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Still Riding

Four horses headed off the Oklahoma Training Track on a mid-August morning in 2008 and walked back to barn 38, where their trainer, Dallas Stewart, was stabled for the six-week meet at Saratoga Race Course. Back at the barn, the riders dismounted and began putting away their equipment.

Three of the riders were young. The fourth, almost inconceivably, was Randy Romero. The fifty-year-old former jockey had nearly died in a Louisville, Kentucky, hospital six months earlier when his kidney was removed.

"His medical report would make a stunt man blush," Gerry Robichaux of the *Shreveport-Bossier City Times* once wrote of Randy. "He's broken a collarbone, a shoulder, ribs, his pelvis, a knee, a cheekbone, a thumb, his jaw and a toe. He's punctured a lung, his kidney and his spleen." Robichaux wrote that in 1980, nineteen years before Randy retired.

In April 1983, Randy was nearly burned alive in a freak accident in a sweatbox when a light bulb exploded and severely burned more than 60 percent of his body. His singed, bloody red torso was ghastly. Doctors gave him a 40 percent chance of living. He was back riding in three and a half months and won his first start back at Louisiana Downs on a horse trained by his older brother Gerald. Utterly exhausted in the winner's circle, Randy, who was wearing a pressure suit to protect his skin, could barely lift his arms.

Randy then not only captured his third riding title at the Fair Grounds the following spring, but also set a still-standing record at the New Orleans track with 181 victories, documenting his courage, determination, and, frankly, his stubbornness. "Randy put it all on the line," one of Randy's jockey agents, Larry "Doc" Danner, says. "There's never been a jockey with more desire or love of the game than Randy Romero."

But Randy couldn't stay out of harm's way. "My body is like a road map," Randy says. "I have scars all over the place." Less than a year after the burning incident, after riding an afternoon card at the Fair Grounds, he flew to a second Louisiana track, Delta Downs, to ride another horse that same night. The horse bolted and Randy jumped off, hitting the ground hard enough to break his femur. He also suffered cartilage damage in his knee, an injury that initially went undiagnosed. That cost him an additional four months. At the time he went down, he was the leading rider in the country by a margin of more than 40 victories. Despite missing four months in 1985, he still finished second in the country with 415 victories, 54 behind Chris Antley.

Randy came back and became the first jockey ever to win four stakes in a single afternoon, March 5, 1988, at Gulfstream Park, capped by long shot Brian's Time's victory in the Florida Derby.

Randy will be forever remembered for riding two outstanding fillies, Personal Ensign, the only undefeated major American Thoroughbred of the past one hundred years, and the brilliant Go for Wand. Personal Ensign overcame a broken pastern (ankle) as a two-year-old, an injury that would have ended most Thoroughbreds' careers. Benefiting from a flawless ride by Randy in the final race of her career, Personal Ensign preserved her legacy with a desperate rally to beat Kentucky Derby winner Winning Colors by a nose in the $1 million 1988 Breeders' Cup Distaff at Churchill Downs, a race that in 2008 was voted the greatest in the Breeders' Cup's twenty-five-year history.

Few dispute the worst Breeders' Cup race ever: when Go for Wand broke down just two years later in the final eighth of a mile in front of the grandstand in the Breeders' Cup Distaff at Belmont Park. Though seriously injured when thrown from the filly, Randy then rode Izvestia in the $3 million Breeders' Cup Classic, finishing sixth, before winding up in a familiar place: the hospital. He had suffered hairline fractures of his shoulder and eight ribs.

When he returned to ride the following spring at Gulfstream Park, he broke his elbow. The injury was misdiagnosed and wound up costing Randy more months of pain and lost time. Most importantly, it sapped his arm strength, so desperately needed when steering thousand-pound Thoroughbreds traveling forty miles per hour on ankles so narrow you can ring your fingers around them.

"I was never the same after that," he states.

Yet he endured. When he retired, he was the twenty-sixth leading riding ever with 4,294 victories. He won 25 riding titles. What would his numbers have been had he only suffered three horrific injuries instead of a dozen; if his number of surgeries was five instead of twenty-five; if his knee and elbow injuries had been correctly treated?

"He accomplished a lot; he would have accomplished more if he hadn't been injured," Hall of Fame jockey Angel Cordero, Jr, says. "He had the character of a champion. He went through a lot of accidents and the burn, and he never showed any fear. He just kept coming back. He came back like nothing happened. I liked that."

Randy knew no other way. "I was dedicated," he explains. "It's a gift that God gave me. It had to be because I sacrificed a lot in my life to be a jockey. I just couldn't get it out of my blood. That's all I wanted to do."

It showed.

Personal Ensign's Hall of Fame trainer, Claude "Shug" McGaughey, marveled at Randy's ability to recover from one injury after another. "You wouldn't think it could be done, but Randy would ride now if he could," McGaughey relates. "He was just like Cordero. He was born to ride."

After he stopped riding, Randy became a successful jockey agent until his deteriorating health intruded. In February 2002, he suffered kidney damage, nearly costing him his life. He needed a kidney transplant but was ineligible to receive one because doctors discovered he had Hepatitis C, a virus that causes chronic liver disease, a virus he may have caught from a tainted blood transfusion following his burns. They also discovered that only 25 percent of Randy's liver was functioning. Instead of performing a kidney transplant, doctors placed Randy on dialysis: three four-hour sessions per week that he will undergo for the rest of his life. Six years after that diagnosis, Randy's kidney was removed to stop internal bleeding. The kidney was so enlarged that doctors had to remove one of Randy's ribs to get to it. Randy recalls, "I was bleeding inside for like ten days. They had to take a kidney out and a rib. I got really, really sick, and I thought I was going to die."

Instead, he slowly recovered. Again.

He maintains a strict diet, which includes Himalayan GoChi juice, and daily exercise, mostly push-ups and sit-ups. Hall of Fame

trainer Bill Mott's wife, Tina, introduced Randy to GoChi juice in 2005 and he believes it has made a huge difference in his health.

Randy might be healthier today had he not spent his entire riding career, and two years afterwards, "flipping" four or five times a day. Flipping is jockey slang for self-induced vomiting, a way for jockeys to keep their weight down. HBO featured Randy in its 2004 documentary on the issue.

None of that mattered at Saratoga in the summer of 2008. Randy—despite his draining dialysis treatments—exercised as many as eight horses every morning for Stewart, his former valet in the jockeys' room at the Fair Grounds and a close friend for years. "It was like Randy never left," Stewart says. "He never missed a beat. No fear and just glad to be on a horse."

Riding a horse, any horse, continues to give Randy the serenity he had found so early in his life. "Because you have no worries," he explains. "You don't worry about bills. You don't worry about pain. You don't worry about my son's having a problem, or my wife's having problems, or my brother's having problems. It's just me and the horse. And I'm focused on just that. I just block everything out of my mind. I feel like I have an instinct with a horse, and the horse feels it. The horse knows. He can read me and I can read him. It's true."

He can verify that by rolling up his pants leg. There is a souvenir from the very first time he mounted a horse, Belle, the paint his family owned on their farm in Erath, Louisiana. Belle correctly read that Randy, six years old at the time, was a little unsure of himself. She ran off with the boy. "I'll never forget it," Randy says. "I'm fifty-one years old now, and this scar on my right knee has been there ever since. She run off with me and I was scared to death. I was staying on the horse and she was running off with me full speed, and I couldn't stop her. I was small. I was six years old, seventy pounds probably at the most. I cried and I cried because I couldn't pull her up. Eventually she stopped." Randy's saddle had rubbed against his leg the entire ride, leaving a distinctive mark. "It hurt me for a long time," he remembers.

That did not preclude Randy from getting back on her that day. "They patched my leg, wrapped it up a little bit and I went back riding. I wasn't scared to get back on the same day. I was fearless. I liked it. I loved it."

The extraordinary natural talent he was born with only

accelerated Randy's drive to succeed, and he was riding in match races before he was ten years old. He was not alone. Adolescent boys who could ride a horse in Cajun country in rural Louisiana frequently found themselves competing in Saturday and Sunday match races at the wildly popular bush tracks prevalent in the 1930s through the 1960s before any of Louisiana's current racetracks west of the Fair Grounds in New Orleans opened. A slew of talented Cajun jockeys in addition to Randy—Eddie Delahoussaye, Kent Desormeaux, Mark Guidry, Robby Albarado, Shane Sellers, and Calvin Borel—built valuable foundations at the bush tracks. "The bush tracks were big," Randy's brother Gerald states. "It wasn't uncommon to have a thousand, two thousand people on a Sunday."

The less weight a horse had to carry in a match race the better, so the smaller the boy riding him, the better. Smaller usually meant younger, but few riders were younger than Randy. In his 2008 book, *Cajun Racing,* Ed McNamara wrote that Glynn "Tee Red" Bernis was credited with winning a 1953 match race at the age of five. Randy was slightly older when he trail rode his family's Shetland pony Flicka and discovered she was extremely fast and started match racing her against bigger horses.

Flicka's exploits were part of a movie very loosely based on Randy's family, *Casey's Shadow,* which came out in the late 1970s. In the movie, the Romeros bought a mare in foal who produced a fast quarter horse, Casey's Shadow, who qualified for the richest horse race in the country, the $1 million 1975 All-American Futurity at Ruidoso Downs in New Mexico. On the screen, Casey's Shadow won the race with Randy riding. In reality, Randy rode the family's horse Rocket's Magic and finished third. Randy was seventeen years old. Many good jockeys go their entire career without getting a mount in a million-dollar race.

The movie starred Walter Matthau, who played Randy's father, Lloyd, a former Marine and policeman who became a full-time trainer after a horrific automobile accident almost took his life. Matthau came across as a likeable curmudgeon in *Casey's Shadow,* as if he had Randy and his four brothers' best interests at heart. That was fiction. "My father was abusive, mentally and physically," Randy shares. "We used to go to school with black and blue marks on our legs. It wasn't only me. It was all my brothers." And their mom, too. "I just wanted to stay away from him," Randy says.

Randy's role model growing up was his grandfather, Henry "Rome" Romero, who lived just a mile away. He could not read or write and only spoke Cajun French, the language also spoken in Randy's house. "I loved to be around him," Randy remembers.

When Randy was sixteen and already a successful jockey at Evangeline Downs in Opelousas, Louisiana, he happened to spot one of his friends walking with the daughter of a trainer who used Randy on his horses. Randy insisted that his buddy introduce him to thirteen-year-old Cricket McKean. When he did, Randy told Cricket he was going to marry her. Less than three years later he did.

But when he was nineteen, he briefly experimented with cocaine. He got caught and was brought into jail in handcuffs. "I got busted," Randy says. "It is probably the best thing that ever happened. It would've gotten worse. It was going to mess up my career." And his marriage. Cricket stuck with her husband though, and she gave birth to their only child, Randy II. But Randy and Cricket eventually drifted apart and were divorced in 1984.

On the day his divorce became final, Randy called Cricket from the courthouse and told her, "I'll make it up to you." She received a dozen roses from him that day. Within a year, they were living together again and two years later were remarried in Saratoga Springs in upstate New York, not far from historic Saratoga Race Course.

Randy went on to compile an outstanding career, capturing twenty-five riding titles at ten different tracks: thirteen at Louisiana's five tracks, six at prestigious Keeneland in Kentucky, two apiece at Arlington Park in Chicago and Belmont Park in New York, and one each at Gulfstream Park and Hialeah in Florida. He still owns the record for most wins in a single meet at the Fair Grounds and for the spring meet at Keeneland.

He won nearly 4,300 races, including 342 stakes, and just under $75 million in earnings. Three times, he won six races in a single afternoon. He rode many of the greatest Thoroughbreds of the 1980s and '90s: twelve horses in addition to Personal Ensign and Go for Ward who were named champions.

The success did not affect Romero a bit. "One day in '90 or '91, Mrs. Payson [Virginia Payson, an owner] came up to me and said, 'With all the success your husband's had, he's never changed. It never went to his head,'" Cricket relates. She agrees: "Randy's never changed from the first time I met him."

His misfortunes did not change him either. “I didn’t blame anybody when I fell and got hurt,” Randy stresses. “I never have. You make the best out of it. You have to have a strong mind. You have to look forward. Never look backwards. Better yourself and make people proud of you.”

Randy’s attitude does not surprise trainer Mark Guidry, who retired as a jockey in 2008 after winning more than five thousand races. He has known Randy for forty years, ever since they rode against each other in match races in Louisiana. “He had a long, hard road,” Guidry attests. “He was dealt a lot of bad cards, but he doesn’t dwell on the negative. He’s a fighter. He’s going to keep on fighting until the day he dies.”

Randy is well aware of the dear price he paid to be a successful jockey. He is still paying. Was it worth it? Randy pauses and sighs before saying quietly, “To me, it was. I loved it, man. I knew I was good. I knew I was one of the best.”