

Jockeying for a permanent position

By Jim Chrisman, Staff Writer

In 1990, at Poway High, Tony Matteucci was always being told by people in the community that he was a great jockey candidate. His build, five feet and one half inches tall, 102 pounds; his wrestling achievements, CIF champ at 98 pounds and his track background, CIF champ 4x100 relay, were perfect to ride a horse competitively.

Never having been on a horse, and the NCAA's lowest wrestling weight being 118, (too heavy for Tony's body), he opted to join the Fire Department. When his size became a detriment in training, he took other's advice and with his parents support, Lee and Dee Mattucci, he hopped on a saddle.

"It's strange," Tony says, "But ever since I was a kid I always knew I wanted to be a professional athlete of some kind; I just didn't know which one. Now I do."

Around the First Turn

In late 1990, Tony believed it

would be best to become an aficionado of horses before he became a jockey. He chose to take the lowly jobs of grooming and "hotwalking" horses, cooling them down after others had ridden them.

"I wanted to learn from the bottom up," Tony says explaining how he was behind other riders' knowledge of horses because he didn't come from a "horse family."

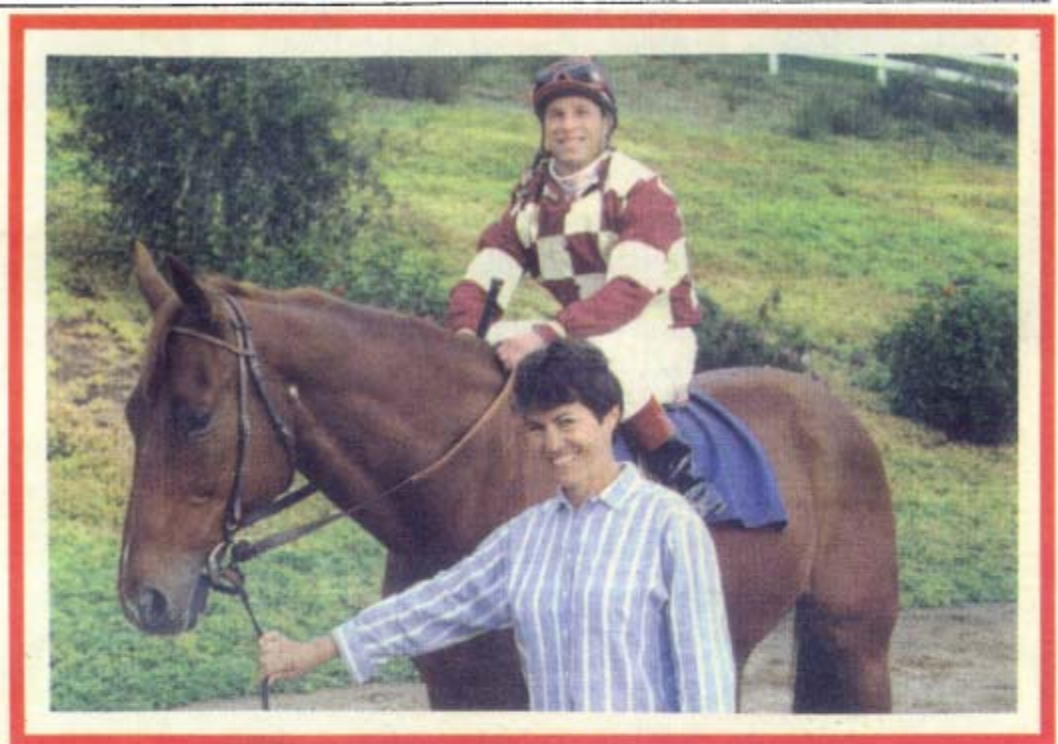
"It was very good for me," Tony contends adding that this initial experience has lead to a greater understanding and rapport with the horses he rides.

The Back Stretch

Tony believes that a jockey has to be with the right people to be successful. He says he found the right people in Candice Regal (an ex-jockey), Bob Verbost and Gayle Valirie at Golden Eagle Farm in Ramona. All three "had a big part in establishing me in the business."

Tony spent three-and-a-half years

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AT THE GATE- Practice makes perfect, and that is what Poway resident Tony Matteucci has in mind in order to become a professional jockey. He will have to win 45 races in one year to complete his apprenticeship. Tony, at 102 pounds, is sitting atop Seaborne, a 1,000 pound, 11-year old gelding owned by Stephanie Kicinski (foreground) at Jeremy's Ranch English Riding School in Poway. The ranch provides trained horses, tack, helmets and boots (679-1168). Photo by Mark Brenner.

Jockey

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at Golden Eagle "breaking babies," taking two-year-olds and putting them on the bit to race. "It is very different from leisure riding," Tony says. "Both the horse and the jockey are learning the basics to racing." He believes his time spent there gave him his seat (position on a horse) and balance: the talents necessary to succeed.

Around the final turn

Tony began racing about eight months ago. "I went to Montana to get my feet wet." He is an apprentice jockey, called a 'bug.' As a bug in Montana and later in Canada, Tony raced over 35 times with 12 victories.

In Helena, MT his maiden victory was the horse's maiden victory as well. "It was very special," Tony recalls, "But I want to go where the bigger purses are."

The final stretch

"Apprenticeship is delicate," Tony warns. "Some circuits do not use the bug boy. It is

important to get a good agent that knows the business. He will put you in the best position to make a name for you during your apprenticeship." This is why Tony will go up to Vancouver to Hastings Park before attempting to make it big in California, the toughest circuit in the world.

Down to the wire

Tony will have to win 45 races in one year to complete his apprenticeship. After having his hips disaligned, surgery on his ankle and three broken ribs, Tony should not have any problem in this endeavor. For it is plainly obvious that he has the determination and the strength to achieve his childhood dream of professional athleticism.

"I have always had the drive to improve on what I've learned and to learn something new. That is why I won the MVP at Poway and why I will be successful [racing]. I'm playing my cards right, and thankfully, it's not a hard thing to do for me."

Tony turns 26 this month and is in the prime of his life. The future looks bright down the stretch as Tony races to victory.