

Holding Back Tears After American Pharoah's Triple Crown

By DONNA BROTHERS

JUNE 19, 2015

Photo



Donna Brothers, left, interviewing the jockey Javier Castellano at Pimlico Race Course the day before this year's Preakness Stakes.

Wendy Wooley/EquiSport Photos

Given time to think about how I felt witnessing American Pharoah's Triple Crown sweep on June 6, my conclusion may be surprising: I felt robbed and a bit sad. Sure, I also felt joy and enormous gratitude toward my employer, NBC, which entrusts me with the responsibility of interviewing the

winning jockey on horseback. But I have waited my whole life for this Triple Crown.

The last time there was a sweep of the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness Stakes and the Belmont Stakes, I was 12, and my takeaway from the Affirmed-Alydar battle was an infatuation with Affirmed's jockey, Steve Cauthen, which did not subside until I was in my late 20s, when he was married with children. My crush was so pervasive that it overshadowed my memory of Affirmed's accomplishment.

I have covered all three races for NBC Sports since 2001, and I have seen many of the failed attempts that transpired in the years between Affirmed and American Pharoah. A couple of them hit hard and made me begin to believe, like many people, that I would never see another Triple Crown.



Brothers at Belmont Park. She has covered all three Triple Crown races for NBC Sports since 2001. Credit Penelope P. Miller/America's Best Racing

Then came American Pharoah.

But before we get to the finish line, let's back up to the top of the stretch. From my position on horseback, I cannot see a race; I can only hear the race call through my earpiece. For this year's Belmont, I used two earpieces so that I could hear

90 percent of the program and Larry Collmus's race call and only 10 percent ambient noise. I knew that with a crown on the line, the crowd noise would be formidable.

Picking up the race from about the three-sixteenths pole — a race that American Pharoah had led virtually every step of the way — this is what I heard: “And American Pharoah kicks away! American Pharoah has opened up a two-length lead as they come to the top of the stretch, and Frosted has moved up into second.”

That was the fleeting moment when I thought: It is not going to happen. Again.

But the call went on: “And they're into the stretch, and American Pharoah makes his run for glory as they come into the final furlong. Frosted is second with one-eighth of a mile to go. Frosted is all out at the one-sixteenth pole. And here it is! The 37-year wait is over! American Pharoah is finally the one! American Pharoah has won the Triple Crown!”

There was a family of five with three children, probably between ages 7 and 12, watching the race from the outside rail next to where I was awaiting Victor Espinoza and American Pharoah on their gallop out. Just barely audible above the din of the crowd coming from my earpieces, and outside them, I could hear the mother screaming to me, with desperation in her voice: “Did he win? Did he win?” “Yes,” I said, “He won!” The family erupted into celebration and, almost instantly, began to cry. I had to quickly look away. Their emotion was my emotion, but not one that could be felt or expressed — for now.

I had an interview to do with the winning jockey, and it needed to be about what he felt and what American Pharoah felt like to ride. At best, an emotional response from a reporter would have been misplaced and inappropriate. At worst, it would have gotten me fired.

The emotions would have to wait. The Belmont was run around 6:56 p.m., and we were on the air until about 7:45 p.m. My assignment was to stay on my horse, keep an eye on American Pharoah throughout the aftermath of the race, then follow him back to the detention barn. And from the barn, I would do a report on what he had done since leaving the winner's circle. Keep it together, I thought.

When we went off the air, I walked the three-eighths of a mile or so from the detention barn to our compound stationed at about the quarter pole. I crossed paths with about 20 people I knew along the way while walking with my crew, three of us in all. I shared high-fives and hugs and joyful stories of disbelief, but I kept my emotions in check.

After arriving in the compound, my colleagues and I celebrated the day, the race, the long wait. We all breathed a sigh of relief. But our thoughts quickly turned to the mundane — how to get back to our hotel, how to avoid traffic.

I went to bed at 2 a.m. and awoke at 6 a.m. When I stepped out of the shower, it hit me: the Triple Crown. It happened. Then I cried tears that had been waiting a lifetime to flow. Or at least it seemed like it.

Afterward, I talked to my siblings, who are also former jockeys. My brother, Jerry, watched the race alone in his living room in Billings, Mont., and said he sobbed. My sister, Leah, watched the race alone in her living room in Florence, Ky., and did the same.

I wanted the space to feel that, to breathe a sigh of relief and allow the tears to flow naturally. If only I were not in a most unnatural position.

But do not feel sorry for me. I would not have traded positions with anyone — except for maybe Espinoza. Yes, I felt robbed and a little sad. But I also know I have the coolest job in the world.

Donna Brothers is a horse racing analyst and former jockey who had earned the second-most winnings among female riders in the United States when she retired in 1998.