



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Donna Barton Brothers is a familiar face at Keeneland.

## INSIDE TRACK

FORMER JOCKEY-TURNED-RACING  
ANALYST DONNA BARTON BROTHERS  
BRINGS SPECIAL INSIGHT  
TO BREEDERS' CUP TELECAST

By Rena Baer



Donna Barton Brothers comes from a racing family: sister Leah, brother Jerry, and mother Patti Barton all were riders.

SUZIE PIERO OLIVANI

Donna Barton Brothers doesn't hesitate when asked about her favorite career memory: the 1993 Keeneland fall meet, on opening day. Twenty-seven years old, with six years' experience as a jockey at tracks such as Remington and Canterbury Park, Brothers was riding at Keeneland for the first time. She'd imagined the day since she was 17 years old. While traveling and grooming horses for trainer Smiley Adams to make money for college, she had seen how dressed up and sophisticated everyone looked going to Keeneland. She hoped one day to have a reason to be among them.

When that day arrived, she was dressed in silks for the occasion — jockey silks — and she won three races on the four mounts she rode, more than any other jockey that day. "Right away Keeneland and I got off to a good start," she said.

Her relationship with the track has endured over time, both as a rider and, in recent years, as a

broadcaster. She'll be back again this fall, still on horseback, but this time analyzing races and chasing down Breeders' Cup winners for NBC, as she has since 2000, signature microphone in hand and hours and hours of well-prepared questions in mind. This will come on the tail of working Keeneland's fall meet as a racing analyst for TVG, a post she has held

at the Lexington track for the past four years.

"I'm beyond excited about having Breeders' Cup at Keeneland and then getting to be a part of it by covering it for NBC. What could be better?" she said. "The history and elegance of Keeneland teaming with the excitement and highest level of racing — the Breeders' Cup — all of that historical significance and racing excitement in one place at the same time, and I get to be right in the middle of it! This will be my 15th year covering Breeders' Cup, and I have not looked forward to any Breeders' Cup as much as I've looked forward to this one."

The 49-year-old knows the sport the same way she knows her left

hand from her right. It's instinctual. Her mother, Patti Barton, was one of the first women to get her jockey's license, and her brother and sister were both jockeys. Brothers rode her first race at 21 after stepping up from grooming to galloping to make more money for school and for the continued opportunity to travel.

A jockey's agent who'd been watching her ride kept pushing the diminutive-yet-strong young woman of racing stock to give it a try. Already set on college, she decided to ride a race for the experience and to get him to back off.

"It was so exciting and challenging," she said. So much so, she kept with it for 11½ years, falling in love with racing and

many horses along the way.

"Thoroughbreds are naturally competitive yet docile enough to listen to us when we tell them 'not yet, not yet,' and when you ask for more, they try and give it," she said. "They let us participate and be part of it. You can't help but fall in love with the ones who get it and let you help them."

Brothers' ability to bond with many of the horses she rode eventually led her to becoming the second-leading woman jockey in earnings.

"Because I had been around horses my whole life, I thought riding came easily to everyone, and it wasn't until I became a jockey that I realized everyone wasn't

good at it," she said. "I still am not sure if I was a natural or had just done it so long it came naturally."

What Brothers also had that came naturally was moxie. The night following her victories at Keeneland on opening day, she concluded she was ready to be in the thick of top racing competition.

"That was the pinnacle of the day, realizing I did belong there," she said.

Early the next morning she asked her agent for D. Wayne Lukas' barn number. Her agent told her, flat out, that Lukas would not ride her on his horses. Brothers told him that wasn't the question she had asked.

Later that morning she found Lukas'



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Brothers came close to a Breeders' Cup victory when Hennessy just missed in the 1995 Juvenile.

barn and introduced herself, telling him, "Hi, Mr. Lukas. I'm Donna Barton, and I am the meet's leading rider." In a second burst of bravado, she added she thought he might like to have her ride for him. Brothers said Lukas laughed and said, first, he'd have to see her ride.

Later that meet she got mounts on two of his horses the same day when his regular rider, Pat Day, went out of town. She finished fourth on both, and Lukas assessed afterward she'd been too excited. Much more encouraged than deterred by his words, the next year she began showing up at his barn at the crack of dawn to work horses for Lukas' assistant, Todd Pletcher.

"Soon, it was me and Pat Day riding his horses," she said.

In fact, it was on one of Lukas' horses, Hennessy, that Brothers finished second two years later in the 1995 Breeders' Cup Juvenile, beaten a neck by Unbridled's Song.

That same year Brothers broke the records for most winners and most stakes winners for a female jockey at Churchill Downs.

Though acknowledged for her prowess as a female rider, Brothers said her gender was never an issue in the predominantly male sport.

"I grew up in a house in which my mother never one time mentioned discrimination," she said. "If a trainer wasn't riding her, it was never because she was a girl but because she needed to be better. And she worked to become the best rider she could be."

Brothers said she took to heart veteran jockey Julie Krone's advice to her on how to win. "She told me 'ride

for people who win races,' " Brothers recalled. "It's easy to get into barns where they aren't winning races; you have to give the good barns a reason to ride you."

Brothers did just that, and when she retired in 1998 on what she described at the time as "one of the happiest and saddest days" of her life, she had 1,131 wins from 9,234 starts and earnings of \$18,661,388.

That same year she married trainer Frankie Brothers, settling down in the Louisville area after years of moving around, including being upended 11 times and attending seven schools while growing up as a jockey's daughter. She, nevertheless, was an excellent student.

Her skills as a quick study came in handy when she began dabbling in on-air horse racing coverage. Her knowledge of horse racing, vibrant personality, and professional demeanor did not go unnoticed by NBC, which hired her in 2000 as their on-track (as in on-horseback) reporter and analyst. She has since covered the Kentucky Derby, Preakness Stakes, Belmont Stakes, and Breeders' Cup, among many other Thoroughbred horse racing events.

Brothers came across so well to viewers that NBC has had her forge off the racing trail at times to cover events such as harness racing's top event,



DAVE HARRISON

The former jockey stills gets saddle time during major racing events such as the Triple Crown races.



JANE M. EBERHARDT

At the Breeders' Cup Brothers gets the first words from winning riders as she accompanies them back to the winner's circle.

the Hambletonian; the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event; and, even, professional bull riding.

Covering the Hambletonian, Brothers said, was the least spontaneous and most challenging off-track assignment. "I had to remember they don't have riders — they have drivers; they don't have reins — they have lines," she said, adding that you can't say a horse is making a break or a run because that means they've lost their gait, and that's not good.

"Thankfully, harness racing folks are very forgiving if you acknowledge your mistakes and don't keep making them," she said.

The Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event quickly grew on her when she realized what was involved, going so far as to take dressage lessons so she would be aware of its intricacies. "If you don't understand dressage, viewing it is like watching paint dry," she said.

Many people aren't aware of exactly what goes on at a three-day event. Brothers said her husband came for the grueling cross-coun-

try portion one year and asked her what horse a certain rider would be on the next day. He was startled to hear the riders are on the same horse in all three phases.

"It's remarkable you can get a horse to be contained enough for dressage, pumped to negotiate obstacles on a cross-country course, and then, on the third day, recover to tackle stadium jumps," Brothers said.

In addition to covering horse racing and equestrian events, Brothers has embarked on other endeavors, including working as COO for Starlight Racing with her husband, developing partnerships and working on client relations; writing a book; and returning to school for a while.

Brothers decided in 2002 to go back to college to study psychology. Despite earning a 3.9 grade point average, she concluded a few years in that it wasn't the best use of her time. Approaching 40, she realized she had a window on her career and didn't want her attentions to be so divided. The number of shows she had been doing for NBC had also grown, from four to 22.

"I didn't know if I would love a career in psychology; and I knew I loved horse racing, and I knew I wanted to be all in, not half in and half out," Brothers said.

Part of going all in was writing her book, *Inside Track: Insider's Guide to Horse Racing*, which was released in 2011. After seeing a book explaining NASCAR written by a former female driver, Brothers decided she wanted to write something similar to demystify horse racing. All the knowledge



KEENELAND/IZ

Brothers interviews Joel Rosario at Keeneland after he wins a riding title.

# spotlight on DONNA BARTON BROTHERS

was sitting right there in her head.

“It was one of the easiest things I have ever done; I wrote it in four months, but the editing process took longer than that,” she said.

As busy as she is — also serving as an advisor for the Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance, on the board of Churchill Downs’ Backside Learning Center, and on the planning committee for the track’s Ladies Day — Brothers said she doesn’t scrimp on a couple of things: sleep and fitness. Most nights she is in bed by 10 and up before 6 for a morning that always includes meditation and exercise, whether it’s going to the gym or her favorite workout, running trails at the park with her dogs.

It’s a schedule that might take a beating when Breeders’ Cup rolls around in late October. Of all the events Brothers covers, she said the Thoroughbred racing’s annual two-day championships are, by far, the most intensive. With the Kentucky Derby, anyone who even lives in Louisville knows the names of at least



ANNE M. EBENHARDT PHOTOS

Brothers is always well prepared when she faces the camera.

seven of the contenders by osmosis, she said. Breeders’ Cup requires preparation for 13 races with an average of 10 competitors and coming up with at least three questions specific to each horse.

“That’s 390 questions I have to have prepared for two days of racing,” she said.

But there’s no place Brothers would rather be than in the middle of the action at horse racing’s highest level. “I don’t mean that in an egocentric kind of way; just so I get to see it,” she said. “And, if I want to ask Bob Baffert why he is adding blinkers, I can go over and ask him.”

And though she may not be riding the winners, she is thrilled to be covering them. When Brothers first started her broadcasting career with NBC, she didn’t quite know how to take the producers pushing her each year for more.

“It used to aggravate me that I would have to always chase the carrot and up my coverage each year for NBC,” she said. “Then I realized they thought I was capable of it. They were broadening my responsibilities; it was a privilege to be asked to grow. Though, it would be nice if one day they said: ‘You are perfect just the way you are.’”

Who knows? With her history at Keeneland, this just might be the year. **KM**



“I’m beyond excited about having the Breeders’ Cup at Keeneland,” Brothers acknowledges.