

Student Voices: How A Summer Job Became A Lifetime Passion

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I first discovered horses by chance in the summer of 2000. An old employer who had hired me as a busboy in his restaurant some time ago was also a commissioner on the New Jersey Racing Commission. Aware of my displeasure with working for the restaurant's new owners, as well as with cleaning tables "for peanuts," he approached me with an alternative job offer.

The potential job was an odd one. On the upside, it was a state job and paid about ten dollars an hour — which is not bad money for a sixteen-year old. However, the downside was that I would be working with enormous, temperamental racehorses as a "pee catcher," which is how my friends described the job. The purpose of collecting the urine was so that it could be tested for illegal substances following a race. My official title would be "animal health inspector," the irony of which is hard to miss.

Having never more than observed grazing horses from a fence at a distance, I knew that this job was certainly over my head. Despite this, I took the job, risking my life with gargantuan creatures that wanted to eat me and kick me around the stall like a soccer ball as I whistled a melodious tune in an attempt to make them urinate. Fortunately, after a few months of working for the Racing Commission, I became much more comfortable around the horses. I actually enjoyed being in close proximity to the active cast members in New Jersey's rendition of "The Sport of Kings." I soon became enthralled with the thrills of horse racing.

Upon the conclusion of my first summer meet working at Monmouth Park, I found myself jobless and missing the track and the horses. Since I enjoyed working around horses, I thought about a possible future with them. I took a job cleaning stalls and maintaining three pregnant thoroughbred mares at a farm in Colts Neck. I worked there four to five days a week in exchange for free riding lessons. I soon realized how much I disliked riding horses. But I continued to work at the farm, minus the free lessons, to gain something I consider more valuable today: horsemanship. Truth was, the joy that I received just from being in the presence of these remarkable animals was more thrilling than riding.

The following summer I worked again at Monmouth, only now I was walking horses for a trainer, and soon I worked my way up the ladder. I became a groom and also an assistant, readying the horses on race days. For two Monmouth meets I groomed horses and improved my understanding of them. Now, in the Equine Science program at Rutgers University, I have never been happier.

I am captivated by working with horses and their diverse physiological markers of exercise and performance. For the past couple years I have been obtaining research credits by working

with Dr. Ken McKeever, associate professor in the Department of Animal Sciences. This year I conducted a twelve-credit research project looking at a particular gastric ulcer medication and its potential to delay fatigue in equine athletes during exercise. In May 2007 I graduated with a bachelor's degree in Animal Science (Equine Option). I am interested in working towards a Ph.D. in the field of physiology using the horse as a research model.

Aside from working on my senior thesis, maintaining two jobs to support myself and my education, and continuing to complete coursework toward a degree, I also was collaborating with a fellow undergraduate, Justin Milizio, to better prepare myself for a future in equine science. Together with Dr. McKeever we worked on two additional papers to submit for review by the end of the academic year. One study detailed an analysis of diurnal blood lactate levels in the horse and another tested an electrolyte supplement for its effects on total carbon dioxide in plasma during intense exercise.

Needless to say, horses have become a large and wonderful part of my life. In January 2000, my brother Frank passed away in the Boland Residence Hall fire at Seton Hall University. Since then, no coping mechanism other than working with horses has brought me more peace, solace, and closure in the wake of his passing. The horse has been a particularly therapeutic part of my life. Its honesty and beauty have been my stairway to the clouds. My time spent with horses has been a great release from the stresses of my life. I have chosen to devote my life to understanding horses and helping to correct problems in them as they have helped me correct my own life.



Dr. Ken McKeever, left, and student Tom Caltabilota prepare Bella for an exercise trial on the treadmill. Photo by Nick Romanenko. Used with permission of Aresty Research Council.