

Spotlight On: FHBPA Board Member Terri Pompay



Photo Credit: Teresa Genaro

For Terri Pompay, it was love at first sight. She was looking out the window of her childhood home in Saratoga Springs, NY, when a man walked his horse across the front lawn. (Those things happen when you grow up in Saratoga.) She couldn't contain her excitement at being so close to such a beautiful animal, and her grandfather, as grandfathers do, made that early encounter even more memorable.

"My Grandpa asked the owner if he would let me sit on the horse's back," Pompay reminisced. "I was maybe two-years-old, and I fell head over heels. I still have that picture somewhere."

Horses have been in the picture ever since. Pompay started working on the racetrack in high school, and took out her trainer's license in 1995. She was elected to the Board of the Florida HBPA in 2018.

Pompay's grandfather helped keep the passion for horses alive when she was small, introducing her to Saratoga racing not at the famed Thoroughbred oval, but at the harness track across the street.

"He used to take us on drives at night, and we'd go to the Standardbred track," Pompay said. "You could park on the grass and we'd go up and pet the horse's noses."

Her father took the family on a once-a-year trip to Saratoga Race Course. By the age of 11, Pompay was taking formal riding lessons. At the age of 16, she started galloping racehorses to help pay the show horse expenses.

"I was so addicted, all I wanted to do was ride," she said.

She was very good at it. One of her first racetrack bosses was trainer John Russell, and she had the privilege of getting on champions like Relaxing and Private Account. Later, she galloped Copelan for Fred Hooper. She played actress Kristy McNichol's stunt double for all of the scenes on horseback in the 1979 movie "My Old Man," which was filmed in Saratoga.

Her parents gave her the greenlight to gallop, but they did not want her to make a career in the saddle.

"My parents let me work at the track, because they knew I loved the horses, but I wasn't allowed to hang out there," Pompay said. "I got up really early and rode my bike to the track. As soon as I got off my last horse, I had to get back on my bike and ride home."

It seemed for a time that Pompay would heed her parents' wishes. While she continued to ride, galloping as many as 16 horses a day before heading to class, she attended Russell Sage College in Troy, NY, where she majored in marketing and economics. She had a brief stint as a jockey after graduating in 1983, but after one win from nine tries at Belmont Park, Finger Lakes and Saratoga, she called it quits and found a job with the pharmaceutical company Warner Lambert. Her career as a sales rep lasted five years.



“I tried to be a regular person,” she remarked, adding, “The decision to leave the real world for the racetrack came about gradually.”

Pompay was still riding at the track in the summer, but the winters in upstate New York were long and cold and horseless. One afternoon, she realized she’d had enough.

“My manager was in town, we were on sales calls, and then we went to lunch,” she recalled. “We’re sitting there, and I just looked at him and said, ‘this company is great, but I want to resign.’ It just came over me. I knew this was not what I wanted to do for the rest of my

life. I wanted to be with the horses.

“I packed up my truck and went to Florida. My family wanted to kill me, but for me, it was a good thing.”

The road she chose was not, however, easy. Pompay learned the ropes at the “school of hard knocks,” working her way up from exercise rider to assistant trainer. The trainer she worked for was also her boyfriend, but the relationship was rocky. They finally split up for good in 1995, and she took out her trainer’s license. Even in the 1990s, there were few women trainers, and getting started in the business is an uphill climb for most everyone. For Pompay, the move had an additional challenge.

“When I went off on my own, I was pregnant with my son,” she explained. “I was a single mother, getting no help from the father. That was a really tough way to start off.”

From a young age, Pompay’s son Chance was a fixture at the barn, tucked into his stroller, watching “Power Rangers” while eating breakfast before the daycare across the street from the track opened for the day. Mom did what she has always done, putting in the hours and doting on the horses. The early years were a struggle, but the effort eventually paid off.

“I’d get one owner, two owners, then lose one. But I got my claws into it, and I really enjoyed it,” the lifelong horsewoman said. “I worked hard, and I loved the horses.”

In 1999, Pompay celebrated her first stakes win with Show Falcon in the Jingle Bells S. at Calder on Christmas Eve. In 2002, she earned her first graded victories with John Franks’ Clearly a Queen, and her stable topped the \$1-million mark in earnings for the first time.

“When I worked for John Franks, I had 50 horses at one point,” Pompay said. “When he passed away [in 2003], that hurt.”



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The trainer soldiered on, picking up horses for Seth Klarman’s powerhouse Klaravich Stables, and it was a Klaravich runner, Currency Swap, who gave Pompay her first Grade I triumph when taking the 2011 Hopeful Stakes in front of the hometown crowd at Saratoga.

“That was so much fun,” she said with a grin.

Current stable stars include stakes winners Heiressall and Cool Arrow for longtime client Wanda Polisseni of My Purple Haze Stables. To date, Pompay has won more than 500 races for purse earnings of more than \$16 million.

From the start, she was determined to make a go of it, no matter the odds.

"I'm a real go-getter, that's my personality," she said. "And I like to prove people wrong. They said I couldn't ride races, they said a single mom couldn't make it as a trainer. But I'm like a bulldog, I'm going to grab it and make it happen."



In addition to raising a son and running a training operation, Pompay has turned a hobby raising monkeys into a business, and is now one of the largest breeders of monkeys in the country. And she finds the time to give back to the sport as a member of the Florida HBPA Board.

"I originally joined the Board because I wanted to be in the know, and I wanted to be able to help," she said. "I wanted to be more involved. Before I was elected, I didn't understand how the handle was split, I didn't know where the money for benevolence came from. I was completely unaware of how that all worked. I've learned a lot."

She also praised FHBPA President Stephen Screnci. "Thank God we have Steve; he knows how to deal with the issues we face."

Pompay is gratified to contribute to the industry that has provided her a livelihood.

"My proudest accomplishment in racing is making it happen. I started out with nothing and worked my way up to become a mainstay in the community," she said

But her greatest achievement is not connected with the racetrack. Chance graduated from Boston University in 2019, and is currently studying for his Masters and PhD at a special program in Pavia, Italy, a small town outside of Milan.



Chance Pompay Photo Credit: www.bu.edu

"I'm proud of the fact that my son turned out to be such a good, smart kid," Pompay said. "In some ways, he is a completely different person than me, but he has pursued what he wanted to pursue. He knew when he just started high school that he wanted to be an archaeologist, and that's what he is going to be. The fact that I was able to help him attain his goals, I'm proud of that."

"He loves it in Italy – he plans on living there forever," she added. "Maybe I'll go visit him next year."

But she won't leave her beloved horses for long.

"I still have the love of the horses, oh yea, I still do, absolutely," she said. "And you never know when the next good horse will come along. Little girls dream of having a horse; bigger girls dream of having the big horse. You want to make that dream happen."