INSIDE: Thoroughbred Retirement Farm Helping Turn Lives Around

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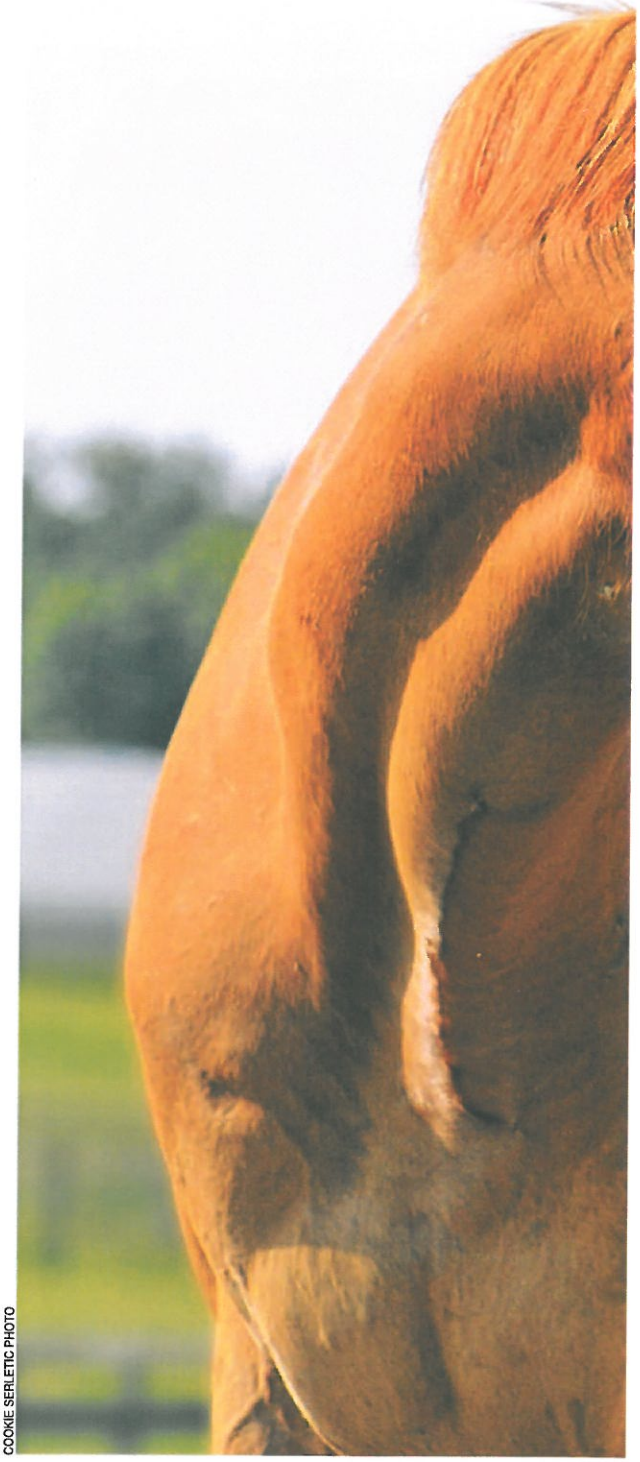
Prison to A Winning Combination

By MELANIE LaCOUR

It was Winston Churchill who most accurately illuminated the human-equine emotional connection when he declared "there's something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man" or in the case of the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation farm based in Ocala, Florida; a woman. At the Florida TRF facility the horses are cared for solely by female inmates from the Lowell Correctional Institute, and the vocational program these women participate in is the physical embodiment of Mr. Churchill's words.

The farm itself is roughly 100 acres of undulating green hills with a well-kept barn and paddocks surrounded by black four-board fencing. Notably, the plank fences used to contain the 54 horses currently housed at the facility are the only ones on the property. In fact, there is nothing one can see to suggest this farm is anything other than one of the typical sprawling thoroughbred farms historically endemic to this area, including the extraordinary level of care and attention the horses receive.

The horses housed at the facility consist of approximately 15-20 sponsored thoroughbreds who will live out their retirement years on the farm, grazing alongside those there temporarily with the ultimate goal of adoption and a new career. Among the resident retirees, one can find two notable Florida champions; Carterista (Dr. Carter – Bosun's Bride by Nashua), the 1993 Florida Champion Turf Horse and winner of eight stakes races; and Shake You Down (Montbrook – Mauvin Gway by Rajab), the 2003 Florida Champion Sprinter



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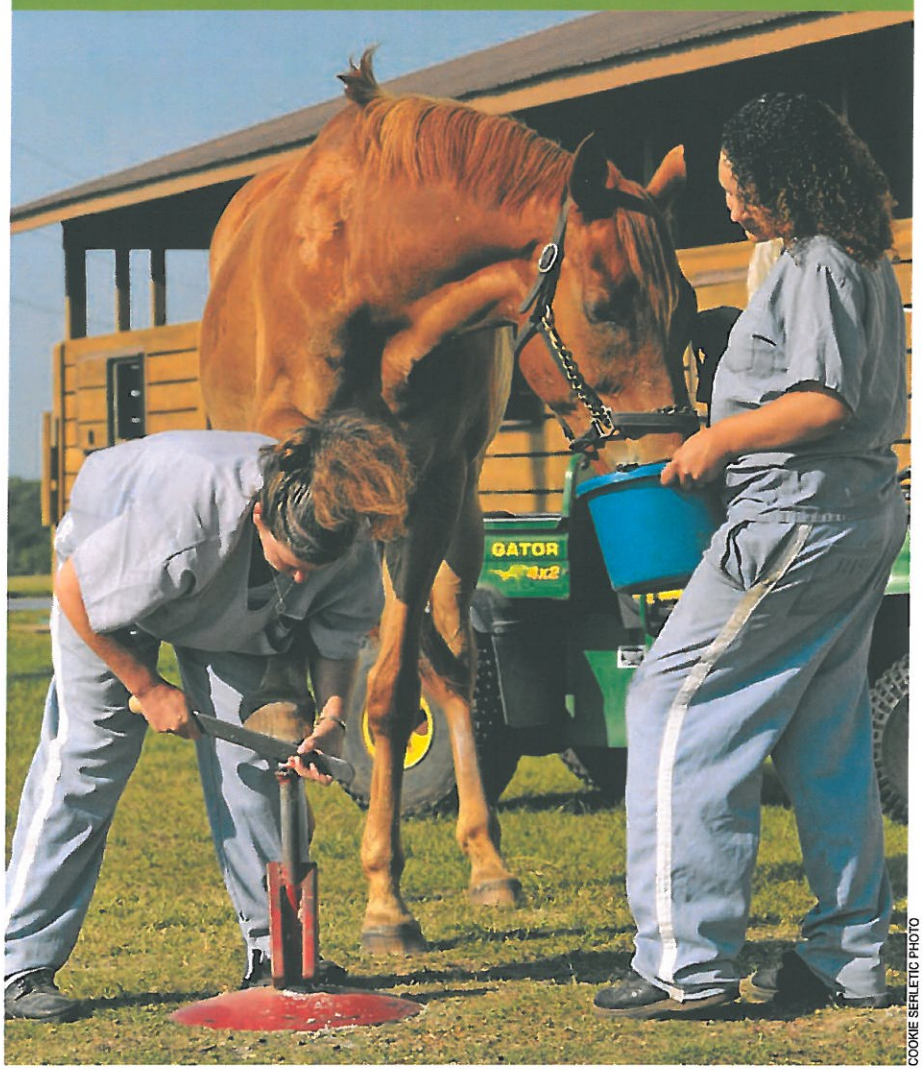
Paddock



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and winner of nearly $1.5 million. However, all that make their home here are treated with the same kindness and devotion regardless of lifetime earnings. Champion or not, they might find themselves the recipient of a delicious peanut butter sandwich generously shared from the lunch of one of the devoted women who care for them.

These dedicated caretakers are a group of 25 female inmates, referred to as students, who are selected from the non-violent prison population. The students rotate to work 15 at a time, 9 hours a day, with weekends staffed on a volunteer basis. Those who are selected to participate are given the privilege of being the primary caregivers of two or three horses per student, and of acquiring practical skills like grooming, feeding, mucking, daily care, riding, and doctoring, as well as learning a college curriculum with 22 written tests covering various aspects of horse care. When they graduate the women receive a certificate in equine care technology.

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Based on the depiction above, it should come as no surprise that the women housed at the prison scramble for an opportunity to fill the relatively few spaces available, as it affords them the opportunity to spend their days outside in a role as close to regular civilian life as an inmate could hope to be. "Currently, I am a number and my name is inmate" explains Jennifer Barrett, succinctly relating the feeling of having one's identity stripped upon entering the penal system. Linda Marter goes on to paint a picture of a life inside the prison using words like "harsh," "dark," "empty," and other adjectives that would make a person shudder if used to describe everyday life. "I had become a mere number" recounts Amber Lee on the feeling of alienation once inside. However, the TRF program has provided these women the means with which to regain some of what they lost when they arrived at the prison, illustrated by Jennifer's uplifting qualification of her initial account where she explains that while on the farm "for 9 hours a day, I am Jennifer Barrett. I can be happy, nurturing, have an opinion, and enjoy something that I love." "Yes, I am still incarcerated" says Linda Marter "but because of a horse I am now free."

Notwithstanding the feeling of independence and the practical skills acquired, the emotional benefits that are the product of this win-win situation are paramount to the success of the TRF program. The students develop and maintain a close connection with their charges and the horses thrive under their care and individualized attention. The women on the farm are remarkably confident and take an obvious and well-deserved pride in their depth of knowledge, responsibility, and hard work, and in turn the horses learn to adjust to a more relaxed life away from the track. These women could have easily elected to while away their sentences within the prison walls, but instead they have taken the initiative to choose a path that ensures not only labor, sweat and commitment, but also confidence, hope and a chance at a future.

It is easy to see why these women naturally gravitate toward the horses at the farm; in them they see a mirrored reflection of themselves. As such, the women often use the circumstances of the retired thoroughbreds as a metaphor for their own lives. In this way they are better able to articulate how it is to be considered undesirable and then be presented a second chance. "I think these horses have a lot in common with us, as inmates" explains Evelyn Spillman, "we have all been out there in

a race and have gone as fast as we could for as long as we could. The fact that they are done racing and so are we, gives [sic] us common grounds" "I think that is why as inmates we bond so closely with these horses because we are both being given a second chance to start something new" explains Angela Cooper. Their stories, both horse and human, illustrate a personal evolution in which one is able to reclassify themselves in order to succeed.

Stemming from the strong bonds they form with them, the women exhibit a universal and unconditional reverence for the horses under their care, frequently using the word "magnificent" to describe their charges and relating the sense of trust developed by their time spent together. Angela Cooper describes the rapport between her and her horse by saying "[h]e gives me unconditional love and unbelievable trust and puts his special life in my hands. It is a humbling experience and I do not take it for granted." The students are able to use the relationships they cultivate with the horses as a source of comfort, acceptance, discipline, affection, peace and purpose; all elements of human character that are all but nonexistent in a prison environment. As a result of this bond, the horses reap the benefits of abundant individual attention. "The level of care given to the horses is undeniably great and leaves me with a sense of pride and accomplishment after a hard days work" says Melissa Matuzek.

The most prominent theme among the student's testimonials, however, is undoubtedly optimism, attained only through the hard work and education that are the roots of the program itself. "The work is hard, hot and dirty" says Angela Cooper, but she is quick to add that the effort is absolutely worth it when she sees her horse resting comfortably in his paddock. And the work is indeed hard as the women are expected to perform every aspect of horse care as well as farm maintenance. "It's not always fun, our chores involve mucking stalls, haying, weed eating, feeding, and keeping everything in its place" says Sarah Hall, but along with the work "you learn patience and you learn to make the most of your time."

A consequence of the labor and hands-on as well as classroom education provided to the students is the aforementioned optimism; the women almost universally have a sense of future where one had not existed before. An example of this is Kathryn Dupree, who prior to entering the program says she could not see the light at the end of the tunnel. However, she has since been able to gain "self-worth, unconditional love, team work, and a boost

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of confidence" through her time at the farm. "Prison is not easy, pretty, fun, or a great place for rehabilitation," Erika Martin bluntly states in her evaluation of a life inside, but by being able to escape the everyday life in lockup, she is able to practice and further her skills every day. Erika now plans to take what she has learned and apply it in her life after release. "The possibilities in the equine field are endless and I can't explain how good it feels to know what I want to do with my life."

This prospect of a successful future has become a reality for a number of the program's graduates based on their unique ability to gain employment using the extensive and specialized knowledge they acquired working on the farm. Dawn Bieber, who graduated from the program in 2009, was offered an opportunity shortly after her release to work for Classic Bloodstock, LLC in Ocala where she remained employed for three years. Prior to becoming part of the program at TRF, Dawn's involvement with horses was minimal and went only as far as doing some combined training as a teenager. As a student in the program, she gained a great deal of invaluable hands-on experience while assisting in the physical rehabilitation of the ex-race horses, helping them come back to form from injuries such as bowed tendons or bucked shins.

Shannon Riger recently finished her time with the TRF when she was released on May 12, 2012 after a 13 year stay at Lowell C.I. While a student in the program, Shannon worked extensively in the area of retraining. As the daughter of a thoroughbred owner and trainer and also an experienced equestrian herself, she was able to make a significant impact by helping prepare horses for adoption through her under saddle work. As part of the retraining process, Shannon worked with up to five horses at a time, teaching them basic voice and leg commands to prepare them for a second career. The close relationships she developed with her equine pupils then enabled her to assist in a successful adoption process by directing prospective owners toward the horse best suited for their purpose.

When asked to expand upon their experiences and opinion of the program and the doors it opened, so to speak, upon release, the women had nothing but positive insight. Shannon explained that she found it therapeutic to be among the horses and that the students learn the "proper way" of accomplishing a plethora of tasks. She summarized the students' future opportunities by saying "if they really want it, they can learn so much and then take [their knowledge] out into the real world."

And take her knowledge to the real world she has done. Having been released less than a month prior to the writing of this article, she is currently searching for employment within the horse industry, but thanks to the program her prospects are bright. She has not only been actively interviewing, but attended the OBS sale in June with Kinsman Farm and hopes that her experience there might lead to a more permanent position. Shannon remains committed to the TRF program and its residents; as evidenced by her choice to adopt two of the TRF horses herself upon her release. Currently one can find former TRF residents Eastside Train and Hurricane Sergio living a comfortable life on 3.5 acres in Ocala under the watchful eye of someone who has received top-

notch training in every aspect of equine upkeep.

Dawn Bieber echoed Shannon's sentiments when she attributed her success to the fact that she "really, really used the program" and further explained that "if you use [the program], you will not have a problem finding a job when you get out." When asked to elaborate on her accomplishments after being released, she described how she attended an OBS sale with the program's director, John Evans, and that the first person he approached on her behalf was more than happy to offer her a position. Although currently a stay at home mom, Dawn expressed enthusiasm for heading back to work in the thoroughbred industry in the near future. Of John Evans and the program at TRF, she explained "that man and that program saved my life, there's no telling where I'd be if I hadn't gone through that program."

With the curriculum incorporating all aspects of equine care and farm maintenance, the women have the option of following their interests and focusing on a particular part of the trade. In doing so, they are able to prepare themselves for a productive life outside when they are finished serving their time. The vocational training the women receive is essential to their success as it provides them with a means to support themselves in a world that might look down its nose at those with a troubled past.

Diane Garcia is the perfect example of someone who has taken the trade skills she gained in the program and transformed them into a successful career. Upon her release in May of 2011 after a seven year sentence, Diane quickly realized she was going to have to take the initiative if she was going to support herself. Two weeks later she started her farrier business, Excellent Equine Care, located in Haines City, Florida. Diane initially began by going door to door looking for business, but within a year her reputation had flourished in the community and she started acquiring clients through word of mouth.

Having arrived at TRF as a Boston native with absolutely no horse experience, she admits she was initially

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timid on the farm. However, it did not take long for her to transform into a full-fledged horsewomen, and soon she was completely engrossed in her work. In particular, Diane had a fascination with feet. She started studying the hoof, observing the farrier, asking questions and devouring books; she explains it by saying she became "absorbed by the whole medical aspect" of the farrier trade. Thereafter, having been given the mental tools by the program and the physical tools of the trade by director Evans, Diane had the ability and confidence to strike out on her own. "The biggest thing [the program] does is for the girls is self-confidence" she explained when asked what the most important take-away was for students. She summed up her testimonial by saying that "girls in prison have made mistakes, followed the wrong people, went down the wrong path" but emphasized that it doesn't make them bad people. Like the thoroughbreds they care for, "the girls need a chance" she said, the emotion evident in her voice.

None of these women are ashamed to admit they have made mistakes in their past, speaking candidly about their sentences and time in prison. However they do not dwell on it and they live their lives looking forward not back.

The program and the industry have helped them gain a clear view of a bright future and provided them a path on which to advance beyond their past and the resources to put their mistakes behind them.

None of these women are ashamed to admit they have made mistakes in their past, speaking candidly about their sentences and time in prison. However they do not dwell on it and they live their lives looking forward not back. The program and the industry have helped them gain a clear view of a bright future and provided them a path on which to advance beyond their past and the resources to put their mistakes behind them. The TRF takes an otherwise daunting situation and provides a light at the end of the tunnel, something to strive for and the tools to reintegrate productively back into society.

Funding and support for the program and facility come from a group of organizations and individuals that recognize and seek to nurture the positive impact the program has on the Florida thoroughbred industry and the community as a whole. Included in this group are the FTBOA, Florida Thoroughbred Charities, OBS Co., Gulfstream Park, Calder Racecourse, Tampa Bay Downs, FHBPA and the National TRF. As evidenced by the support it receives, it is difficult to imagine an organization connected with Florida thoroughbred racing that would not want to see succeed a program that provides a chance for thoroughbreds to have successful post-racing career and the means to support the permanently retired horses that prompt students to say of them "he awakens the inside of my heart and fills my spirit with promise." After all, there is no downside to lifting up those around us, both human and horse, it is a winning combination. ■

Melanie laCour *is a Graduate Intern at FTBOA. She earned her B.A. in Psychology from the University of Kentucky and her J.D. from the University of Kentucky College of Law. This fall she will be attending the University of Arizona Race Track Industry Program as a candidate for a master's degree. In addition to being a racing enthusiast, Melanie has ridden hunter/jumpers for 20 years. When not at school, she resides in Miami, Fla., with her husband.*

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