

Jockey with Tucson ties outraces demons for Derby bid

By Patrick Finley

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Garrett Gomez is paid to be in control.

Thighs and legs squeezing against a saddle, hands clenching a horse's reins, Gomez made his bosses \$14.2 million last year alone by urging horses across the finish line first.

The Tucson-born jockey has a chance to become a legend today when he mounts trainer Bob Baffert's horse Bob and John in the Kentucky Derby.

There was a time when his edge became his hell. He didn't like to fly because he wasn't controlling the plane himself. He sought comfort in the solitary numbness of addiction, and almost died because of it.

Alcohol and cocaine addiction landed him in jail and then rehab, and out of horse racing for 21 months from the end of 2002 until September 2004.

"When you get out of control, it's a fear factor of not controlling your environment around you," he said. "But I don't really control my horse. My horse controls me."

The horses Gomez rides have been bred for racing, generations of sires and mares raised to charge through furlongs.

Gomez, 34, was bred to be a jockey. His father, Louie, rode horses for a living, moving his family to different stops around the Southwest.

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"We were like gypsies," said Sandy Gomez, Garrett's mother.

The family was in Tucson — Louie raced often at Rillito Park — when Garrett was born on New Year's Day in 1972. The family kept moving, but Garrett would return to Tucson to visit family members during the summers.

Garrett dropped out of a New Mexico high school in 10th grade to race full time. By 17, he had taken up drinking around the track, a kid in a sport dripping with drugs and booze, be it to cut weight or cut loose.

"It's like going to Vegas," he said. "Every night, I wanted to get drunk. It didn't matter.

"You're at a very young age, being given a lot of money. You're expected to grow up really fast, and a lot of us don't grow up."

Just as Gomez was raised to be a jockey, he was bred to be an addict.

"I blamed myself," Sandy said. "I was like, 'It came from my part of the family.'"

Sandy's sister, Karen Corsi, lives in Tucson and is a recovering addict.

"I really believe I was born one," Karen said. "My family, one drink and it's all over."

Gomez fell into the quicksand of addiction. When his wife, Pam, became pregnant with his daughter, Amanda, she told him to stop using drugs or leave.

He left.

Friends and family members literally carried Gomez to rehab and out of drug houses, but nothing worked.

"We tried to trick him into coming (to Tucson) so he wouldn't kill himself," Corsi said.

Out of racing for six months, he was arrested on July 3, 2003, in Temecula, Calif., on charges of possession of a controlled substance and drug paraphernalia, being under the influence of a controlled substance, and for failing to appear in court on a previous charge.

He spent 40 days in jail in Riverside County and entered a rehabilitation center late in 2003.

Finally, Gomez — who has another son and daughter from a previous marriage — realized



JAMES CRISP / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Jockey Garrett Gomez, a native Tucsonan who was out of racing for 21 months between 2002 and 2004, is a 12-to-1 shot to win the Kentucky Derby today astride Bob and John. He rode Sinister Minister, above, in April.

he had a lot to live for.

"I've had different bottoms," he said. "For some reason, I started paying attention to what was important."

Since returning to racing in September 2004, Gomez, 34, has been one of the hottest jockeys in the country.

Last year, he won the \$1 million Del Mar Pacific Classic and took home 62 victories for the top spot on Hollywood Park's spring/summer schedule.

He was given the Bill Shoemaker Award last year as the top Breeders' Cup jockey after winning two Breeders' Cup World Thoroughbred Championships races in October. Atop Bob and John, Gomez won the \$750,000 Wood Memorial in April.

A win today on Nogales native and UA alum Baffert's

horse would cement Gomez's legend. Bob and John is a 12-to-1 shot running from the No. 7 gate.

Gomez's parents will watch the race from their home in Riverside, Calif., where they are watching Garrett and Pam's two children.

Sandy has taught Amanda how to cheer; from the moment the horses leave the gate, the 3-year-old screams "C'mon, Daddy!" at the screen.

Sandy will cheer, but not too loudly. During the Pacific Classic, she screamed so violently that her neighbors called the police, fearing there was something wrong.

Gomez's aunt Karen will watch the race from Tucson. Now on her ninth step in Alcoholics Anonymous, a sober Karen says Garrett will contin-

ue to inspire her, win or lose.

"He went down so far, so fast," she said. "It makes it even more special."

Gomez, who is a member of Narcotics Anonymous, won't need a win to know he has made it.

"For me, it's more like your basic everyday something that goes on," he said. "I find myself noticing things that normal people notice — my girl dancing around in her ballerina dress, watching how her mind's working."

"I've become more observant. I'm taking in a lot of things."

"Before, it was all about me. My world isn't all about me today."

Even if the race makes him the most famous jockey in the world.