

Longshot: Horsewomen Who Surpass Expectations

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Layers of Discrimination

Horsewomen have been a rarity; minority women, especially so. Historically, women with a desire to work within the horse industry faced long odds. They were up against both racial discrimination and sexism. African American horsewomen exhibit strong resolution and endure extraneous pressure.

The first female African American trainer was Sylvia Bishop. She noted of her early experiences on the track, "When I began training back in 1938, men were definitely shocked and surprised to see me. The fact that I was a woman, and on top of that a Black woman, was almost too much for some of the fellows."¹

Later, the first female African American jockey, Cheryl White, called herself a jockey, not "a jockette". She said, "The media made this term up... My license will say the same things the guys' say."²

Overcoming Professional Obstacles

Women persevered to overcome exceptional difficulties. For example, Cheryl White's jockey license proved difficult to come by. As an apprentice jockey, she lost her first two races. Stewards told her she would need more experience before earning her full jockey license. White was disqualified in her third race after finishing in third place. They ordered her to complete two weeks of extra training before they would consider her again.

Another example is Sylvia Bishop, who chose to step in for her brother-in-law when he was temporarily restrained from training. She ran his stable and her own, producing winners from both.³

Sacrifices in Personal Lives

The pressure to perform is ever present in horse racing. These African American women dealt with the burdens of the barn in addition to responsibilities in the wider world. Bishop ran her foster mother's tavern while also raising her daughter, Laverne, besides her long hours in training.

Cheryl White's comeback to race in Pimlico's all-female Lady Legends race required extra measures to prepare. "I believe that I have lost somewhere in the vicinity of 35-40 pounds. You name it, I've done it; different diets, not eating, laxatives, water pills. Went to the gym, went walking up mountains, sweatsuit, a little bit of everything," White said.⁴

White and Bishop exemplify the extraordinary efforts that women have made to ensure their position and success within the male dominated structures of the Thoroughbred industry.

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Footnotes

¹ Schelzig, "Sylvia Bishop, African American Race Horse Trainer."

² Kisner, "Teen-Aged Girl Cracks Barrier On Race Track."

³ "Lady Horse Trainer."

⁴ Neff, JOCK: The Female Jockey Documentary.