

MEET THE NYTHA BOARD

GAINING GROUND

Only four trainers in the last dozen years have been able to capture a championship at Saratoga: Kiaran McLaughlin, Bill Mott, Todd Pletcher, and Linda Rice. It was a ground-breaking milestone for Rice, who took down her first training title when she bested perennial leader Pletcher by a single victory in 2009 to become the first woman to top the standings at a major racetrack.



Has her success made it easier for women to make their way in the male-dominated sport of Thoroughbred racing?

"I'd like to think so," Rice said.

It would be hard to believe otherwise. Since her Spa title, Rice has been atop the leaderboard at both Aqueduct and Belmont, and she has steadily risen through the national ranks to break into the top 25 this year. Through Dec. 17, the Wisconsin native had won 98 races and more than \$4.68 million in purses. She is on track to hit 100 victories for the first time this year.

But it has not been an easy climb, and she is still not sure her dad, long-time horseman Clyde Rice, is convinced she made the right call on her career--despite the fact that when she celebrated her 1,000th win in 2011, it was with a horse owned by her father.

"He was a little skeptical when I decided to become a trainer," Rice said. "He thought it would have been easier if I had been one of his sons. I don't think he was thrilled when I chose this path--not thrilled, but not surprised, either."

She added with a smile, "He might think I made the right choice now, but he hasn't admitted to that yet."

Rice was breaking babies by the time she reached her early teens, and got hooked on the sport while preparing horses like champion Family Style for the track.

"She was one of my real pets as a yearling turning 2-year-old," she recalled. "It was hard not to get emotionally involved and invested."

Despite studying computer science at Penn State, she never seriously considered a life away from the track. "I was anxious to get back to what I loved," she said.

Rice took out her training license in 1987, but the early years were a struggle. It was difficult to get new owners, and difficult to gain the respect of her peers.

"It wasn't easy to attract clients who would give me a chance with their horses," she remarked. "But, over time, I figured out that winning races was the way to do it--and that still holds true today.

"When I first started out, a lot of the well-established trainers in New York didn't necessarily think I'd be around long," Rice continued. "That was the take I got--they didn't give me the kind of respect that they do today. But I think respect is something that's earned, and it would be that way in any industry for anyone, man or woman."

Through the years, Rice has built her stable from a handful of horses to a 50-strong string employing 33 workers. Her favorite horses have been City Zip, a "tremendous competitor" who swept the 2-year-old stakes at Saratoga in 2000; and Soldier Field, a hard-knocking stakes horse who won eight of 15 starts in 1998. She has also developed Grade I winners Things Change, Tenski and Lucifer's Stone.

A measure of the respect she now commands was in evidence more than a decade ago, when veteran trainer Mike Hernandez approached Rice to suggest she run for election to the New York Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association Board. She was intrigued by the idea.

"I'd been in New York for at least 10 years, and I knew I wasn't going anywhere. This is my home, this is where I plan to stay," Rice said. "I don't have a lot of interests outside the Thoroughbred industry, and I thought I would enjoy learning more about New York racing.

"I grew up in the business and have a long history in racing--I'm in the barns, I'm in the trenches with the workers. I thought I had something to contribute, and I thought I could offer a female perspective to the Board."

Rice was elected in 2002, the first year she ran. She was part of the NYTHA team that navigated through the NYRA bankruptcy and franchise battle, and the arduous process of bringing VLTs to Aqueduct, even naming horses We Need VLT's, Fight for VLT's and Victory for VLT's in the hopes of focusing attention on the issue. She acknowledged that NYTHA's efforts on behalf of New York's horsemen are not over when it comes to VLT revenue.

"The VLTs were a long time coming, and now we have to manage that money well," Rice said. "We have to be wise about how we spend it--be it making improvements on the backside, marketing the sport, or using it to help fill stalls. The cost of living is very high in New York; feed, hay, tack and all other products are more expensive here than



City Zip *Coglianesi Photo*

elsewhere. If we can give some financial relief to the horsemen via workers' comp, health coverage, pension plans, etc., we can attract higher quality stables, horses and owners to New York. This will increase field size, the daily handle and, in turn, the purses will continue to rise.

Gaining Ground, cont...

"There has also been a lot of discussion about uniform medication rules and the penalties for multiple violators to go along



with that, and there has been talk about installing a synthetic racing surface in

New York to protect turf racing from bad weather. There is a lot going on."

Rice devotes a lot of energy to her duties as Chair of the NYTHA Scholarship Committee. It was a post she sought when getting voted onto the Board.

"I wanted to be involved with kids who are working to improve their lifestyles," she explained. "That was something I wanted to be a part of, to be able to help them go to college and improve their way of life. It's a feel-good story. I don't have children of my own, and it gives me a connection with the kids that I really enjoy. It's a tremendous program, and it's amazing the positive impact we've had on so many lives on the backstretch."

NYTHA provides 30-40 students, backstretch workers and their immediate dependents, with about \$85,000 in scholarships annually. The Committee also brings in Barry Fox, a financial aid counselor who helps the students find grants and additional scholarships to help fund their tuition.

TAKE THE LEAD, NYTHA's equine retirement program, also has the full support of the Rice stable. The trainer has sent several horses on to second careers this year. Both she and her owners donate generously to the aftercare organizations such as New Vocations that retrain those horses, and her charges typically are adopted in short order.

"Maybe the horse has a career-ending ailment, or maybe he just doesn't have enough talent, but I want to identify the fact that a horse isn't going to be successful as soon as possible and send him on his way, rather than running him into the ground," Rice said. "It's better for my horse, and it's better for my client. Because of that, I find my horses are placed in new homes very quickly."

Having a retirement plan in place is just one small key to running a successful racing operation. Rice sets goals each year designed to improve her stable and her staff, implementing new ideas and new technologies in order to get the best results. She'd love to have horses to take to the Breeders' Cup and Triple Crown someday.

Be it stakes horse or claimer, though, she looks forward to working toward bringing out the most potential in each individual.

"Whether I'm buying a yearling or a 2-year-old, or I'm claiming a horse, I really enjoy taking that horse and studying its pedigree, its conformation, the way it trains, and figuring out how to get the most out of it," she said. "That's something I started out doing when I was 13 years old breaking horses and I still enjoy it today--a lot."

But, gender aside, the life of a trainer is not an easy one. Does Rice ever question the direction she chose in life?

"Well, when I was younger, I didn't think about some of the realities of being a horse trainer--seven days a week, very few vacations, early mornings year-round," she admitted. "I never considered those as negatives at the time. For the general population, those could be seen as difficult hurdles. But I think that there are a lot more pros than cons, and I'm still very passionate about what I do."

NYTHA OFFERS NEW SCHOLARSHIP

NYTHA has introduced the T.J. Kelly Memorial Scholarship, in memory of the Hall of Fame horseman who passed away in the spring. This year's recipient was St. John's student Angel Torres, who earned \$2,000 toward his college education. Three years ago, NYTHA established the Red Terrill Memorial Scholarship, which also awards \$2,000 in funding. Victoria Casso, studying veterinary medicine at the University of Kentucky, received the grant in 2013. The NYTHA Scholarship Committee, chaired by Linda Rice, determines the recipients of these awards.

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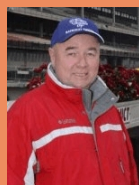
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