

Spotlight On: FHBPA Board Member Ron Spatz

When Ron Spatz found his first job at the racetrack, he was not in search of a career. Spatz was a typical 20-year-old on break from college, looking to make a little money and enjoy the Jersey Shore. Growing up in Union City, he'd always liked animals. "I'd bring home every pet I could find – dogs, cats, turtles, frogs," he said. But he never expected the highlight of that summer vacation to be working with the horses.



"Something happened that summer," he recalled. "Being around the horses, they just drew me in. I went back to school for a few months, but I knew that was not where I wanted to be. The racetrack, that was it for me. I'd found my niche."

He left Monmouth College and an unfinished degree in business administration behind, and never looked back.

Spatz celebrates five decades in racing this year, the last four as a trainer in South Florida. He has spent the last five years dedicating his time and energy to the industry as a Board member of the Florida HBPA.

"I didn't have a lot of interest in running for the Board, to be honest," Spatz said. "I had friends who were on the Board, and there was a lot of dissension, a lot of conflict. But [then-Board member] Bill Kaplan came to me and said, 'you've been in racing a long time, don't you want to give something back?' I thought about it, and I realized he had a point. I had more free time, so I talked myself into it."

Spatz takes his role seriously. He looked to more seasoned Board members, Treasurer Tom Cannell in particular, for guidance as he learned the HBPA ropes. "Tom has been my mentor on the Board. He is one of my clients, and he is a good friend," he said.

Now a member of the Bylaws and Scholarship Committees, Spatz concentrates his efforts on the challenges that affect the day-to-day business of training horses

"I could go on and on about the issues we face," he said. "We have year-round racing, so we have to spread the purse money out over a long period of time. Year-round racing is hard on the track, it's hard on the people, and it's hard on the purses. We have to keep up with the Joneses to keep horsemen here, and we are working on it. We have to get innovative to make our purses competitive."

He is also focused on ways to improve the quality of life for the backstretch workers.

"I'm proud of the work we do for the backstretch," Spatz said. "We have top-notch dental and eyeglass programs, we provide scholarships for the workers and their kids, it's all good stuff. Horsemen's groups started as Benevolent and Protective Associations. We do so much more now, but we don't want to lose sight of the fact that we are here to help the backstretch people."

The New Jersey native was quick to credit Pastor Tom LaPointe with the success of the Florida HBPA's backstretch programs.

“One of the greatest assets we have is Pastor Tom,” Spatz said. “He works with us on all the backstretch benevolence, he does the legwork for the outings, for bike and backpack giveaways. He gets people to the clinic when they’re not feeling well, he gets people the help they need if they’re struggling with substance abuse. Without him, we could not do the work we do.”



Herb Oster has also been a crucial addition to the HBPA team.

“Herb does a great job,” Spatz said. “He puts in the time, he’s always available. If you need something done, you talk to Herb.”

Spatz knows first-hand how important the programs are to the people caring for the horses at Gulfstream Park. He worked his way up through the ranks as a groom and assistant trainer at Monmouth Park for trainers Budd Lepman, Jimmy Croll and Greg Sanders.

“When I was coming up with Budd Lepman, we had such a great crew,” he reminisced. “We worked together, and we had a lot of pride in our work. You don’t see that as much; things have changed. I know it’s a hard life, it’s tough working seven days a week. People used to be into it, it was their life. Now they have families, they have obligations, the racetrack is not their first priority. Things are different now, and we have to be flexible.”

Spatz has been rolling with the changes since he took out his trainer’s license in 1982. He won his first race with his first starter, Fast Change, at Calder just two days before Christmas that year. The lifelong horseman notched his 800th victory with I Get It during the very last meet at Gulfstream Park West, formerly Calder, last October. I Get It is the latest Spatz success story.

“I like her sire, Get Stormy, so we bought her for \$8,500 [at OBS October as a yearling],” the trainer remarked. “She won five of her first nine starts, she placed in a graded stakes, then we sold her to Gary Barber for a lot of money. He let me run her one more time before he sent her to Mark Casse, and she won a stakes [Sanibel Island at Gulfstream in March].”

He added, “That’s what I like to do, to bring young horses along. I love going to the barn, working with them, watching them develop. I enjoy seeing them fulfil their potential.”

Being hands-on with the horses is important to Spatz.

“I never wanted to have a big stable,” he said. “When I was younger, I had 30-32 horses and that was plenty. Now, having more than 25, that’s out of my comfort zone. I put a lot of time in with my horses. With too many horses, and too many employees, that gets too demanding.”

In addition to I Get It, stable standouts have included stakes winners A Sea Tripp, Alix M., Art G Is Back, Chispiski, Croton Road, Mo Cash, Noble Robyn, and Redoubled Miss. But it would be hard to beat the record of Carterista. Purchased for just \$10,000 as a 2-year-old, the Florida-bred gelding went on to win 27 of his 102 starts, including the Grade 3 Miami Budweiser Breeders’ Cup Handicap and Grade 3 Tropical Turf Handicap. He earned \$753,599.

The story was not exactly a fairy tale, however. Spatz didn't know what he was getting himself into when he agreed to take a few horses, including Carterista, for owner Siegfried Mertins of S.A. of South Florida, Inc. The horse was difficult; the owner even more so.



Spatz was able to iron out the issues with Carterista.

"He was very tough in the starting gate, he'd run into the gate, try to run over the top of people, he didn't want to be in there," he explained. "We worked with him, and we got him OK'd."

The chestnut, overlooked at 96-1 in his second career start, cruised "flagfall to finish" to win by 3 ½ lengths, but there were still bumps in the road. He finished off the board in his next three appearances.

"He started to get worked up going over for his races," Spatz said. "He'd wash out, he wasn't giving me his best. I finally dropped him for \$35,000, he won for fun, and that was a turning point. He matured."

Carterista also had a massage therapist, enjoyed his fill of grapes, peaches and plums, and slurped carrot juice straight from the feed tub. Ultimately though, Spatz said the key was, "He was very fast, very talented, and we got along."

Not so Spatz and Mertins.

"He fired me two or three times," Spatz said with a laugh. "But after a while, I'd get the call: 'Ron, it's Siegfried, can you take the Carterista back?' That became the pattern."

Eventually, Spatz had had enough. "I fired the owner. He had threatened me so many times, I took matters into my own hands."

He had no qualms about making that call, looking only at the upside of training an athlete like Carterista.

"Carterista was a special horse, it was a great experience for me," he said. "He taught me lessons in ownership, in horsemanship; it was a real education."

There has been no second-guessing as to his career path, either.

"I have never regretted my decision to leave school for the racetrack," Spatz said. "If there was any doubt, it was when I was struggling to get to where I wanted to be. It was tough to get stalls, to get owners, to make payroll. It was harder than I thought it would be to get established. But I've been very blessed, I've had my share of good horses. Once I got through that, there was never a question that I made the right choice."