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ROUNDTABLE FOCUSES ON LIFE AS A THOROUGHBRED TRAINER

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Correspondent

As part of a series of roundtable discussions during the August Thoroughbred meet at Saratoga Race Course, the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame offered "Riding Through Time: A Historical Perspective on a Trainer's Life and Career" on July 31.

Moderated by Dick Powell, the panel featured five trainers with horses at Saratoga: Ramon "Mike" Hernandez, who began his career in Mexico City in 1951 with his first winner, Flying Queen; Flint S. "Scotty" Schulhofer of Centennial Farms, a 1992 Hall of Fame inductee and trainer of the 1995 Whitney Handicap winner, Unaccounted For; his son, trainer Randy Schulhofer, who runs his father's operation at the Oklahoma Training Track in Saratoga; Lisa Lewis, the daughter of two trainers, who had great success in 1991 with the filly American Royale; and New Yorker Michael Hushion, a former groom for Allen Jerkens who now runs a stable of his own, including the tough job of working with claimers.

On why they stay in the game despite the long hours, stress, and lack of vacations, the trainers were united. Scotty Schulhofer summed it up, saying, "It gets in your blood. You love the horses and the thrills. You just can't get away from it." Added Lewis, "I can never remember when I didn't want to [train]." All the trainers nodded in agreement when Hushion said, "The people that stay in the game, it's the horse that keeps us here."

Discussing their own training, the panelists acknowledged their debts to others. Said Hernandez: "Watch the pros. I learn from the guys that know." Added Scotty Schulhofer, "I learned a lot from a lot of good old grooms." Hushion also recognized the importance of the backstretch crew, saying, "My exercise riders I consider the most important part of my stable."

One week earlier, the museum had held a roundtable on "The Popularization of Ownership," during which panelists discussed the always-delicate relationship between owner and trainer, especially in these days of syndicates. Scotty Schulhofer got nods of agreement by saying, "Good owners are someone that will give you a horse, let you train him, and leave you alone. You get a lot of free advice, and it's worth just what it cost you." Observed Hushion, "One of the most important things for an owner is an owner that knows how to lose."

All the trainers talked about rising early each morning, walking down the shed row, and feeling relieved that all their charges were up, breathing, and eating breakfast—or getting a knot in the stomach by seeing a horse down in its stall or favoring a leg. All of them rely on tried-and-true methods to keep their horses sound, and there also are a lot of high-tech gizmos and medical tests that are supposed to help. The panelists have tried—and rejected—most of the new-fangled methods, but Scotty Schulhofer spoke in favor of acupuncture, which he has used on his own sore knees. The trainers also favor massage therapy for their horses. Hushion said he tried turning to human sports medicine for advice, poring over runners' magazines for tips on increasing energy. "We tried human stuff like carbo-loading," he said. "Once again, I had no success. So, back to basics again."

Some of those basics include things familiar to every horse person, such as wrapping legs. Claiming a dearth of the wonderful grooms they had in the past, the trainers often take care of such details themselves. Don't be surprised to see Lewis down on her knees before a race, wrapping her own horse's legs. "I'll let a groom do the hind," she said, "but I always do the front wraps."

All agreed there's something special about winning at Saratoga—along with a little special pressure. Said Scotty Schulhofer, "Most of your owners are here. Your owners like to win at Saratoga. It's a showplace."

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