

There are 33 jockeys  
listed to ride on the  
eight-race card,  
and most of them  
will begin their day  
in the sauna.

From left: Joseph Rocco Sr., Yamil  
Rosario, Ramon Dominguez,  
Mario Pino, Art Madrid Jr., Juan  
De Dios Acosta, Ryan Fogelsonger.

# BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE JOCKEYS' ROOM

Story by Sean Clancy  
Photographs by  
Jim McCue

It's 11:23 on Wednesday morning, April 24, at Pimlico Race Course. Racing secretary Georganne Hale pokes her head out of her office looking for somebody to fill a race, trainer Gregg McCarron walks through the empty grandstand carrying a pair of pink silks, a busload of elderly women disperses for a day at the races, a man in a tuxedo carries a dozen plates to an escalator, flower beds are weeded near the wire, the race track gets scraped and raked, the American flag stands at full staff, a maintenance worker pokes around the top of the Preakness gazebo and 10 grown men—jockeys—are huddled in the jocks' room sauna an hour and 47 minutes before the first race.

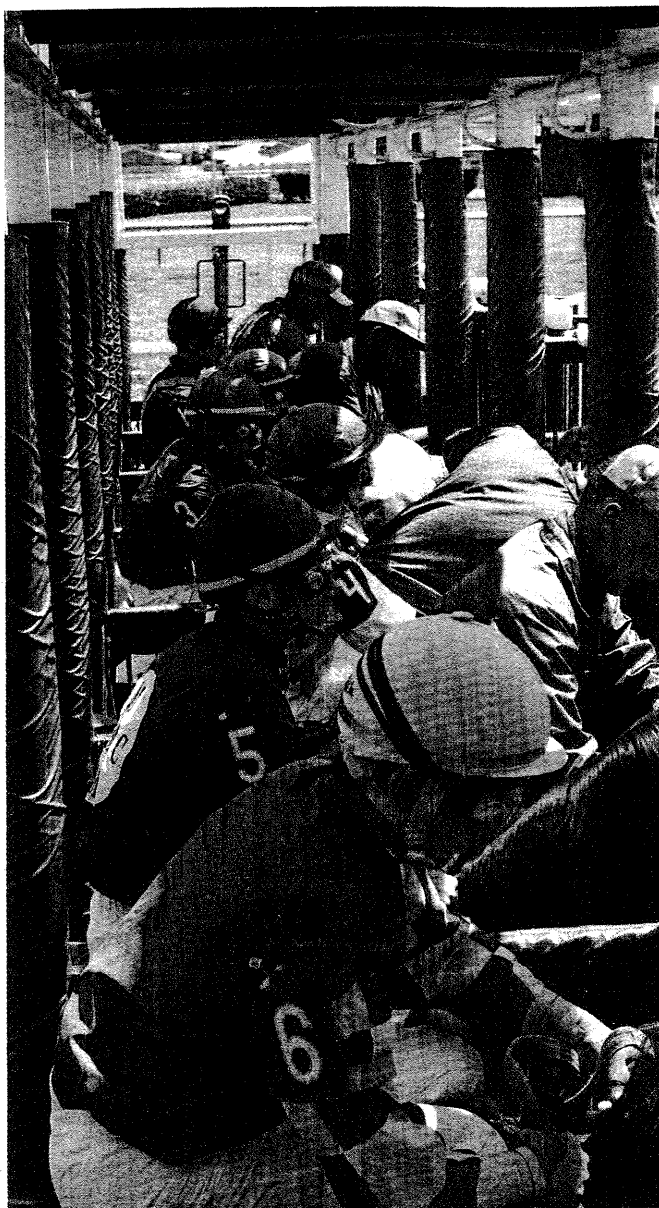
That's how the day starts for most members of the jocks' room. Sweating.

There are 33 jockeys listed to ride on the eight-race card. Nearly one-third of the group is in the sauna at the moment while some have already done their time and even more have a reservation still to fill.

"Come on in, there's plenty of space," greets the one person fully dressed in the steam-filled series of rooms—four in all, one hotter than the next.

John Mellencamp's *Jack and Diane* blares from the third while some jockeys sit and stare, others stand and shave, all suffer in their own individual ways. Weight is never partial as Charles Forrest, whose horses have earned less than \$20,000 at Pimlico this spring, sits right next to Ramon Dominguez whose horses have earned close to \$300,000 at the meet. By the time you count to 10, you're sweating right with them. All interviews are postponed.

Outside the sauna among the 61 wooden "boxes" or lockers, the valets (about 12 in all) put the finishing touches of Pledge on goggles, jockeys watch replays of Sunday's races, hands



Hours of waiting culminate in a minute or less of activity for some jockeys, who must check into the jocks' room by 11 a.m., even to ride late in the day.

follow hands in card games, and a DVD of Bruce Willis's *Unbreakable* gets loaded into a laptop.

Jockeys' room manager Frank Saumell, standing in for vacationing clerk of scales Adam Campola, checks in the jockeys as they come to the room. Each jockey must initial a checklist at Saumell's desk. The rider checks into the room and is required to declare his riding weight and overweight if it applies, sometimes mentioning that it depends on the sauna and he'll get back to the clerk.

The room is quiet, really. A few one-liners get tossed around from one valet to another. A couple of morning gallops are dissected (many valets and most jockeys ride in the morning). The *Daily Racing Form* is read by jockeys and valets. The floor is mopped. An empty shopping cart gets wheeled through the long room. But as a whole, the place is quiet with less than 90 minutes to the first.

Veteran Alberto Delgado, in a red bathrobe over clean but worn-looking britches, dark socks and plastic shower shoes,

relaxes on the couch in the rec room. Former jockey Larry Saumell runs the kitchen, cutting sandwiches and boiling eggs, all with a limp from too many falls. Delgado talks when someone talks to him but otherwise he just passes the time—half-watching replays from Pimlico and other tracks.

"I've been coming here for what's going on 20 years now. Sometimes it gets old, year in, year out, riding the same horses—claimers and allowance horses—but riding a good horse always picks up the spark again," Delgado said. "Every year I get blessed with a good horse. I've ridden some good horses. Colstar, Fighting Notion, Oliver's Twist. Horse for horse I was always partial to Fighting Notion."

You can almost see his eyes searching for the next one.

"I've been involved in tons of spills but I was always very fortunate to be O.K. and find a good horse every year," Delgado said. "I average two or three a day. Business is kinda slacked down a bit with the short fields. I've been my own agent for the last three years but I'm content to ride for my own people and know what I have. The best part is when you work with a horse in the morning and they win. That's a good feeling."

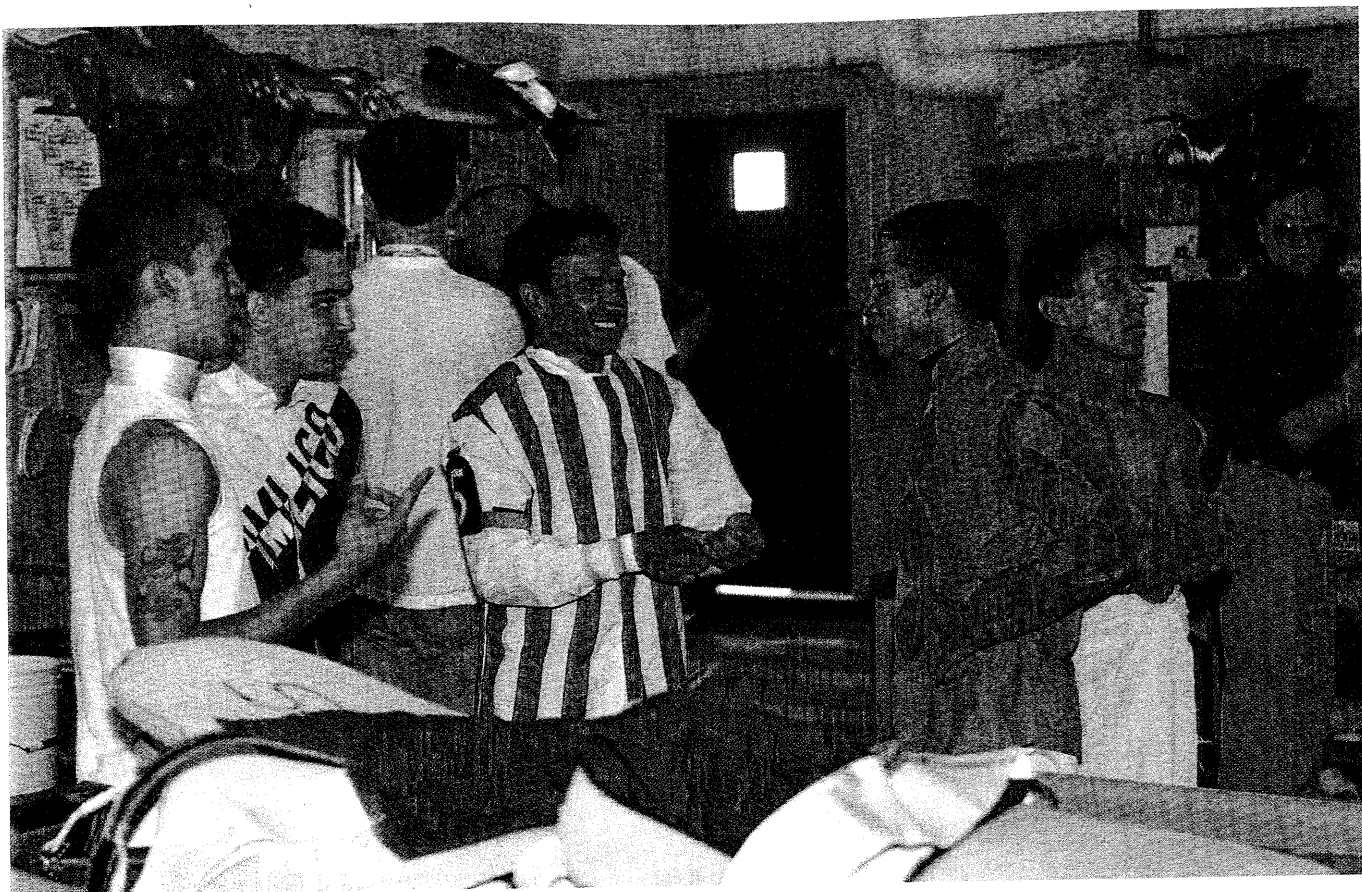
Delgado talks quietly as *Unbreakable* starts to run through the opening credits next to him.

"My weight's not too much of a worry. I say that, but I still have to reduce; I take off one to two pounds every day. I tack [1]14 and leave the light weights to the bug boys," Delgado said. "I wouldn't say it gets boring in here. Even if I'm not riding, I still like to watch races. I still love the game even if it's frustrating sometimes."

A father of three, Delgado brings the job home with him. At least to his youngest daughter.

"My little one loves it. She told me, 'Papa you have to do it like this; hit him left-handed then hit him right-handed real fast. Now write that down,'" Delgado said. "So I won a race the other day and I came home and told her I did exactly what





Talking shop (from left): Yamil Rosario, Hector Ramos, Francisco Maysonett, Raymond Torres and Calixto Juarez.

she told me to do. She screamed, 'I told you, I told you, Papa.'"

Delgado laughs at the story as the room continues to spin around him.

Back in the main jocks' room, 2001 Eclipse Award-winning apprentice Jeremy Rose lies on a bench while his valet Bruce Gill goes through the card with him. Nearby is a clipboard with Rose's riding assignments.

Every valet has a hand-written schedule for the day, usually written up the night before so the jockey and valet can look at it before they go home and know what's in store for the next day. It's the atlas all riders and valets use to get through the card.

Gill's seven-line schedule reads:

4-24

JR

3-115

4-115

5-117 (with a line through it)

6-117

7-122

It's not Morse code. The date is April 24. JR stands for Jeremy Rose. He does 115 in the third and fourth, his horse is scratched in the fifth, he does 117 in the sixth, and 122 in the seventh.

The details come when the two of them handicap the races, each with a program in his hands.

Like an old married couple filling in the lines, "How do we look today? . . . Got a couple of shots. . . There's no speed in the third. . . Ham Smith is always tough. . . Be real tough in the fourth. . . Yeah, Capuano. . . Scratched in the fifth. . . I wonder why Mark's not riding this horse back. . . Don't know. . . Ride for the big man Stuart Janney in the seventh. . . Yeah. . . Got shots in all of them kid."

Gill has plenty of experience reading a program. A veteran of 28 years in the room, the Maryland native was here when Kent Desormeaux broke the record for wins in a year, has seen veterans and bug boys like Steve Hamilton and Charlie Fenwick III come and go, and watched jockeys like Edgar Prado and Mike Luzzi move on to higher ground. But he loves the Maryland jocks' room.

"This is the best room in the country. It's fun, everybody gets along. The riders are a competitive bunch but believe me when one of them wins a race, they all

congratulate each other. There's camaraderie here," Gill said.

"There's always been a bunch of good riders here and it's a tough bunch right now. They could go anywhere and win races. This boy [Rose] is going to be a hell of a rider. He won two stakes the day after he lost his bug. Rick Wilson's on the shelf but he's going to try to come back. Everybody who rides here now likes living around here and that's a big part of it. Look at a guy like Larry Reynolds; he rides seven days and seven nights a week, that's how competitive it is."

Reynolds slides his britches on from a bench a couple of "corners" over from Gill. Each valet runs a corner (even if they're in the middle of the room) that houses the valet and his jockeys, not to mention all their tack, clothes and everything that goes with their life and their job.

About then it's 12:50—20 minutes before the first race.

Saumell's voice comes over the loudspeaker, "Pick 'em up riders. Checking for the first."

Valets and jockeys move with a mission for the first time all day. All the saddles are put out

on their corresponding numbers on a long table in the center of the room before the call to weigh. When they are paged, valets and jockeys take the tack to the scale where Saumell checks off each number.

"O.K., Ramon."

"Good, Alex."

"Good."

"Good, Joe."

"O.K., Mark."

"O.K., Mario."

The tack goes back to the table and the valets take it down the 25 steps to the Pimlico paddock to saddle the eight runners in the first. The jockeys pick up arm numbers and contort themselves trying to pin the numbers to their right shoulders.

Saumell calls the jockeys to the paddock and they pass the valets going in the other direction.

The horses head out of the paddock while Jozbin Santana, Omar Klinger, Mario Verge, Larry Reynolds, Frank Douglas and six valets walk out to the ledge and watch the first. Cigarettes smoke, another round of jokes and soon the horses are in the gate and attention turns to

the maiden claimer going a mile and a sixteenth on the dirt.

Horatio Karamanos on the seven breaks in, Joe Rocco tries to finesse a headstrong Singleton's Dream and Dominguez easily wins the first with Brandy Choice.

The jockey shakes trainer Chip Miller's hand as they walk to the winner's circle and Race 1 is history. Dominguez wipes dirt from his face and tells Miller, "Don't ask me. I'm the worst," when Miller asks him what kind of race the horse should run in next. Jockeys are honest anyway.

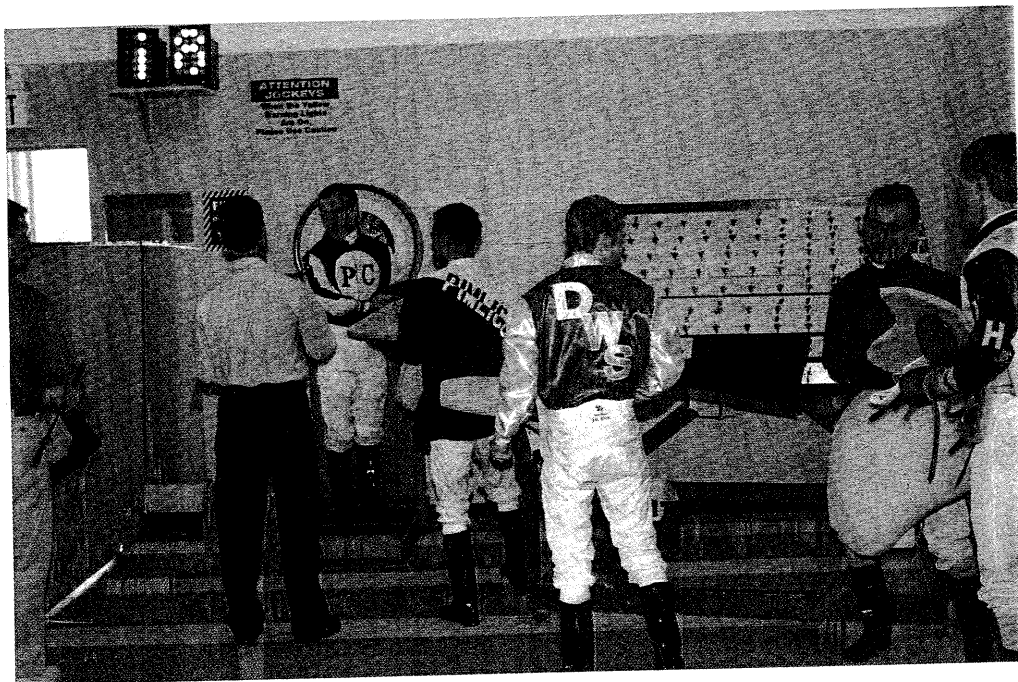
Back in the jocks' room, arm numbers are tossed on the table at the door for jockey and part-time number man Ken McMillan to pick up. Discarded silks hit the same spot for color man Lenny Taylor. The first layer of sand is brushed away from boots, goggles, pants, helmet covers and saddles. Girths are tossed in the dirty pile, a set of britches gets hit by a round of Shout and thrown in the dirty clothes cart, jockeys douse their faces in the buckets set out in each of their corners.

Dominguez swishes his mouth out, watches the replay, and changes his clothes in mindless routine, never stopping completely but knowing exactly how much time he has for the next race. The valets handle all the details, leaving the jockeys more or less alone. Very little is said and a lot is done but without a moment of excitement. It's an assembly line.

In minutes, Dominguez is back on the scale to ride Silver Midnight in the second, Delgado is back in his red bathrobe after finishing second on Mister Slick, Rocco shuffles back to the sauna, 10-pound apprentice Ryan Fogelsonger shakes off the nerves, Anthony Mawing buttons his silks and does the sign of the cross, Reynolds pulls each of his heels to his back and stretches, then waves his whip twice just to make sure it still works like all jockeys do when they pick it up for the first time all day. And the routine of the first race is replayed for the second.

Frank Douglas wins the second on Brilliant Code for his second win at the meet. The joker of the jocks' room, Douglas has tried to write this story all day. "Now," he says,

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Clerk of scales Adam Campola (back to camera) keeps a watchful eye as jockeys weigh in before a race. Jockeys from left are Ken McMillan (on scales), Hector Ramos, Ryan Fogelsonger, Joseph Rocco Sr. and Travis Dunkelberger. At far left is Bruce Gill, who serves as valet for 2001 Eclipse Award-winning apprentice rider Jeremy Rose.

"you have something to write about."

The jockeys walk back up the stairs to the room. They don't look disappointed, though Douglas is definitely more excited than anybody else and they're not tired, though breathing a bit harder than they were on the way out.

Alex Estrada goes to the shower, his day is over. Rocco comes out of the sauna a pound lighter, Fogelsonger with goggle marks under each eye watches the replay, and just like Gill said, Douglas is congratulated by everyone in the room.

"Pick it up riders. Checking for the third," sends the valets and jockeys in the direction of the scales.

Douglas walks past and wants to make sure everybody knows he rode in the Preakness once, Mark Johnston tucks in Jack Jones's silks on the way to pick up his saddle, and Saumell

checks the nine riders for the third.

Forrest wins the maiden claimer with Knight Errant.

"All right Charlie," rings out from every corner. Forrest places his flak jacket on a hanger, spits into a trash can in the middle of the room and the time spent in the sauna is a distant memory.

"You just need something under you, you know that," Jack Gerkin says from the next station over. Forrest just smiles.

"Checking for the fourth."

Johnston swigs down three gulps from a can of Country Time Lemonade of all things and puts on his helmet for Case Made in the fourth. Rose pins the number eight on his shoulder and another round of tack heads off to the paddock.

The only thing that really separates the jocks' room is activity. While Johnston, Rose and Dominguez head down the steps

for another ride, the guys who aren't riding kill time in the other half of the rec room where the grill-smell of the kitchen permeates the air, a tired-looking Equicizer mechanical horse sits idle, two televisions play races from all over the country. The jockeys who aren't booked for the race pass their time sleeping, eating (a little), watching or playing.

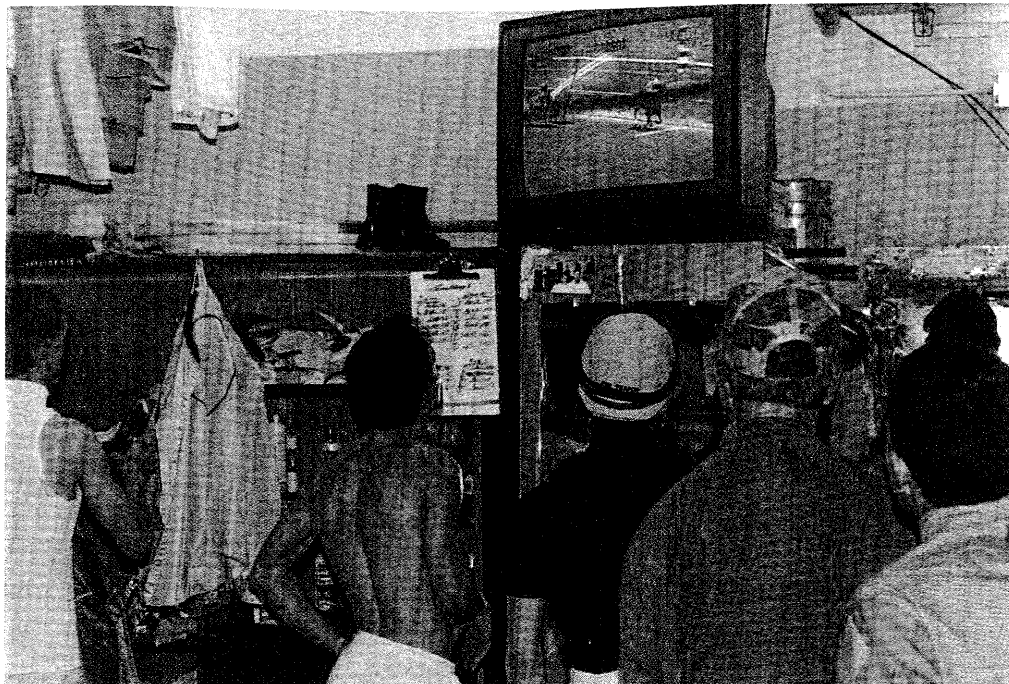
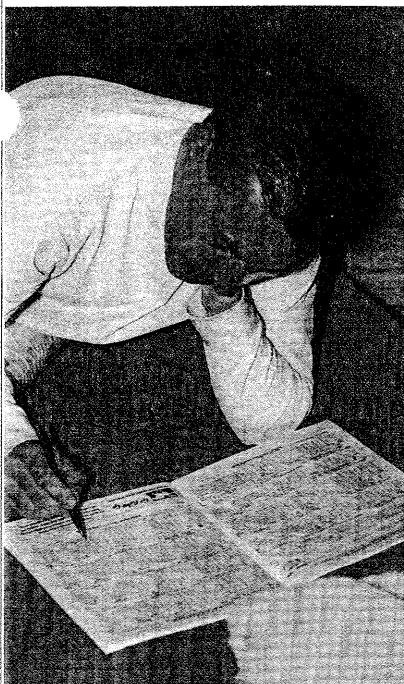
The winningest—and quietest—jockey in the room is here. Mario Pino sits between two sleeping comrades in the corner of an L-shaped couch. It takes Douglas's prodding for Pino to speak up about his accomplishments.

"Here's your man, right here. This is Mario Pino. Have you talked to him yet? He's closing in on 5,000 winners," Douglas says.

Pino is embarrassed by the attention.

"These guys know more about it than me," Pino said about the 5,000-victory mark.





Mario Pino studies the *Form* (left), and a group gathers to watch a race. Two televisions provide continuous showing of races from around the country.

## INVENTORY ON BRUCE GILL'S COUNTER

Cell phone.  
Bottle of orange Gatorade, half-full.  
Opened bag of Tostitos.  
Program opened to the first race.  
Clipboard and today's roster.  
Towel.  
Can of Pledge.  
Two cans of saddle soap.  
One roll of duct tape.  
Plastic wrap.  
Fresh salsa.  
Can of Kiwi Wet Pruf.  
Bottle of rubber cement.  
Stiff scrub brush.  
Two steak knives.  
Pocket knife.  
Eight wrist rubber bands.  
Six pairs of clear Kroop goggles.  
Two pairs of dark Kroop goggles.  
One helmet rubber band.  
Three black slip pads.  
One chamois.  
*The Bear and the Dragon*, by Tom Clancy, opened to pages 18-19.  
Twenty hat covers with J. Rose on the back.  
Twenty-two hat covers with Rick or Rick Wilson on the back.  
One hat cover with NJSEA on the back.

"I've been riding for 24 years I guess, since 1979. I have a routine with my weight, my day, everything. I feel as good as I ever did, well, I guess not as good but I feel pretty good. A lot of these guys talk about training; I hope I don't have to do anything when I'm done riding. I ride all year long and sometimes you can get burnt out but then something happens and it picks it up again. I don't beat myself up and I like what I'm doing."

When any jockey in the room is asked who they like it's Pino's name they come back to every time.

"Who's the best? I won't say best but the hottest is Jeremy Rose," Delgado said. "Mario Pino is very consistent. I take that back, I would say Mario Pino is the best. He's had his share of ups and downs; right now he is doing really good. Sometimes he doesn't get the credit he deserves but he is a very, very smart rider."

"I like the way Mark Johnston sits on a horse. I watch him," Phil Teator said. "And Mario Pino. He's unbelievable."

"Mario doesn't say much but when he does you respect it," Johnston said. "For me he's the best. Here's a guy who's been doing it for 20 years. He's going to win 5,000 races, that's a great accomplishment. And he's a good guy on top of it."

Just like Johnston said, Pino doesn't say much as Rose wins

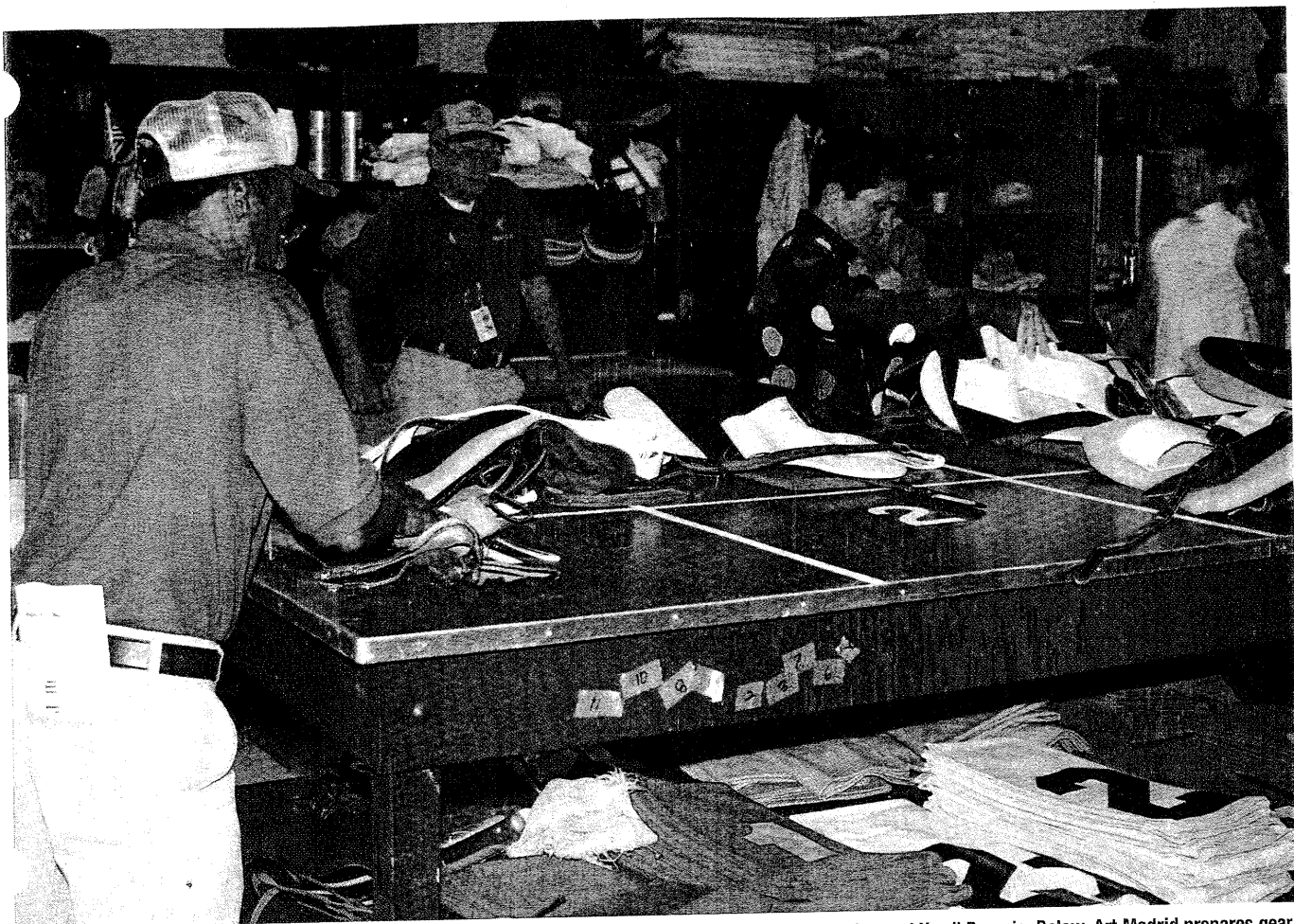
the fourth with Sea Devil. Pino slips back to his corner to get ready for Ghostly Numbers in the fifth. Pino's humility is unforgettable.

And so is Juan De Dios Acosta. The seven-pound apprentice wins the fifth aboard Sir Richardwinalot. And nearly kills himself leaving the jocks' room.

While pulling his traveling tack bag down the steps, the 20-year-old jockey loses his balance and bounces like a bucket of water with his suitcase, which is nearly as tall as he is, barreling down behind him like a bull. His valet Donald Cusick saved his life at the bottom of the steps.

His English is summed up with head nods and shoulder shrugs. Agent Gerson Rodriguez Jr. does the interpreting for the Dominican Republic native who went to jockey school in Puerto Rico.

"He won 28 races in Puerto Rico and this is our little adventure," Rodriguez said. "His dream is to win the Eclipse Award for bug boys. He's very confident. He feels like he can ride with the best journeymen and the best bug boys. His idol is Pat Day. He likes the way he rides. He says he would like to be one-on-one with him one day, if God permits. We are trying to earn our food. He's vicious. No, not vicious. I mean ambitious, that's the word. Ambitious."



Valets William Robinson and Sonny Moore (from left) assemble at table along with jockeys Anthony Mawing and Yamil Rosario. Below, Art Madrid prepares gear.

He better be because, like Gill said, these guys can win races anywhere.

Travis Dunkelberger takes the sixth with a frontrunning ride aboard Grand Code.

Teator takes his turn winning the seventh with Autumn Creek, a filly he talks about like a kid talks about his first pony. Teator was born about the time Pino started on his 5,000 journey. Where Pino comes across as a consummate professional, the 24-year-old Teator comes across as the kid in the candy store. Not that the 1997 Eclipse Award-winning apprentice isn't professional. He moved his tack from the tough New York circuit and has found a solid spot in the Maryland riding colony.

"I love it. I can't believe I'm here. My dad was a two-dollar better and I was hanging over the rail with him. We never even went to the clubhouse," Teator said. "Now to be doing it, it's unbelievable. I remember reading the book *The Kid* about Steve Cauthen. He talked about going up and doing his Eclipse Award



speech, how he looked down at his parents before he spoke, then there I am doing the same thing. The whole thing is still hard to believe."

Teator is a New York native, Saratoga to be exact, but is well aware of the difference in atmosphere.

"People tend to stay to themselves more in New York. It's more a family here. If a guy has

"It's more a family here [in Maryland]. If a guy has a party everybody shows up. If a guy gets hurt everybody pitches in money."

a party everybody shows up. If a guy gets hurt everybody pitches in money," Teator said. "New York was so tough once I lost the bug. I did O.K. for about a year but then it was really hard. It was a good move for me. I like it here. I might have a Preakness horse this year. It would be something just to ride that race, to hit the board. . . that's why I came here."

Teator has the ride on Nancy Alberts's Magic Weisner who was nearly unbeatable in Maryland this winter.

"If I win the Preakness you can write that story," Teator said. "The Cinderella story."

In what amounts to about three and a half hours, the last race goes running past. The five-furlong turf race is won by Splendeed and Mario Pino in



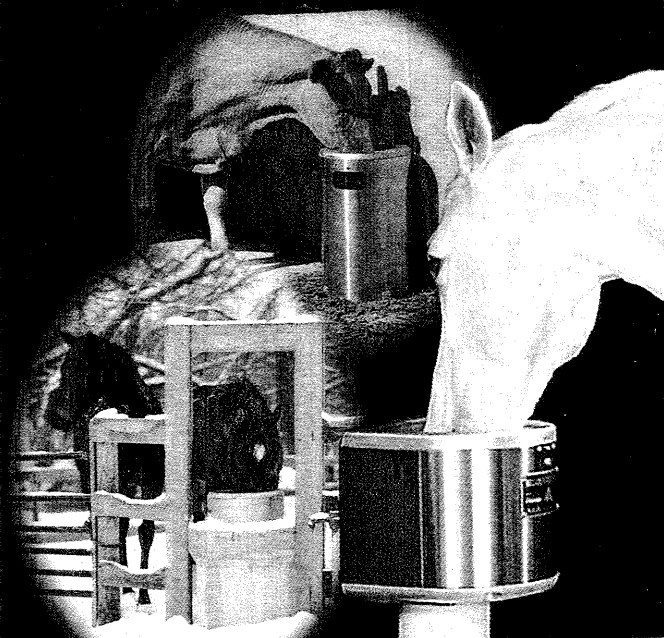
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:56.14—just missing the course record by .03 seconds. In typical Pino fashion, he walks up the stairs, smiles and says thank you for the congratulations. That's all. He's out of the room and on his way home in under 15 minutes—one more closer to 5,000, not that's he's doing the math.

Nine horses behind Splendored is Trapper Meek and Brent Bartram. The jockey was in the room all day to ride one race. The horse broke in the air, spotted the field five lengths and it was all over. Bartram smacked his number seven pin on the metal pole at the top of the steps and went to the showers after a long, useless day.

Johnston and his longtime valet Ray Kimball are the last to leave the room, thanks mostly to a long conversation at the end of the day. A day that produces eight different winning jockeys in eight races, none of them Johnston who is always near the top in the Maryland standings. The 31-year-old jockey ended his day on a pick-up ride who was anything but a pick-up.

Mr. Fasty shipped from Philadelphia Park and went to the post without benefit of a lead pony. Johnston turned to gallop the giant chestnut to the start and was instantly on his way. The horse's head went up, Johnston's hands went up and if it weren't for an outrider they might still be going around there. After that, the horse balked and backed up when it was time to go to the gate.

Johnston never got excited.

"It was kinda like a rodeo, a little excitement to the day, part of the job. They're animals. He was having a bad day like we all do. You have to try to be patient and sympathetic to them," Johnston said. "I thought I had a couple of shots today but as long as you walk to the shower on your own power you had a good day. I ride for good people and the wins will come."

Johnston started riding races in 1989. Going winless on a card doesn't fluster him and neither did Mr. Fasty and his rodeo act.

"You're never scared out there, it's more like a rush of adrenaline. Just a quick shot of adrenaline if a horse cuts you too close, whoa. I don't think you have enough time out there to be scared," Johnston said. "There's been times, like after a fall, that it takes a couple of rides to get your confidence back and

that's miserable. You know the danger is there but I have so much love for the game, that I guess you accept it. It's what I love to do so you deal with the danger."

The jocks' room and all its characters play a big part in that love.

Kimball has been with Johnston since he started in Maryland back in 1989. The former jockey takes care of two riders—Pino and Johnston. It's a hell of a family.

"Oh, I don't work for them. It's not a job. We just do it. It's fun, play time," Kimball said. "We work our asses off but it's not in your mind—work—which makes it a lot easier. When my riders are out there, I'm out there with them. I'm right there every race they ride. I get a high from it. I'm in it, which is fantastic."

Johnston is in and out of the shower while Kimball slides his shoes on to go home and goes through a checklist for the next day.

"I have the sheet made out for tomorrow," Kimball said. "First thing I'll do is check the board, mark the program, hang the silks, get the girths that were washed, get the saddles out, clean the goggles. Mario likes three pair all the time. Mark likes four pair going long, three pair going short. When all that is done, I put my hat on and my shades and I run a mile. I had a bypass and I have to take care of myself."

Johnston summed it all up.

"It's the best room I've ever been in," Johnston said. "There are a lot of good things about Maryland racing; the people here are one of them. The guys I ride with, you have your arguments, but I think it's a very generous group of riders. Very competitive, very skilled. They ride aggressively but safe."

"As much as I love my wife and like to be home, I look forward to coming here. I guess when I retire, I'll miss the jocks' room as much as anything. It's family."

The day in the life of the jocks' room is over. Frank Douglas's wisecracks are silent, Larry Saumell's kitchen is closed, the sauna is aired out, new sheets are already up on the clipboards.

And tomorrow, Ray Kimball will put three pairs of goggles on Mario Pino's helmet, four on Mark Johnston's going long and three going short. \*