

The **CHRONICLE** **CONNECTION**

**DONNA
BROTHERS**
A 110 Percent
Kind of Woman

**3 TAKES ON THE
MICKLEM BRIDLE**

**HORSES HELPING THE INCARCERATED
GET BACK ON TRACK**

**CLEVER COSTUME
CLASS INSPIRATIONS**

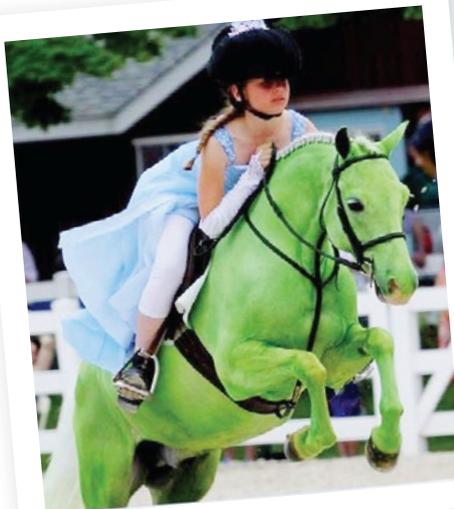
Contents

(10/2012)

> **32**
Donna Barton
Brothers



> **24**
Rochester: The Rider's
Perfect Getaway



> **10**
Halloween
Is Here
Again

Features

- 10 **Halloween Is Here Again**
- 18 **Prison Programs Provide Second Chances for Inmates and Horses**
- 24 **Rochester: The Rider's Perfect Getaway**
- 32 **Donna Barton Brothers: All or Nothing, Every Day**

Departments

- 4 Editor's Letter
- 6 Around the Arena
- 8 Test Lab
- 40 On Deck
- 42 Parting Ways

Donna Barton Brothers: All or Nothing, Every Day

Arguably the most famous female jockey of all time, she's had a voracious appetite for victory, and for even greater challenges out of the saddle, since the day she was born.

By JENNIFER CALDER

With horse racing in her genes, it may have been inevitable that Donna Barton Brothers ended up one of the winningest female jockeys in the sport, but her competitive edge and insatiable curiosity have since taken her to places she never imagined.



It's been almost 25 years, but Donna Barton Brothers still vividly remembers watching her first Kentucky Derby in person. The emotional experience hasn't been diminished by the years, and she can't discuss that day, that race, that horse, without her eyes welling up.

Winning Colors, the third (and last) filly in Derby history to win this prestigious race, was a massive gray horse, bigger and more athletically built than many of the colts in the field. She and jockey Gary Stevens took the lead out of the gate and held it to the wire, earning her the respect of virtually everyone involved in horse racing.

And when Brothers thinks back, calling that day's events a pure display of "girl power," it's easy to see that part of what makes the memory so emotional are the parallels to her own life.

Triumphing in a sport dominated by males, Brothers holds the distinct honor of retiring as the second-winningest female jockey by money earned in history (second only to best friend Julie Krone). Her fearlessness, moxie and self-determination have earned her the respect of her peers and helped her parlay an incredibly successful riding career into an equally impressive correspondent job with NBC Sports and TVG.

Viewers of the Derby, Preakness or Belmont Stakes will recognize Brothers as the inquisitive, dynamic, petite blond navigating on horseback following each race to speak with the winning jockeys still astride their victorious mounts. She possesses an apparently natural gift for bridging the divide between those 'in the know' and the average viewer.

Her love for the sport is obvious in her coverage of the races, yet nowhere is her inclusive approach more evident than in her conversational and chummy new book, *Inside Track: Insider's Guide To Horse Racing*. In it, Brothers pulls back the curtain on the rarefied and often intimidating world of horse racing, leaving novices better educated on everything from what to wear on race day to how, and when, to bet.

Speaking with Brothers inside the cavernous Belmont Park (N.Y.) mere hours before 2012 Triple Crown hopeful I'll Have Another is scratched from the Stakes, it quickly becomes clear why she's achieved such a level of success—she's focused and confident with a mischievous and quick sense of humor. The trajectories of her career paths are eclectic, but her desire to fully understand—to examine and dissect—is her intellectual fingerprint and marks all of her endeavors.

God, I Hate This

Brothers, now 46, grew up in a family of jockeys. Her mother, Patti Barton Browne, with whom she is still incredibly close, began riding in 1969 and was one of the first licensed female jockeys. Brothers' two siblings followed suit, but she was never that horse-crazy girl who was dying to ride—she had no desire to follow in her family's footsteps.

In fact, she had every intention of *not* becoming a jockey.

"I think I just took the horses for granted," Brothers admits. "It was quite easy and very mundane for me."

Brothers' parents divorced when she was a year old, and she was never close to her father, a farrier and rough stock rider on the rodeo circuit. She's unsentimental as she recalls being forced to visit him one summer when she was 10 years old. It did little to change her mind about horses, or her father.

"He was an alcoholic and a horse shoer, which meant we had to go to the barn in the morning. I'm not very big now; you can imagine how I was at 10. But I would have to hold the horses for him. 'Stand in front of that son-of-a-bitch,' was code for, 'I'm about to hit him up under his belly with my rasp, and he's going to run you over,'" she says with a laugh. "And you wonder why I wasn't romantic about horses? I was thinking, 'God, I hate this.'"

The middle child of three, Brothers was an excellent student.

"School was *really* easy for me, and my brother and sister weren't very good at school. I grew up in this house, and I felt like, 'There are two different choices. I can maximize the potential of my brain, or I can follow my stupid brother and sister,'" she jokes.

Brothers decided she wanted to go to college, but the

“There are far more races won and lost with your head than are with a whip. After Donna rode a few, she came to realize how much of a mental game it was.”

—Patti Barton Browne

**Donna Brothers
(née Barton)
aboard Colonial
Winter** after a race at
Churchill Downs in
Louisville, Ky., in 1996.



problem with being the first in your family to try something new is that there's no one to show you the ropes. No one reminded her to take the SATs or tour college campuses. And though she was incredibly bright, (she finished high school in three years, despite having attended seven schools in 11 years as she and her siblings followed their peripatetic mother to different racetracks) Brothers soon faced the dilemma of how to make enough money to pay for college.

"Mom's rules were pretty clear. As long as we were going to school, we could live for free, but once we stopped, we had to pay rent or move out. And by that time, mom had married her fifth husband, and I thought, 'I am so out of here!'" she recalls, laughing.

It was then that Brothers decided to turn to the thing she knew best—the racetrack. She started as a groom but quickly came to understand that it would never pay enough to cover the cost of college, much less provide the adequate time needed to attend.

So she learned to gallop horses. And her world expanded.

"Once I started galloping horses for a living, one, it was a pretty decent living, and two, it gave me the freedom to go *anywhere!*" she says. "Now I could *travel!*"

After all those years spent at the track with her mother, Brothers' nostalgia kicked in. She wanted to see and ride at these venues the other jockeys talked about. So she toured the United States for more than four years, until she eventually grew tired of the travel and "longed for a career rather than a job," she says. "I was 21. It was time to grow up."

The Inevitable Lure

Brothers wasn't sure what this new career would look like, but she was pretty adamant that it wouldn't involve racing.

"An agent I knew had been trying to get me to ride races for a while, and I was like, 'Nah, I don't think so. It's too easy; I want something challenging.' That was my idea," she says.

In an attempt to quiet him and finally eliminate jockeying as a career option, she finally agreed to give it a shot. And everything changed.

"I rode my first race, and I was like, 'Holy shit! Was that ever the most exciting thing I have ever done!' And, by the way, it's *a lot* harder than I thought," she says.

Brothers' mother, Browne, had known her daughter was born to race all along.

"I always said, 'As a jockey, do you know what part of my body I use the most?' And people would answer, 'Your arms, your back...' No. My *brain*," Browne says. "There are far more races won and lost with your head than are with a whip. And I'm inclined to believe that after Donna rode a few races, she came to realize how much of a mental game it was."

It was this mental aspect of racing, combined with the exhilaration, that appealed to Brothers. "It was really, really exciting. And challenging! I realized when I rode that first race that my brother and sister weren't as stupid as I'd thought," she says, chuckling.

Brothers soon turned to her suddenly much-wiser brother, Jerry Barton, for help in her quest to understand the mechanics of racing. She remembers hearing him and other jockeys discussing the ins and outs of a particular race and confessing to him that she just didn't understand how he could see all that at 40 mph, flying through the mud on the back of precocious Thoroughbreds, with decisions needing to be made in fractions of seconds.

"Jerry just said, 'You will. After you fall, after you go down, you'll start to notice all that stuff.'" Brothers says. "So I



thought, ‘Wow, OK. I can figure this stuff out now, or I can wait until I fall.’ And after that I just started noticing everything. Self-preservation, *that’s* why they do it. It’s not so you can be the person that comes back with the most dramatically detailed description of the race. It’s so you don’t go down behind the horse that breaks down on the lead.”

Riding smart is as important as riding well. It also helps that Brothers has a fierce competitive spirit.

“The difference between a competitive person and being competitive as a top jockey is that, in most cases [outside the racing world], it’s enough to have a competitive desire that says, ‘I want to win.’ But when you’re out there riding at the top level, you have to also be willing to say, ‘And I want you to lose. None of you are my friends once that gate opens,’” she says.

This is what differentiated Brothers from some of the other women jockeys, including her sister, Leah Barton.

“If I can’t win, I hope you do...” Brothers says, mimicking her sister in a singsong voice, then laughing. “Not me—if I can’t win, I don’t want *any* of you to win!”

Ask Brothers what the most thrilling part of racing is

Donna Brothers accompanied friend and fellow former jockey Patti Cooksey, a breast cancer survivor, in leading the 2009 Kentucky Oaks Survivors Parade at Churchill Downs.

(other than the obvious: winning), and a huge smile spreads across her face.

“When you have the best horse in the race, and *the* moment you become aware of it,” she explains. “It doesn’t matter if you’re 3-5, and everyone else is a long shot in the post parade. It doesn’t matter in the starting gate, and it doesn’t matter in the first quarter mile, really, because anything can happen. But when you get to the quarter pole and you realize that you are on the best horse in the bunch, and you just squeeze them a little bit, and they go.”

A 110 Percent Kind of Woman

The thrill of racing factored into Brothers’ retirement in 1998 after more than a decade of race riding and more than 1,100 wins under her belt.

“As a jockey, you have two emotions coursing through your veins at all times. The first one is that thrill, the excitement. The other one, to a much lesser extent, is the knowledge of the danger,” she explains. “I rode for 11½ years. For 11 of those years, the thrill and the excitement of it towered over the knowledge of the danger. But for the last six months, the knowledge of the danger began to become

about equal with the thrill and excitement.

“As I became more and more aware of the dangers, it became less fun, and I knew it was time to quit riding,” she continues. “Scared riders put everyone in a bad position. And I never rode scared, but I could feel the knowledge of it creeping up... and I was just done. I didn’t want to do it anymore.”

Brothers’ retirement from racing that September coincided with her marriage, two months later, to horse trainer Frank Brothers. The two had been dating for several years, but there’s an archaic rule in racing that if a jockey and trainer marry, and a trainer has a horse in a race, the jockey must ride that horse or sit the race out. Since neither Frank nor Donna was willing to put her in that position, their marriage waited until her exit from the jockey pool.

Following her retirement, feeling ready for a new challenge, Donna accepted an offer in 2000 from NBC Sports to be their racing correspondent on the ground, or horse, as the case may be.

Calling it “baptism by fire” she recalls, “At first I was such a fish out of water. I was lucky enough to be successful as a jockey, so I was interviewed a lot, but when you’re on the other side of that and there’s a camera watching, the hardest part is figuring out what questions to ask of people, because I already knew the answer to them. But the questions are for the viewers, not for me.”

“I got a little bit lost with [retiring], and I am in total awe of the energy she put into recreating herself,” says friend and former jockey Julie Krone of Donna. “I think she is flippin’ amazing. She’s phenomenal.”

In 2002, Donna finally realized her dream of attending college, where she once again found success. Majoring in psychology, she received not only the highest semester score out of her 600 fellow students in Psychology 101, but the highest score ever in the history of the University of Louisville (Ky.).

Just as with racing, Donna became enthralled by her studies and was determined to wholly pursue them. “I just loved psychology. I just absorbed it, and if I didn’t understand something, I had to sort it out to understand it, to get the answer right,” she says.

College and her gig for NBC Sports overlapped, and what started as four shows a year for NBC exploded to 20 by 2005.

“It got to the point where I couldn’t do both well. My grades were still great, my work appeared to be good, but the last Breeders’ Cup I did while going to college was at Lone Star [Park (Texas)] in 2005. I realized that it wasn’t my best show,” she says. “Nobody knows what I couldn’t ask because I didn’t know the follow up to it, but I knew.”

“I think there’s hardly anything she has been just ‘slightly interested’ by. Donna finds out about something and devours it”

—Julie Krone

Unwilling to give less than her best to either work or school, practicality won out. She went with the one that paid.

That was seven years ago, and her role at NBC continues to expand. She’s been a fixture at the Kentucky Rolex CCI**** for the past six years, and while she had little knowledge of eventing to begin with, Donna dove right in, dissecting the sport.

“I really needed to understand it,” she says. “I walked the courses. I wanted to be able to speak their language.”

“Anything she [does], she becomes fully devoted,” explains Donna’s mother. “She doesn’t allow other things to sideline her. That’s Donna—she’s a 110 percent kid.”

Krone echoes that sentiment. “I think there’s hardly anything she has been just ‘slightly interested’ by,” she says. “Donna finds out about something and devours it. She has this ability to be so thorough and so complete.”

She’s Earned It

That curiosity, combined with a passion for sharing information with others, culminates in Donna’s book, *Inside Track*. “For so many years, I just kept thinking, ‘Somebody needs to write a book [explaining the ins and outs of horse racing],’” she says. “I was at the bookstore one day and saw this *Girls’ Guide To Nascar Racing*, and it was written by a woman who did the television coverage and whose family was in NASCAR. And I thought, ‘Wait, that sounds strangely familiar. Maybe I would be equipped to write this book.’”

Inside Track is written in a friendly, conversational tone with each chapter covering a topic that gets more specific and detailed as you go. “I just wanted [the reader] to think, ‘Do I care about this?’ and if so, read more. If they read the first page on jockeys and think, ‘Oh, I never did care where those little people came from,’ then done!” Donna says, laughing. “Done with this! And you move on.”

True to form, Donna is moving on herself. She rather reluctantly confesses she has another book in the works, less of a how-to manual and more of a window through which we can look at the world of racing, told by someone who lived it.



In addition to that and her work with NBC and TVG, she was recently named COO of the Starlight Racing team, handling partnership development and client relations. Her role is to bring new partners into the group and see to the needs of current members. It's a higher level of play than most racing teams, with a limited number of investors each owning a share of all of the horses in that year's crop.

Donna joins her husband, Frank, who serves as the group's bloodstock agent and is in charge of purchases and consulting. Todd Pletcher serves as Starlight's head trainer.

The Brothorses currently live in a condo in Louisville with their dog, Molly. They decided not to have children. While "delighting" in Donna's nieces and nephews, the couple never felt their lifestyle was conducive to raising a family—a decision consistent with Donna's all-or-nothing personality.

"It was something they agreed upon before they married,"



Above: Donna Brothers eagerly shares her knowledge and love of horses with any audience.

Left: Donna Brothers has expanded her journalistic horizons to covering the Rolex Kentucky CCI**** for NBC, so she's educated herself about the sport of eventing as well.

says Donna's mother, Browne. "They couldn't be the kind of parents they would want [to be], and they didn't want to be half-assed parents."

"[Donna] invests great amounts of energies into human beings as well," Krone adds. "I know one thing, as her friend and as a person she loves, it is a *wonderful* position to be in, because she is incredibly loyal and dedicated. Spending time with her is rich, quality life time. She makes everything more colorful and more fun."

Like that winning filly all those years ago at the Kentucky Derby, Donna continues to exuberantly approach each new challenge.

When asked what gives her the most joy, looking back over a fascinating and varied career that's still far from over, she pauses before answering.

"I guess having the respect of my peers. It's not easy to get in this game. It's something that takes a long time to earn, and I'm proud of the name I've made for myself. And by that I mean credibility," she says. "I never won a Kentucky Derby, and maybe if I had that would have been it. But I think most things that people are the most proud of take a long time to get—to earn."

And with one more laugh, she adds, "Some guy yelled at me one day when I was doing the handicapping on television for Churchill Downs, and he said, 'You have an easy job!' I said, 'I *do* have an easy job, but it's not an easy job to get!'" 🗨️



A Three-Point Landing

Photo by STIRLIN HARRIS

This image, from the Dec. 24, 1965 issue of *The Chronicle of the Horse*, shows rider Jennifer Smith coming a cropper from Mrs. R. Neild's Cinnamon Lad in the preliminary division of that year's national horse trials at Hideaway Farm in Geneseo, N.Y.

Stirlin Harris, who snapped this photo, still runs Hideaway Farm with his wife, Beth. Together they breed Connemara ponies (and stood the renowned eventing stallion Hideaway's Erin Go Bragh) and are longtime members of the Genesee Valley Hunt, coincidentally showcased in this month's Photo Feature.
