



op/ed

by Frankie Lovato Jr.

THE LAST LEG-UP

The publicity and well-deserved outpouring of sympathy going to Ramon Dominguez, who sustained a career-ending injury early this year, is another reminder about how dangerous racing can be, even for one of the world's top jockeys.

I was recently listening to some racing commentators talking about the unfortunate end to the 36-year-old's career, during which he achieved 4,985 wins and over \$191.6 million in purse earnings. They said how hard it must be for a jockey to deal with being forced into retirement rather than choosing when and how to end his career. There was also talk about what Ramon is going to do with his life now, which is something every jockey has to deal with in some manner.

This is all very close to home for me. My father, Frank Lovato Sr., was a jockey forced by a racing accident to retire from riding. I, on the other hand, chose the day to walk away from my career. Whether by choice or because of injury, it is not easy for a jockey to just move on with his or her life.

Walking away was one of the hardest decisions of my life. Fortunately, I had a back-up plan, namely, something I created called the Equicizer. I initially developed the Equicizer to help me rehabilitate from my own racing accident, and I had no intention at that time to make it into a business.

Even so, my heart was not ready to walk away--and for some jockeys, it never is--but my body had had enough. My weight was bad, my back was bad, I was hiding the pain in my shoulders from everyone. I was falling apart and was worried that were I to go down again, there would be no more bouncing or rolling left in my body; I felt instead as though I would shatter in a thousand pieces.

On top of everything, obtaining rides on good horses and winning races was becoming harder for me as I was competing against kids half my age. It was time, and I mustered up the courage to call it quits while I was still in one piece. Still, with all the rationalizing and even plain common sense, it was extremely hard for me to walk away.

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It was like taking the family dog that you'd had since you were a little kid to the vet to be put to sleep. I agonized for weeks. On my last day of being a jockey, there were tears as I was driving to the track, going into the jocks' room, suiting up, getting on the scale (something I hated), walking to the paddock, riding in the post parade and loading in the gates, all for the last time. It was all done with a lump in my throat and a hole in my heart.

Twenty-five years as a professional jockey was over; it was all too surreal. This is what I was born to do, everything I knew. How hard I had worked, all the dreams I'd had since I was four years old, any chance of winning the Kentucky Derby--all was over and done. The bottom line for any jockey, whether their career is ended by choice or injury, is the fact they will likely have to deal with great fear and emptiness. The outside world can be a scary pool of ice water compared to everything we know and are good at. A jockey may feel like he or she is the CEO of a company when riding and winning races, but off the track, many of us wouldn't have the credentials or experience to get a job that would pay enough to make rent.

Many jockeys, myself included, started this career as kids, and when I say kids, some of us were literally children. The race track and riding race horses is all that most of us know and have to fill our resumes.

Jockeys are different in many respects than other athletes. Being unprepared for life after riding is not out of total ignorance or disregard to having a back-up plan.

The Last Leg-Up cont.

A jockey's life in the United States does not consist of a job with a stable salary or sponsorships. You only get out of it what you put into it, hopefully, with some winners at the end of the rainbow. The mechanics of it all do not always allow a jockey to put any time or energy into building a back-up plan, padding a resume, getting an education, etc. A jockey cannot just put 90% into this and expect great results. It has to be everything you've got, and cross your fingers.

Because of all this, many jockeys can't do anything else, like my dad, a top rider in the 60's and early 70's who was a jockey with nothing else in his bag of tricks other than what he was great at, which was being in the saddle. A morning training accident ended what he did best. My dad did not want to do anything else. He loved what he did, and for him, there was nothing better nor anything he was more comfortable doing. When he was riding, he was "home," and happy.

When I counsel aspiring riders through our Jockey World forums, media, jockey camps, etc., there's no sugar coating. I emphasize that it's not all about being small or wanting to go fast; it's also about the injuries, the anguish and the average wages, all of which make up the reality of the territory. I do understand the dream though, but plead with them to have a back-up plan and to finish their education first. When I started out, it was practically unacceptable to start later than 16 years old.

Now, with women entering the profession in greater numbers, we're actually seeing a growing acceptance of older newcomers, and even some college graduates. The perception of being older and more mature is becoming a more attractive, acceptable and respectful manner of entering the profession.

For any active jockey, knowing that that last ride is coming, sooner or later, I would also encourage them to find a second passion, something they enjoy and can be good at. As independent contractors, it's up to us to find work and life after the saddle.

Ramon Dominguez was nowhere near being ready to retire and was on top of his game. His accident cut short a brilliant career that was rolling like a freight train down a mountain, not slowing down anytime soon. It is sad when we see brilliance end due to an accident. Ramon likely had hundreds if not thousands more winners, including Breeders' Cups and Derbies in his future, but instead he is looking for something, anything, that can come close to filling that void.

For a jockey, sliding on a pair of boots and helmet each morning before the sun rises, the biggest fear is not the danger in riding; it's the fear of not being able to ride, not having that chance to win a race. Getting the opportunity to ride and win starts as an obsession; if you get a taste of winning, it becomes an addiction, a high that nothing can replace.

I actually think deep down, in some twisted manner, many jockeys would prefer that an injury end their career; perhaps it is easier than to pick that day to walk away. I can see it as a matter of pride, like getting discharged from the military with a Purple Heart. After all, jockeys talk about our broken bones as if they were trophies.

Jockeys are a rare breed who have worked so hard and put in so much time, effort, desire, and dedication into this passion and obsession that drove them through thousands of mornings putting on a pair of boots and helmet and trying to get mounts, and thousands more afternoons of trying to get to that winner's circle.

Regardless of whether they're choosing to one day walk away or having it chosen for them, and regardless of what they'll do after that career ends, a jockey's greatest fear of all is when it ends: the day they get that last leg-up.

Frank Lovato Jr. won the Eclipse Award as top apprentice in 1980. He retired in 2004 after 25 years in the saddle. Lovato is the founder of Jockey World (www.jockeyworld.org), a non-profit organization dedicated to fan education and to providing career-building tools to people of all ages in horse racing. He is currently producing an educational video series called '365 Days of Racing Terminology' which can be accessed through the Jockey World website and on youtube. To learn more about him visit www.franklovatojr.com or reach him at frankie@jockeyworld.org.