

JUNE 24 Youth Beats

The harness racing 'zine for teens

Striding into Summer



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Youth Beats



A field of horses charges into the first turn at Saratoga
PHOTO COURTESY JESSICA HALLETT

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JAMES WITHERITE
Youth Beats editor

TREVOR EARLEY PHOTO

Letter from the Editor

It's been a fun and eventful spring. For a few days, I got to revisit my old racecalling role, at both Rosecroft and Freehold Raceways. It made for a lot more time up and down I-95 in April and May than I've been accustomed to during the past few springs, but I've always enjoyed the grind, to be fair. And I still relish any opportunity I get to dust off the binoculars and colored Sharpies and call an afternoon of harness racing.

While I was at Freehold, I got to know and work with a bright young woman named Katie Eick. Like me, she's a first-generation participant in our sport, and she's got a knack for writing and photography and all things media. But the similarities end there. I never rated a training mile — let alone put a harness on a horse — before I called my first stakes race or wrote my first recap. Conversely, Katie took an immediate shining to horses from her first up-close interaction with them, and that love of horses led her to her multi-faceted career in our sport. I chatted with Katie after the races at Freehold one afternoon to learn her story, how her path — with more twists and turns than the literal straight shot up U.S. 9 from her home in Howell, N.J., to Freehold Raceway — has helped her expand her skill set, and how her experience in the shed row and on the backstretch has served her in her current role in the Freehold race office.

This issue of *Youth Beats* not only shares Katie's story, but a few others in the under-25 set whose lives have been significantly shaped by Standardbreds. Thanks, as always, for reading, and I look forward to seeing you at the races this summer!

Cheers, James

STANDBREDS

are Amanda Blackford's Passion

It has a catchy advertising slogan, but Ace was definitely not the place for Amanda Blackford. And it had nothing to do with a faulty rake or bum cabinet fixture.

At age 19, the Maryland resident was involved in harness racing, but stepped away for financial reasons and took a job at Ace Hardware. She shot up the employee ladder, quickly being promoted from cashier to assistant manager.

During that time, Blackford did a paddock for Tammy and Gary Crescenze of Northern Creek Farm. Gary was impressed enough to offer her a job, but the lure of the promotion kept Amanda in hardware for a bit longer.

But ...

"It was killing me; I missed the barn work," said the 21-year-old trainer, who has nine wins and \$51,685 in purses in 56 starts this year, all at Rosecroft Raceway. "I missed working with the horses. I decided I didn't want to be inside all day. I liked having a little more freedom than what a regular job gives you."

So, 18 months ago, she took Crescenze up on his offer and has been there ever since. It could not come at a better time, as Blackford has suffered some emotional hits recently. A year ago, she lost her mom, who had battled a long illness that prompted the two to move from Florida to Maryland when she was 4 years old. Then, after moving out just last year, tragedy struck the home she grew up in as a fire burned it to the ground.

"It was pretty rough to get through when I lost my mom," Blackford said. "And that fire was pretty rough. I only moved out last month and we lost a lot."

Amid tough times, however, the horses provide solace. "They absolutely help," she said. "I started with them when I moved up here. I was always around them. I'd go to fairs and dress the horses and watch them race. It was like an addiction right away. You just can't shake it."

Blackford currently trains five horses at Northern Creek. One is a 2-year-old preparing for this season, and she has four race-





21-year-old making her way in Maryland

BY RICH FISHER

horses with R Hot Toddy, Golden Krisp, Sweetheart Deal, and Lookie A Cookie.

Sweetheart Deal has been the best so far, with four wins and \$24,915 in purses this year.

"They say Gary bought that horse as a maiden on my first day working there," Blackford said. "It's been incredible to see him grow. He was a 2-year-old back then, and now he's an Open horse for us. He's a pleasure to work with; by far the barn favorite."

She gained her love of horses while working with her grandfather and uncle, saying "My grandfather loved Ocean Downs. For a long time, he was in New Jersey racing at Freehold and Monticello back in the '80s. He moved down here to Maryland, I moved up from Florida, and I was just around it my whole life."

Upon her arrival in Maryland, Amanda was taken to the Great Pocomoke Fair, which enhanced her equestrian love.

"Everyone could be involved," she noted. "My grandmother was in a wheelchair, she would go in the barn, see all the horses, talk to all the people. It was a great family environment. A long time ago my family had some horses in it, and I was running around the fairgrounds helping them."

When Blackford's grandfather passed away, she became distanced from the racing world. In 2017, when Amanda was 15, her aunt Stephanie DuBrel signed her up for the Harness Horse Youth Foundation Camp, sponsored by the Pennsylvania Harness Horsemen's Association at Pocono Downs at Mohegan Pennsylvania.

It was a fulfilling experience culminating with the exhibition racing finale. In third of the

day's three exhibitions, Blackford drove her horse to victory accompanied by professional driver Jim Marohn Jr.

"My aunt had seen it online. Her two sons had done it when they were younger; she said, 'Hey, I think you'd love this,'" Blackford said. "I went to the camp, and that kind of lit the fire under me to get back into it more seriously. That was a whole lot of fun. I loved doing the Youth Foundation."

Amanda eventually partnered with a friend to buy the horse Rockin Dougie. That is when she began her pursuit of a trainer's license. Cliff White, a mentor whom Blackford met at Pocomoke, was listed as the horse's trainer.

"He's a real nice man," Blackford said. "He lives in Bloxom, Va., and was always stabled at Pocomoke. When we had a couple horses, he would always tell us different remedies to take care of the legs, give us different training ideas. He's so supportive. Every night we race, he gives me a call and wants to talk about the horses and what he saw. He'll always congratulate us."

But when Rockin Dougie got hurt and couldn't race, Blackford was in need of money and had to live in the "real world." That lasted about eight months.

"I got sick of Ace," Blackford said. "At first, I got sick of the cold, but after a while, I decided I didn't like working out in the cold, but I realized being with the horses was better than working at Ace."

Amanda quickly hooked up with the Crescenzes, and her career was underway. She had four starts in 2022, then got her first win

2024 HHYF Events Schedule

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June 25-29
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Oak Grove KY

July 15
Lexington KY

July 24, 25
Goshen NY

July 30, 31
Manalapan NJ



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more information



Ages 11 and up; preregistration
required for summer programs

Field trips / School visits

July 1
Anderson IN

September 17, 18
Anderson IN

September TBA
Corydon IN

Public Events
July 12-14
Breyerfest KY

July 27
American Dream NJ

August 3
Hambletonian NJ

October 24-27
National FFA
Convention IN



in January 2023 when Russell Foster drove John Mac to a wire-to-wire victory in 1:54.2 at Rosecroft. Amanda thought her horse might hit a wall after opening with a blistering :26.3.

“That was pretty shocking; I didn’t believe it when he finally crossed the wire,” she said. “He was not a horse that finished very well. I saw him on the front end, and I thought ‘This is going great, but I don’t know how long it will be going great for.’ It was pretty exciting. My head was in the clouds for a while.”

Blackford finished last season with three wins and \$39,835 in earnings, marks that she has already surpassed this season.

“I’m very happy with this year so far,” she said. “The horses are great to work with. Gary and Tammy are wonderful people to work for and work with. They’re super nice, and they just treat you like family. It’s just a great environment to be in.”

Her highlight came last year when Sweetheart Deal won his first Open race at Ocean Downs.

Things have continued to improve, and she is grateful to her aunt and uncle, Stephanie and Lou DuBrel, who she says “are always behind me and support me no matter what. They love it too.”

Gary and Tammy Crescenze have also been helpful.

“They’ve taught me a lot of things, like when it’s time to sell or buy, how to look for good horses,” Blackford said. “They’ve given me the opportunity to train all these horses. They’re nice horses, and they’re nice people.”

In looking toward her future, Amanda will continue to race in Maryland but eventually hopes to venture north to Harrah’s Philadelphia and the Meadowlands.

As for possibly driving, she feels her smaller size makes it difficult, saying “these horses are so strong, they can easily overpower you. I’m taking that part of things kind of slow.”

Actually, that is how she is taking her entire career for now.

“I don’t really have any kind of plan or idea set,” she said. “It’s just a go-with-the-flow kind of thing.”

She is just happy the flow took her from the murky stream of selling hardware into the sparkling waters of harness racing.



Chasing

Saratoga photographer Jessica Hallett captured this scene of horses barreling for the first turn with a strikingly vivid rainbow in clear view.



RAINBOWS



A Woman Of Many Hats

New Jersey native Katie Eick blossoming into a holistically versatile harness racing professional

BY JAMES WITHERITE

Given Katie Eick's lifelong love for animals, it's hardly surprising that she wound up working in the horse industry. But the 24-year-old New Jersey native's path to the Freehold Raceway race office — where she serves as director of racing Karen Fagliarone's 'right-hand woman' — hasn't been without its share of twists, turns and surprises.

"I always liked animals," said Eick (pronounced 'IKE'), who grew up in Howell, N.J., a mere 10 miles south of Freehold Raceway. "I always was asking my parents for every pet that I could have. I asked for a pony; we settled on riding lessons."

Little did Eick know at the time that her early experience would pave the way for her current career path. Through a riding summer camp she attended as part of her involvement with the Girl Scouts, Eick, then 12, won a contest to attend another camp — one presented by the Harness Horse Youth Foundation.

"I was hooked," she said. "I loved the camp; I got picked to race on Hambletonian Day in an exhibition race. We won — me and Yannick (Gin-gras). I just loved it."

For her next few summer vacations, Eick volunteered with HHYF camps, and her love for horses — Standardbreds, in particular — grew to the point where she decided to make horses a year-round pursuit.

"I started learning how to paddock and how to jog the big horses, I got my groom's license, and

just kept going from there. I quit basketball in high school — that was Saturday mornings — and I came to Freehold Raceway instead to paddock, and I started warming up."

After graduating from Howell High School, Eick began her coursework in animal science at Rutgers University. When the COVID-19 pandemic pushed all of her classes online, she pounced on the opportunity to further her harness racing education as well.

"I would go to the barn and jog in the morning and do my online classes in the afternoon," she recalled. "I got my trainer's license at that time. The following spring, I got a job working for Brett Pelling. A couple days a week, when I didn't have class, I'd ride for him and train."

When Eick completed her degree in 2022, she knew she wanted to stay in the sport, saying, "I knew that I wanted to not hate my job; I knew that I wanted to do something with horses."

Being a first-generation industry participant, she felt taking the plunge into full-time training would be risky, so she pursued other opportunities within the sport and the equine world at large.

"When I went to school, I was planning on doing some sort of equine sports therapy — I got certified in equine massage. That's what I thought I wanted to do, and try to make my clientele the racehorse people so I could stay involved."

Eick was fortunate to be able to put her degree to use right after graduation, landing with a racing-centric startup company with a focus on nutrition. Unfortunately, the company failed to establish its footing, but Eick fortunately landed back on her feet, taking care of riding horses in a New Jersey stable — but she quickly learned that it wasn't for her.

"I didn't like riding horses as much as I thought I did; I like racehorses and racehorse people," she shared. Lo and behold, Eick found her path back to the races when she was sidelined from the equestrian barn with a broken hand.

"I saw an ad on Facebook that Freehold Raceway was hiring," Eick said. "I was, *Well, my hand is broken; I can't go work for a trainer right now.*



Why don't I try this job at the race office? I just needed to get out of the other place — it wasn't racing; I didn't like it. So I ended up applying and getting the job. I found it really interesting and took to it quickly."

Eick's homecoming to Freehold has given her the opportunity to expand her skill set even further. In addition to assisting Fagliarone in taking entries for and crafting each day's racing program,



she handles the track's social media and public relations. All the while, she assists trainer Per Engblom in the mornings at his Chesterfield, N.J., base of operations — a mere half hour west. And the knowledge Eick has gained along the way — both on the backstretch and in the race office —

has given her a much greater appreciation for the sport's inner workings, from all its angles.

"It's really beneficial to understand the other side," said Eick. "When I'm talking to an angry horseman on the phone upset that their horse didn't get in or is in a tough class, I understand that they're trying to get their bills paid. But you need to know both sides of it. Working in those barns,

we enter our horses to race, the draw would come out, and we say, 'Oh, good, we're in an early race, and we got a good post!' But I never thought about what happened in between the entry and seeing the sheet come out. You don't think about all that goes into it. It's been neat to learn A to Z from both the horseman side and the administrative side."



Photos courtesy of Katie Eick & James Witherite

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Inspiration

Tanzi sisters' lives shaped by horses

BY JESSICA HALLETT



Horses have the power to change lives. If you look around the harness racing community, there are many diverse backgrounds that converge into this one industry. Ask any of those horsepeople why they are a part of the business or how they became involved, and there is one common answer: because of the horses.

Since the beginning of time, horses have served a variety of purposes in the world. There are horses that work on farms, as transportation, as companions, and horses that participate in rodeos, shows, and, of course, racing. Some horses also take on the jobs of therapist and teacher. Through occupational therapy and psychotherapy, horses have been essential aids in assisting with mobility, strength, coordination, cognition and emotions. And through education, horses can help guide the way to shape one's future. This is true especially in the case of sisters Jacqueline and Gianna Tanzi.

Jacqueline and Gianna have been heavily involved in the horse world throughout their lives and their ties to the community extend into the world of harness racing, too.

Residents of Allentown, N.J., Jacqueline, 20, and Gianna, 17, started out with horses at the ages of 4-1/2 and 3-1/2, respectively. Both dove in headfirst with their feet in the stirrups of a Western saddle.

"The girls have both been involved with horses since they could walk, going every chance they got

on pony rides," Renee Tanzi, the girls' mother, said. "We spent many picnics only going on pony rides!"

Fast forward nearly 16 years later, and the girls can still be found in the saddle. Both girls ride English and Western, but they especially enjoy competing in Western dressage shows. In addition to pleasure riding and competing on her own, Jacqueline trains horses and teaches lessons. She was involved as a volunteer in the therapeutic riding program at Riding High Farm, also in Allentown, and Gianna currently volunteers at a riding program for people with disabilities.

"I am out of high school now and going to college to be a vet tech," Jacqueline said. "I work at Fair Winds Farm (in Cream Ridge, N.J.) on foal watch in the late winter to early summer. I also help train the yearlings to get them ready for their careers."

The Tanzis' equine educational background included time spent in 4-H, a youth organization with programs focused on health, science, agriculture and more. This part of the industry encourages learning and education through animals, especially horses. Starting at a young age, kids develop skills through working with these animals with the program's four goals in mind: Head, Heart, Hands, and Health. These four goals embody the essence of the jobs of the horse, jobs both well-known and as an 'unsung hero.'

"As part of being in 4-H, we went on many field trips to different horse farms," Jacqueline said. "We go often to Fair Winds Farm to learn



through horses

more about breeding, and we have been to Southwind (Farms, in Pennington, N.J.), as well. Every summer since we were old enough, we have gone to harness camp with our friends at HHYF.”

Thus, involvement in 4-H opened the doors to harness racing for the Tanzis as they were introduced to the Harness Horse Youth Foundation (HHYF). The organization is dedicated to introducing youth to the world of harness racing through an annual summer camp, in which kids learn about harness racing and horse care and then apply what they learn through hands-on work with horses, including harnessing and jogging them. The program culminates to a grand finale of competing in a race at the end of the program.



“Jacqueline and Gianna have been involved in harness racing since they were first in 4-H, going to the Open Space Pace parade, and getting to know Suzanne D’Ambrose and Mark Mullen,” Renee said. “They have opened so many doors for them to learn. They have gone to HHYF harness camp for years with Miss Ellen.”

Ellen Taylor is the executive director of HHYF, and D’Ambrose serves as the secretary of the program. Together, Mark Mullen of Fair Winds Farm and the team at HHYF have hosted equine events to join the 4-H, equine, and harness racing communities. The program and events have proven successful with participants like Gianna and Jacqueline graduating and moving on to bigger things within the equine world — bigger things, indeed, as the girls have built extensive résumés.

“They have won many championships in ECRDA (East Coast Regional Dressage Association) and 4-H,” Renee said. “They have also gotten involved in shows at the Horse Park (of New Jersey). They have won championships for English Intro A up to Training Level 4. They got into Western Dressage and have also won many championships from WDAA (Western Dressage Association of America) Intro 1 to WDAA Basic 2.

“Gianna is very interested in teaching her pony Raven how to drive, and now that we have moved to the farm, that is her next project.”

In addition to success in the arena, Jacqueline and Gianna were awarded the New Jersey Youth Person of the Year Award in 2021 and 2022, respectively.

Their involvement in HHYF extends over multiple years and their ties to harness racing continue, especially with Jacqueline’s employment with Fair Winds Farm. Hindsight is 20/20, and what is seen is two young girls starting in the saddle and then joining 4-H. When 4-H, Fair Winds Farms and HHYF joined forces, the two girls were caught in the crossfire, leading them to change their paths through the influence of the horses.

The final product is a pair of award-winning sisters that now educate and inspire through horses in their communities and future endeavors. The final product is the result of horses having the power to change one’s life.





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