me an opportunity to combine two of my life loves: turf writing and language teaching. They gave me a groom's salary plus journalist perks in exchange for teaching English survival skills to some of the Latin American jockeys and grooms, my dorm-mates.

When I first arrived, I was welcomed, in good English, by a jockey named Roger, from Central America. His career eventually spanned 34 years, with 8,006 starts and 763 wins. Total earnings of his mounts were \$6,065,903, less than some riders earn during a Breeders' Cup weekend.

There were some years when his income may not have topped \$10,000 while his best year probably brought him near \$90,000. I'm calculating based on the rider's fees plus his percentage of the earnings for wins, places and shows.

I got to know two other types of journeymen riders. Some did better, percentage-wise, such as Larry, from Texas. Larry's win percentage is in the mid-teens and he's one of the privileged small-track jockeys who actually do reasonably well financially.

On the other side, you find many riders like Mr. Herrera, who risk their lives for a pittance. They win fewer than 7 or 8% of their races, and thus find it difficult to get good mounts. As a consequence, they'll willingly hop on horses that are essentially field-fillers, just for the riding fee, and this becomes a vicious circle, as they knowingly lower their win percentage by doing so. Such mounts solve the moment but hurt their long-run chances to reach a higher level.

In a typical morning on the backside, I would wake up at 5 a.m. and use the shared shower facilities, mostly to cool off, since nights in the dorm were sweltering during a lengthy heat wave. (Sometimes I cheated and went to sleep in the air-conditioned press box).

I would get a cup of coffee from "the kitchen" and watch the horses work out as the sun came up. Then I'd return to the kitchen and have biscuits and gravy, chatting with trainers, riders, grooms. From the bottom-tier jockeys, I listened to stories of hope, that they could win a big purse and break through the invisible barrier that kept them living from hand to mouth. Exercise riders would dream of getting an occasional mount, to prove that they had the talent.

The exercise rider who lived in the room next to mine was beaming one morning because he was picking up his girlfriend at the airport. (Chaplain Jack told me that social isolation is one of the causes of a high rate of alcoholism on the backside). The next morning I passed my neighbor in the hall, expecting to see him bright and chipper. Instead, his face was drawn. After picking up his girlfriend, they'd gone to a nearby Indian Casino and blown all his savings.

Most Latin American riders and grooms were much more responsible, living a Spartan life, saving as much as they could to send to their families in Mexico, missing their kids, worried about their moms, looking forward to spending a few weeks with their wives or girlfriends. For the grooms, on call 24 hours a day, a Sunday was no different from a Wednesday.

So when Jorge Herrera died at 33, I remembered these things, remembered that he and his counterparts play a key role in keeping the race cards flowing, in bringing in betting handle, in holding up an industry from the bottom, and that they have families who depend on them and who worry that the next race might bring tragedy.

"Jorge's death affected me particularly hard because I was injured three weeks ago and have been unable to ride since," John Velazquez said. "We participate in the most dangerous sport there is, and even though it is a job, we do it because we love racing."

Mr. Velazquez is chairman of the Jockey's Guild. The Guild has offered assistance to Mr. Herrera's family.

PS. From John Velazquez's press release:

"Sadly, there is no safety net for jockeys and their families. The Jockeys' Guild and the Permanently Disabled Jockeys Fund provide assistance as best we can, mostly through voluntary contributions, but the sad fact is many in the industry who benefit from racing do not contribute to the safety and well-being of jockeys. All tracks do not contribute to the Guild to help cover life insurance, death and dismemberment, and temporary disability benefits. Most casino-owned tracks in general do not contribute a dime, yet they make hundreds of millions of dollars from the license of operating a race track."

Mark Cramer is a Paris-based author who specializes in horse racing, bicycling and off-beat travel.