

Jockeys take job seriously

BY CHRISTOPHER HEINE
Staff writer

Art Linsey had the jumpy look of an older man who just won a RV on the Price is Right.

He was leaving the winning circle at State Fair Park, peering side to side and tugging on his pants nervously.

Victory will do that to a horseman.

One of the three thoroughbreds he trains, Airsheba (grandson of Kentucky Derby winner Alysheba), had just won Friday night's last race in a tight finish.

Linsey gathered his ecstasy, looked to the stands and clapped his hands as feverishly and triumphant as a humble man can.

"That's the best feeling in the whole wide world," he said. "It's a heckuva lot of hard work, but it's all worth it when you get across the line first."

Racing horses has been Linsey's life for more than 30 years. You can see it in the 65-year-old's small, sun-burnt face.

He's far from being alone in his passion.

Trainers and jockeys, devoted to their crafts like artists and depression-era farmers, make the races at the State Fair Park happen.

They are up at 6 a.m. on race days to walk the horses; the trainers getting a feel for their thoroughbreds condition, and the jockeys looking to ride the most primed runners.

As you hang around the stables and locker rooms, you sense these guys are in heaven. They walk around cheerfully like young minor

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ARMANDO MARTINEZ
jockey

league baseball players just happy to be playing the game.

One thing is for sure, they aren't getting rich.

Dan Beck, a veteran jockey, said he and his peers usually pull in between \$20,000-\$40,000 annually, depending on how many winning races they ride.

Beck is from Dodge City, Kan., and lay on a kid-sized bunk bed in the jockeys' quarters and espoused his experiences.

"You have to win in this business," he said. "If you don't win, you don't make any money."

Jockeys have to make quick decisions in order to be victorious, Beck said.

"It's that fast," he said, snapping his fingers for emphasis. "Whether you wait, go out or go in, you have to react on instinct. And you have to know your horse."

Armando Martinez is a jockey of 11 years who also trains thoroughbreds in Kentucky during winters.

He agreed with Beck that knowledge is a jockey's winning key.

"I can tell you every bone in a horse's body," he said. "That just shows you how well you have to know these animals to do well."

"You have to be able to feel their bodies to know what to do in the course of a race - when to push them and when hold back for a little bit."

Martinez, who's wife is also a horse trainer, said he puts in long hours at the track.

"But this is what I've wanted to do since I was only 14 in Mexico," he said. "I left my mother and father to start my dream. I want to ride until I can't ride anymore. The thrill of winning is the best feeling in the whole world."

Sometimes jockeys lose, however, in the worst kind of way.

Beck said he has broken every bone in his body. He has a steel plate from his hip to his knee and one in his shoulder as well.

"Tibias, fibulas, you name it," he said. "You can't dwell on it and worry about getting hurt because you won't be aggressive."

"You won't shoot that hole or take that chance. You won't do what you need to win."

Linsey was running down the track to check on Airsheba when he stopped to talk more about his profession. Still excited, he looked through his 1950s-styled, black-framed glasses.

The sun setting beautifully behind him, you could only wonder if there is a senior citizen enjoying life more anywhere.

"I wouldn't trade what I do for anything," Linsey said. "Every victory helps. I always say winning makes a 65-year-old man feel 25."

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