

Competing in an amateur event under racing conditions tested the mettle of even an experienced rider

THE LADY RIDER

BY ALETA WALTHER

EDITOR'S NOTE: Former jockey Aleta Walther, now a journalist who serves as Oklahoma correspondent for The Blood-Horse, competed in the National Women's Amateur Cup, a nine-furlong turf race contested at Garden State Park on May 28. Miss Walther and the other riders in the race are members of the Amateur Riders Club of America, which was founded by club president Pierre (Peb) Bellocq. Following is Miss Walther's first-person account of the May 28 race.

As the trainer gives me a leg up in the saddle, my heart races, my adam's apple plummets to my stomach, my face flushes, and my legs turn to jelly. My emotional senses are befuddled. Should I fight or take flight?

Why am I nervous? I rode in several hundred pari-mutuel races and exercised thousands of horses in the 10

years I hustled the Midwestern Thoroughbred circuit.

When Peb invited me to join the Amateur Riders' Club of America (ARCA) last December, it seemed like a fun idea. Besides, I still harbor a big ego, characteristic of most jockeys, and hungered for the excitement of those brief minutes from the paddock to the winner's circle.

As my mount, a big, strapping bay filly named Lady Lamour, steps onto the track, I have second thoughts. Is Italy worth it?

The top two finishers in the race I am about to ride in will represent the United States in the BMF Internike USA-Italy Challenge race the following month in

Milan, Italy. I rationalized my participation in the ARCA as an opportunity to see the world, all expenses paid.

In the post parade, Lady Lamour tosses her head, wrangles her tail, and snorts in a playful manner. It is her way of announcing to the 20,000 or so fans at Garden State Park that she is ready to tackle the 1 1/8-mile turf race. The question dogging me is whether or not I can go the distance.

It has been 10 years since I rode professionally, six years since I did any serious exercise riding, and five years since I left the race track. In those five years, I have been working a desk job as a reporter for various Oklahoma

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Shown with Amateur Riders Club president Pierre (Peb) Bellocq are competitors in the Garden State Park event: Standing (from left) Blythe Miller, Suzi Prichard-Jones, Aleta Walther, Tamara McKinney, Tracey Wessner, Jennifer Warden, Sana Neilson; kneeling (from left) Liz Merryman, Lotte von Bromssen, Wendy Hughes.



AMATEUR RACING

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Miss Walther and trainer Marty Fallon, who saddled Lady Lamour.

newspapers and magazines. No wonder my body is talking to me now.

Sure, I attempted to get fit for the amateur race, but I realize now what a feeble attempt it was—riding my 10-speed bike 50 or so miles a week and periodically galloping horses. Because we have no major race tracks in Oklahoma (yet), I drove about 300 miles a week-end to work horses at a bush track, where anything beyond two furlongs is considered "a route of ground." I got hurt more times the five weekends I rode at that track than I did in the last five years I galloped horses.

Heading for the starting gate I can hear the echoed warnings of some of my friends, and my doctor.

"You're crazy! You're absolutely nuts! You're too old and too out of shape! What are you going to do if you get hurt? It's not going to help your back any. What are you trying to prove?"

I asked myself those same questions after spending a couple of hours in the jockeys' room with the other amateur women riders. The only thing amateur about my ARCA competition, as far as I could tell, was that the girls were heavier and taller than so-called professional jockeys. Many of them regularly ride hunt meetings and steeplechase races up and down the East Coast.

While changing and preparing for the race, I felt like Pee Wee Herman next to Sylvester Stallone. Some of the girls were as solid as professional riders, with calloused hands and stern demeanors.

I thought my past experience would give me an edge over the other girls.

When I saw them, however, I realized that my past hurt me, allowing me to be overconfident, thus ill-prepared for the task at hand.

Halfway into the starting gate, Lady Lamour balks and backs up. Grabbing a handful of mane, I whisper a Hail Mary and wait for her to wheel or rear. Fortunately, the New Jersey-bred has too much class for such behavior.

As my filly is once more led into the starting gate, visions of my friends Jackie Fires and Allen LaBlanc flash through my mind. Both now are wheelchair-bound victims of racing accidents.

As the door clangs behind me, I take a couple of deep breaths, a feeble attempt to regain some kind of composure. I wonder if my fear is obvious to the other nine riders, pony riders, and gate crew. My knuckles are clenched white. Sweat dampens my forehead and palms. My skin tingles.

It seems like a lifetime waiting for the last few horses to be loaded. Will I fall off, be run over, get cut off, break a leg, break my neck, survive?

I figure I can keep myself out of trouble, but I wonder how competent the other riders are. I know nothing about their talents, and they know nothing of mine. On top of that, most of the women never saw their mounts until this afternoon.

Although I had the opportunity to go by and visit Lady Lamour at her barn, I never galloped or worked her. Her trainer, Marty Fallon, would have let me had I arrived a couple of days earlier.

Marty was nice enough to let me gal-

lop a couple of other horses over the dirt track, but I do not know how much good it was, considering the amateur race was over the turf course. I never rode in a turf race. Most of the horses I rode in my professional days were too cheap to warrant a trip over the grass courses of Chicago's Arlington Park or Hawthorne Race Course.

"She's never gone 1 1/8 miles and never carried so much weight, so try to save her," Marty advised.

"So much weight" was an understatement. In my days as a jockey, I never came close to carrying as much lead as Lady Lamour now is toting. The occupational hazard always had me two pounds overweight, but because ARCA riders carry steeplechase weights, Lady Lamour is packing 151 pounds, 25 pounds of it in lead.

Conditions for the May 28, \$10,000 starter-allowance race were: Fillies and mares, 3-year-olds and older which have started for a claiming price in 1987-88; 3-year-olds, 137 pounds, 4-year-olds, 151 pounds, older horses, 160 pounds.

Garden State Park racing secretary Paul Jenkins wrote such conditions in order to make sure the race would attract enough horses, but I didn't think it was fair that the 5-2 favorite was a former stakes competitor which recently raced for a \$75,000 claiming tag, while another filly was a \$7,500 maiden-claimer. Fortunately, my filly's most recent past performance showed her to be a solid allowance horse.

As I lean forward in anticipation of the start, pain shoots through my lower back. Uh, oh! My spondylolisthesis is acting up. Twinging, I grit my teeth, grab more mane, and take a deeper seat.

Three jumps out of the gate, Lady Lamour is tugging to take the lead. What a rush. I take back, as directed by the trainer.

Much to my surprise and delight, all my senses click into action the instant we barrel from the gate. It is something you never forget, like riding a bike.

So I have not forgotten how to race ride, I just thought I had. I am totally aware of what is going on around me and under me, and feeling in complete control.

I want to drop closer to the rail and save ground on the first turn, but it is just too tight for my liking. I let the leaders stretch out a bit further before I drop in from the No. 5 post.

As we head into the first turn, the

race is unfolding perfectly for my mount, which is bouncing along handily in third position. My lungs, thighs, calves, and back, however, already are beginning to burn, and we have five-eighths of a mile to go. In an effort to save myself, I stand up, almost in a galloping position.

A sprinter, Lady Lamour is eyeballing the leader Nancy's Glory, ridden by champion skier Tamara McKinney. On my outside, Tracy Wessner aboard the favorite, Cayman Queen, is closing on me with every stride.

Down the backstretch, we shake Nancy's Glory and take a short lead over Cayman Queen. I get a second wind for the drive down the stretch. In my euphoric state, my back pain and sore muscles take a back seat to the thrill of the race. Italy, here we come!

Just outside the turn for home, however, Wessner inches by. I go to the stick, asking my mount for more, but it just is not there. The gallant filly is gasping for breath, and so am I.

Come on Lady, I urge her with what little strength I have left, hang on for second.

Glancing back, I see a flash of yellow on my right and a dab of maroon on my left. I am nipped at the wire by Ahha, under Wendy Hughes, and Rolf's Ruby, ridden by Suzi Prichard-Jones.

Standing up at the wire, my weary legs try to buckle, my back pinches in protest, and my heart rate borders on cardiac arrest. I console myself with the fact that while Lady Lamour and I have finished the race perhaps a little worse for wear, we are unscathed.

Back in the jockeys' quarters, the other riders congratulate each other for finishing the race without incident. A good reflection on the ARCA. The Garden State amateur race was a long way from the Jersey Derby (gr. II), but in the heat of the race, the thrills and chills felt the same.

With a Coke in one hand and my pain pills in the other, I limp out of the jocks' room thinking I am too old for such nonsense, but realizing I probably will be back next year.

EPILOGUE: Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Prichard-Jones, the one-two finishers in the Women's Amateur Cup, joined four male members of the ARCA in an international competition at San Siro in Milan, Italy, on June 18. Peb's son, Remi Bellocq, finished first, followed by Mrs. Prichard-Jones. American Joe Gillet finished fourth, and Mrs. Hughes was fifth. ■



GARDEN STATE PARK PHOTO BY SAM PRAAT

Miss Walther and Lady Lamour after finishing fourth.