

19-year-old takes up harness racing

By ROBERT CONNELLY - Associated Press - Monday, July 27, 2015

YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio (AP) - Sierra Graham says she is always one of the youngest drivers - if not the youngest - when she takes the reins in harness horse racing.

The 19-year-old's dream of becoming a thoroughbred jockey changed to becoming a standardbred driver because she kept growing. Thoroughbred jockeys are more limited in height and weight, compared with harness drivers who sit on a seat on a cart attached to the horse. The maximum weight for a thoroughbred jockey, with the saddle, is 126 pounds.

"Everyone told me I was going to be too heavy for that, and I ended up being too tall and too heavy," she said. "I've been on a horse before I could walk, and I just always thought it was cool to race them."

Graham is a 2015 Jackson-Milton High School graduate and has been driving - harness drivers are the equivalent of thoroughbred jockeys - in county fairs across Ohio this summer. That includes going to Paulding, Ottawa, London and Circleville. "Every fair we went to, only one of them got a rain delay. We've been really lucky," she said.

She obtained her driver's license - for driving harness racing - last summer and was in 10 or 11 fairs last year.

Graham is in second place of a series called the Lady's Pacing Series, made up of 20 women drivers. She is the second-youngest in the field and said her most exciting race so far this season was when she was last in an eight-horse field in Oak Harbor, near Sandusky, until the back stretch, when she was able to finish third.

Graham plans to drive in the Canfield Fair later this summer and is hopeful that the latter half of the summer and the fall will get her 15 qualifying drives to get a license to race at racinos in Ohio.

Harness drivers sit on a seat, with wheels on each side, that is attached to a metal U-shaped cart that goes around the horse. Straps under and over the horse's torso are attached to the metal structure. The horses either trot or pace.

The racinos offering harness racing are Scioto Downs Racino, Columbus; Hollywood Gaming at Dayton Raceway, Dayton; Miami Valley Gaming and Racing, Lebanon; and Hard Rock Rocksinio at Northfield Park, Cleveland.

“Getting into racing was fun, and especially with harness racing. There are not really any young people or girls in there, and it really is a good thing to have more girls involved in harness racing,” Graham said.

Graham said she hasn’t made much money this summer, estimating it at about \$1,000. “Especially with the younger horses, it’s more important to get the experience of racing instead of pounding them into going faster and winning and making money,” Graham said.

She will attend Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pa., where she plans to study business marketing. Her goal is to use that degree in the horseracing industry. She trains with Dr. David Swaney at his New Wilmington, Pa., farm that has nine horses stabled. Graham’s favorite horse is Genuine Star, who is 11 years old and has about \$250,000 in career earnings. Dr. Swaney bought that horse at last year’s Canfield Fair.

“As long as you take care of them and don’t overuse them ... they can race until they’re 14” years old, he said.

Dr. Swaney’s farm sits on about 300 acres, mostly wooded, that has a practice track and has stabled as many as 15 horses in the past. He is a harness driver and a veterinarian.

He said the purses for county fairs have “ups and downs,” but said the last four years have had good payments at fairs in Pennsylvania.

The introduction of video lottery terminals, VLTs, at the racetracks has been able to increase purse sizes in Ohio, both at thoroughbred and standardbred tracks, as well as incentivize Ohio breeders. Graham said she followed the racino process “a lot, because no matter what racing it is, it’s a good thing to get more people involved because horse racing is kind of like a dying industry. The people who are involved are getting old and less young people are getting in. So no matter what type of track is coming in, it’s a good thing.”

She also called the racinos “a good thing. Without the slots, the industry would have been almost dead in Ohio really. It was on the decline, but now since the racinos and slots all came back, the breeders have all come back to Ohio and Ohio is really taking off again.”

The 2014 annual report from the Ohio State Racing Commission said, in its standardbred stallion report, that 2014 was the highest year - 168 stallions, with 44 registered and 124 renewed, since 2003, which had 173 total. The lowest years were 2009 and 2011 with 14 registered stallions and 82 renewed, for a total of 96.

Initially, the Toledo harness track was to relocate to the Youngstown area, but ended up relocating to Dayton.

Dave Bianconi, executive vice president of racing and simulcast at Northfield Park, echoed Graham’s sentiment about the lack of women drivers.

“So far in 2015, I bet we haven’t had more than three or four women drive here, so I’d love to see it,” Bianconi said.

He explained there are more women in the thoroughbred field because of the weight limit. “Breaking in is tough. It’s not an easy game to break into. If she keeps it up, and I’m sure she can,” she can do it, he said. “In the harness games over the years, there have really not been that many top women drivers, but I’d love to see it.”

Northfield Park, the track at the Rocksino, has increased purse offerings from 2011 to 2014. The Rocksino opened in December 2013. Northfield Park’s purses totaled \$6,921,700 for 2,769 races in 2011; \$6,736,600 for 2,741 races in 2012; \$8,394,400 for 2,866 races in 2013; and \$16,199,700 for 3,176 races in 2014. Those figures are also from the 2014 OSRC annual report.

That influx of an additional 310 races was due to more horses being stabled at Northfield. “More horses, and more purse money allowed us to run more races and possibly, looking into the future, more dates,” Bianconi said. “It’s been a great start to the Rocksino era.”

Northfield Park averages 15 races a day and begins with a post time of 6 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays. The track runs year-round. Bianconi said that the quality of horses has increased since the Rocksino gaming side of the facility opened, and because of that the top two drivers in harness racing are the top two drivers at Northfield Park. One is Ronnie Wrenn Jr., who won the 2013 and 2014 National Dash titles for more wins than any other driver those years. He currently trails the other top driver, Aaron Merriman, so far this year.

Another top accolade is the \$400,000 Carl Milstein Memorial on Aug. 14. Bianconi said that race “is likely to include” Wiggle It Jiggleit, the top harness horse in the country. “It doesn’t get any higher than that, and the horse is 12 out of 13 lifetime,” in races won, Bianconi said.

On the gaming part of the Rocksino, the net win, or revenue after payouts to winning players, has had two months of more than \$18.5 million and only three months below \$14 million. Since opening, the Rocksino has brought in \$289,546,841 in 19 months of operations. One month, the Rocksino outperformed three of the state’s four casinos.