

The Announcer Who Wanted to Get in the Game

Arapahoe Park's racecaller gets to know some retired racehorses

By Jonathan Horowitz



Jonathan Horowitz rides the Texas-bred mare Churchita over a jump on the cross-country course at Spring Gulch in Colorado.

Ashley Gubich

I got my butt kicked by an 11-year-old, and now I have to write about it. That's because after years of announcing horses, I'm now learning how to ride them. Unlike basketball, where the announcer sits courtside, an announcer at the horse races is as far away as possible from the action, perched at the top of the grandstand and requiring strong binoculars to follow the horses around the expansive ovals. It's one of the best views anywhere at the racetrack, but to see everything, the announcer sacrifices the immersive experience that fans on the rail get of thundering hoof beats, flying dirt and colorful jockey silks.

So, I decided to make a habit of visiting the stable area, paddock and jockeys' room before or after a day's races to meet the horses and the amazing people behind them. I wanted to give my race calls a human touch (you know

what, I'll just make up my own phrase, "a centaur touch") by getting closer to the athletes I was describing.

I learned very quickly what has made the horse one of the most beloved animals in history—from the theology that celebrates the mythological Pegasus and horses of the Bible, to "The Four Horsemen" nickname for one of the best backfields in football history at Notre Dame, to the Oscar-winning movies like "National Velvet," to the equine legends like Seabiscuit and Secretariat that have captured the hearts and spirit of our country.

I wanted to ride. I've seen pictures of myself on a pony when I was 2 years old, but despite presenting this as evidence, no trainer would put me on a racehorse, so a career as a jockey was out.

After they retire, racehorses can go on to amazing second careers as jumpers, eventers, polo ponies, trail horses

and more. I became involved with CANTER (Communication Alliance to Network Thoroughbred Ex-Racehorses) Colorado after its executive director, Jamie Girouard, approached Arapahoe Park near Denver, where I've announced since 2011, to help Thoroughbreds find new homes and careers after racing. In June 2015, Jamie invited me to see some of the horses CANTER trains, and I was blown away by the transformation and new skills of these horses I had previously announced.

CANTER trainer Ashley Gubich asked if I wanted to ride. I said yes. She said to put on my boots. I said my sneakers would do just fine. She laughed. I got on a chestnut Thoroughbred mare named Blondie H F, who was initially trained as a racehorse but never made it to the starting gate. Let's just say I was not as graceful on a horse as Arapahoe Park's jockeys, and I learned the difference between "talking the talk" and "trotting the trot."

I asked Ashley if she'd teach me to ride. First order of business, she let me borrow her husband's boots. My lessons with Ashley were frustrating and rewarding—at first, more frustration for me and more rewards for the horses for putting up with me. But I slowly started understanding more about balance, keeping my heels down and being in rhythm with the horse by posting at the trot and having the correct posture. When my lessons would end, Ashley's 2-year-old son Chase would get on the horse and show me how it's done.



John Abramson

Horowitz announces the races from his booth at the top of the grandstand at Arapahoe Park in Colorado.

I almost fell off several times when learning to canter, and Ashley's having control of the horse on a lead line is the only thing that kept me on board. When I finally cantered for the first time, I was breathing harder than the horse.

Once I learned the basics of walking, trotting and cantering on the flat, Ashley brought out the jumps. First, it was going over poles on the ground, and



Katie Beals

Horowitz and trainer Ashley Gubich of CANTER Colorado at the announcer's first horse show at Mariah Farms in Colorado in March.

then the poles were lifted off the ground...by a whopping six inches. After Blondie H F found a new home, I started riding another of Ashley's chestnut mares, Churchita, whom she had obtained as a 3-year-old from CANTER Texas when the horse's owners decided to get out of the racing business. Chita is a big mare at 16.3 hands with a powerful, rhythmic stride. Going over a jump with her is one of the most exhilarating feelings I've ever experienced. We've upped the jumps to two feet, and I hope to keep going higher.

In March, nine months after my initial riding lesson, I competed in my first horse show at Mariah Farms in Castle Rock, Colorado. By this time, I had acquired proper riding attire—boots, breeches and a riding coat. I did two intro dressage tests, although I was nowhere near as good as 11-year-old Sophia Spiegleman and her 30-year-old horse, Rosie.

I competed in my second show at Mariah Farms in April...and again was put in my place by Sophia. I've done a total of four dressage tests in my two shows and have first-, second-, third- and fourth-place ribbons. On the same day

as my second show, I also announced the Gold Crest Classic at the Colorado Horse Park and completed a very rewarding riding-announcing double. If I can drop 50 pounds, maybe I can ride and announce a race at the same time!

What racehorses can do after retiring is truly inspiring. In 2015, I announced the Thoroughbred Makeover presented by the Retired Racehorse Project at the Kentucky Horse Park. The event featured 190 former racehorses competing in 10 different disciplines, including jumping, eventing, barrel racing, polo and freestyle. But retired racehorses can also teach a beginner like myself how to ride and how to have an even greater appreciation for these amazing equine athletes. ★

Jonathan Horowitz (jjhorowitz.com) became the youngest person ever to announce a horse race in the United States when at age 14 he called at Los Alamitos Race Course in California in 1999. He has announced at 23 racetracks in the United States and Great Britain and is currently calling at Arapahoe Park in Colorado.

Rather than being paid to write this article, Horowitz opted to have American Racehorse make a donation to CANTER Colorado. American Racehorse will match, up to \$250, any donations to CANTER Colorado that come from our subscribers.

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