

Hernandez, Rafael: Born: From: Puerto Rico

The Puerto Rico native first learned about racing as a 16-year-old back when he was still more interested in music than horses. A verbal challenge from a relative in the sport convinced him to try riding; Hernandez completed two years of jockey school in his homeland before moving to Florida to begin his career.

He arrived at Fairmount in 2004, won the riding title there in 2005, and proceeded to win it eight out of nine years. He famously won seven of Fairmount's eight carded races one day in 2014, and clipped along scoring at a 39 percent win rate.

Trainer Wesley Ward is credited for plucking Hernandez out of Illinois and landing him at Gulfstream Park, where the young rider immediately made an impression by winning on opening day of the 2014-15 winter meet. He started racking up graded stakes wins, such as with Divisidero at Churchill Downs in the G2 American Turf. He won the Queen's Plate and G3 Marine Stakes aboard Shaman Ghost...

The kid from Puerto Rico was working hard while enjoying his successes when he went down in a highly publicized three-horse spill at Gulfstream Park on February 20, 2016. He broke his collarbone, fractured several ribs, and had to have a kidney removed following the incident. Doctors advised he would not ride again for six months.

Hernandez, who spent a month in the hospital, distinctly remembers talking to fellow rider Edgar Prado after the spill. It was Prado who urged that Hernandez move up north to Woodbine, where he had won his first graded stakes race as a jockey in 2014 aboard International Star in the Grey Stakes (G3). "I loved it the first time I was there," Hernandez recalled. "I always thought about it since, especially after the Queen's Plate. That's what opened the doors for me in Canada."

In only four months, Hernandez was back in the saddle, winning Gulfstream's Forty Niner Stakes in only his fourth ride back from injury. The idea of moving to Woodbine stayed with him, so he and a lawyer began the six-month process to move Hernandez to Toronto full-time.

Hernandez appreciates that Woodbine's nine-month-long race meet means he can spend more time with his wife and two children. "I can stay in one place and see my family," Hernandez explained. "I wanted something more stable, and now I can take the kids to school, pick them up, and lead a normal life."

Hernandez had already met jockey agent Tony Esposito, who is well known for bringing leading rider Luis Contreras to the Rexdale oval. Once the paperwork was completed, Esposito agreed to take him on, and Hernandez rode his first full day at Woodbine during the 2016 Queen's Plate card...