

**LITTLE**



**BIG**

**MEN**

**FOR THE WORLD'S BEST  
JOCKEYS, LIFE IS A MIX  
OF FORTUNE AND FATALISM,  
COURAGE AND DEPRIVATION.  
RIDING A HORSE IS THE EASY PART  
BY JESSE KATZ**

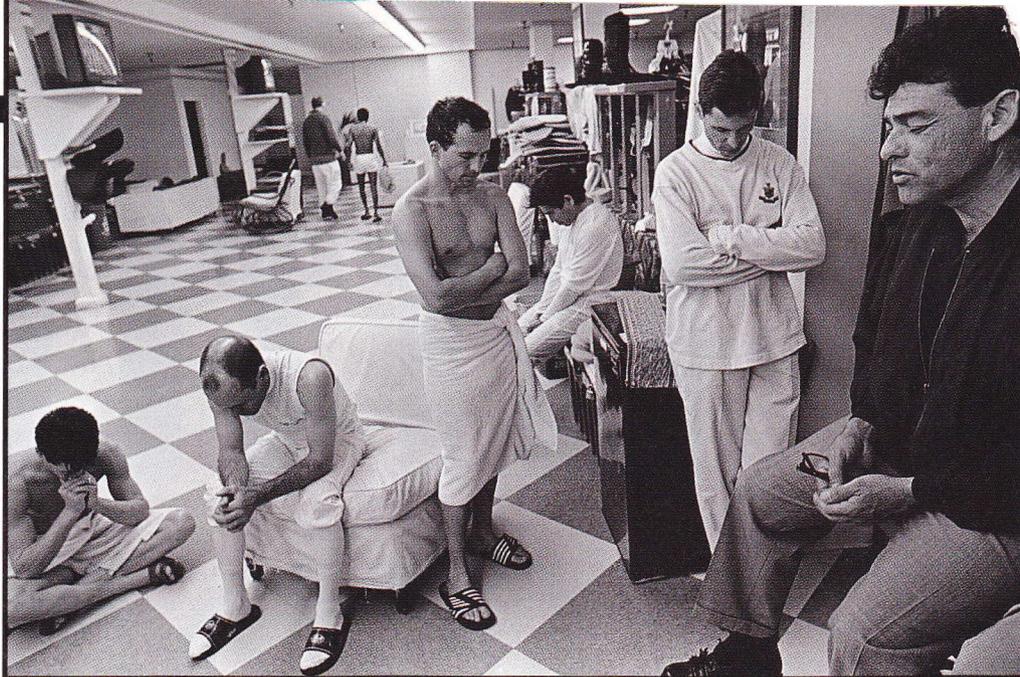
**O**N A COLD, WET, winter morning at Santa Anita Park, a chaplain enters the jockeys' room. The first race is still an hour away, but the long, windowless shed is already crackling with bravado: the snap of horse-whips on patent leather boots, the smack of tobacco spit on linoleum tiles, the rat-a-tat of Spanish epithets in accents spanning the Americas. A couple of guys are playing gin, \$5 a hand. Nobody ever pays up. A few are hunched over the *Daily Racing Form* with Hi-Liters, doing homework. There is a girlie calendar from an El Monte smog-check garage hanging on the wall. Some of the biggest names in the history of the sport will be riding today; a class of eighth-grade boys would tower over them all.

The chaplain is not ordained, but he once owned racehorses, gambling on some of the same souls he is now trying to nourish. He slips on reading glasses and unfolds a page of handwritten notes—from the songbook of the Doors, the words of Jim Morrison.

*Into this house we're born, the chaplain recites. Into this world we're thrown . . .*

Chris McCarron, cheeks still lobster red from the sweatbox, shuffles over in shower sandals and a robe. At 46, with career earnings of more than \$23 million, he is the richest man to sit in a Thoroughbred saddle. In getting there, McCarron has fractured a foot, cracked three ribs, broken a shoulder blade, sprained his neck, crushed his right leg, splintered his right forearm, and shattered his left hip, twice. His insurance premiums have run as high as \$20,000 a year. Standing next to him is Gary Stevens, another Hall of Fame rider, who retired on opening day of the 2000 season after six operations on his arthritic knees failed to dampen the bone-grinding pain. A year later, experimenting with an herbal remedy originally made for horses, he is back. "I was lost, just absolutely lost," Stevens says of his time away.

The prayer circle expands to Kent Desormeaux, a Cajun showman who has won two of the last three Kentucky Derbys. He has no hearing in his right ear, the result of being thrown from his mount eight years ago and kicked in the head by another horse. His two-year-old son, Jacob, who was born deaf, recently underwent surgery to have an electronic sound processor implanted under his skull. Joining late is the brilliant yet surly Corey Nakatani, last season's leading rider. During World War II, his Japanese American grandparents were housed in the racetrack's stables, a way station to the internment camps. They have never returned



**MEN O' WAR:** Chaplain Richard Mena (top) leads a prerace prayer in the Santa Anita jockeys' room. A steam always follows the morning coffee klatch at Clockers' Corner, where Chris McCarron takes care of business on his cell. Kent Desormeaux (bottom right) symbolizes all of racing's highs and lows



here to see him ride.

*Like a dog without a bone, the chaplain continues. An actor out alone . . .*

A small TV, tuned to *The People's Court*, hums in the far corner, where Laffit Pincay Jr. sits off by himself. The 54-year-old Panamanian, who surpassed Bill Shoemaker in 1999 to become the world's winningest jockey, is the Yoda of this room: restrained, powerful, ageless. Pound for pound—at five foot one, a rippled 117—he might just be the best athlete on earth. Packing his muscles into that frame, though, requires a diet that borders on torture; when his mother cooks his favorite dish, *arroz con pollo*, Pincay allows himself one taste, lets the juices trickle down his throat, then spits the rest out. A few lockers away, Garrett Gomez takes food to another extreme, eating so ravenously between races that he is known as "Pac-Man" to his fellow jocks. Because purging is the only way that he—and most others—can meet the sport's stringent weight requirements, he figures he might as well indulge. "A lot of people think of it as throwing up," Gomez says. "But it's not that gross. Before anything even settles, we get rid of it. It's like putting food in a blender and pouring it out."

Between Pincay and Gomez is another locker, sitting empty for the last year. The nameplate says PAT VALENZUELA, one of racing's great disappointments. Unprepared for success at 17, when he became the youngest jockey to win the \$1 million Santa Anita Derby, Valenzuela has since been suspended at least nine times for failing drug tests or dis-

appearing before races, his triumphs undone by a lifetime of addictions. Although nearly everyone in this room expects another relapse, he plans to be back—and, at 38, finally sober, he insists—before the winter meeting is through. In the opposite corner, there is another empty locker. It belongs to Chris Antley. His body, bloody and battered, was found in the hallway of his Pasadena home in December, a discovery that briefly catapulted horse racing from the back of sports to front-page news. What initially appeared to be a homicide, however, was later ruled an accidental overdose; an autopsy revealed enough amphetamines and illegal diet pills to send the two-time Kentucky Derby winner careening off the walls. Antley was 15 pounds over his riding weight. Nobody has the heart to remove his name.

Now the chaplain delivers the chorus: *Riders on the storm . . . Riders on the storm . . .*

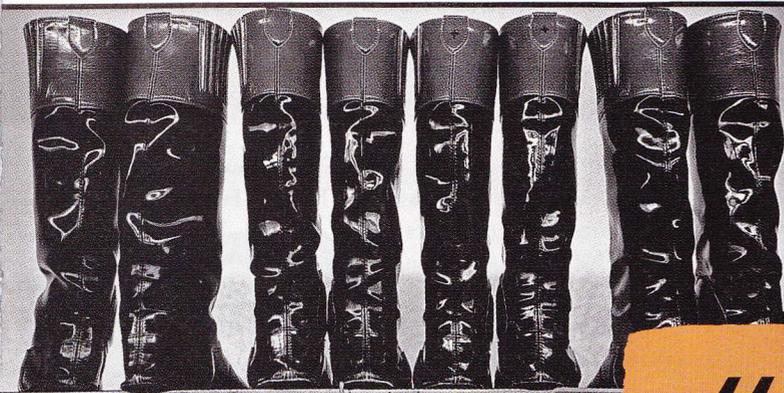
More world-class jockeys live in Southern California than anywhere else in America. More world-class jockeys, in fact, live in the San Gabriel

eyes here can ride year-round without leaving home, a luxury not enjoyed on the nomadic East Coast circuit.

By the first Saturday in May, at least five and perhaps eight of the men in this room will have made the trek to Churchill Downs, to ride in the Kentucky Derby; Santa Anita jockeys have captured the most coveted of races 13 of the last 20 years. The nation's attention will flicker their way, maybe take note of the winning horse's name. But the jocks will return as they left, anonymous to all but the faithful. Horse racing is the dinosaur of U.S. sporting life, romantic and majestic yet insular and slow to adapt. When Santa Anita Park opened on Christmas Day 1934, a crowd of more than 30,000 packed the stands, including Al Jolson, Clark Gable, and Will Rogers. Average on-track attendance is now down to 10,000, less than a third of its peak in the 1940s. Back then, of course, there was no competition from the Dodgers or Lakers, no Lotto or Vegas or satellite wagering to lure away gamblers. Ranches and farms were not so out of place in the city, the view from horseback hardly novel.

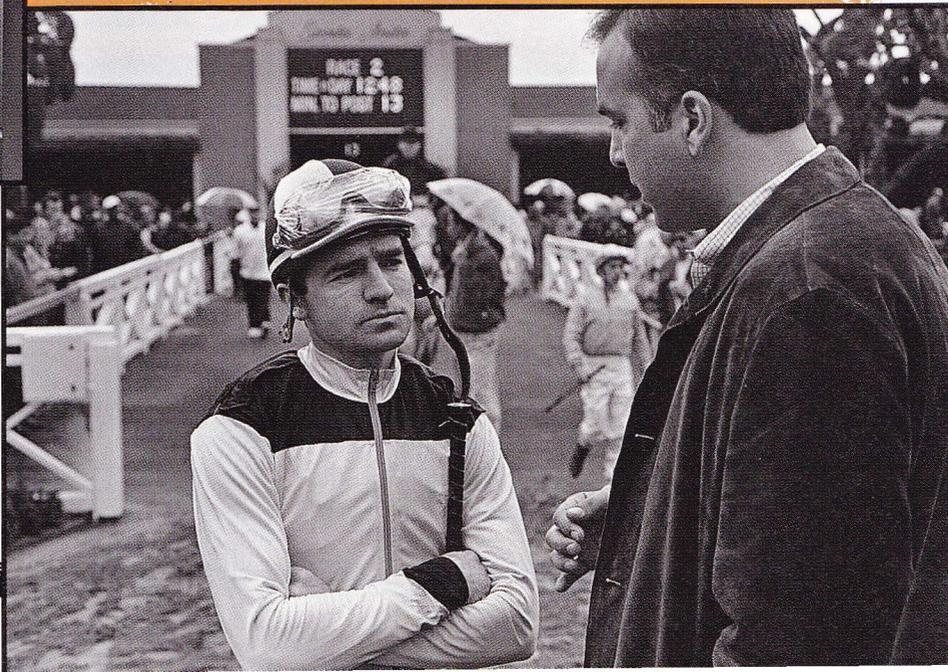
To say that you are going to the track these days is to sound anachronistic, or at least ironic. It suggests an afternoon spent with bulbous-nosed codgers and stogie-chomping wise guys, retro hipsters and misunderstood geniuses, the very rich and the very poor—none of which would be too off the mark. Even so, the uninitiated can readily appreciate the grandeur of a Thoroughbred, its startling size and lethal power. The animal is the celebrity, the star of media coverage and ad campaigns. The humans on top, in baggy knickers and a rainbow of silks, always have been harder to figure.

In a society that prizes oversize sports heroes, jockeys are tiny men who must shrink themselves tinier. The scale is as much their enemy as any emar-



**“I DON'T THINK THE PUBLIC HAS ANY IDEA OF HOW MUCH POLITICS AND BS YOU HAVE TO GO THROUGH JUST TO GET ON A HORSE.”**

Valley foothills—Bradbury, Sierra Madre, Glendora, Monrovia, Duarte, and Arcadia, where the track is located—than in any other single area code. For them, Santa Anita is Yankee Stadium, the temple graced by Seabiscuit and Citation, Longden and Shoe. Other tracks may occasionally host a more prestigious event, but the racing at Santa Anita is consistently richer and the weather better, the backdrop of swaying palms and snowy peaks a wonder impossible to replicate. Given the proximity of Hollywood Park and Del Mar, jock-



ciated fashion models, the relationship between food and the demands of their profession no less perverse. They outlast the horses by many years and earn millions more in their own careers, but few will ever get an endorsement deal or end up on a Wheaties box. They can steer a 1,200-pound beast through the narrowest of holes, clinging to its neck at 40 mph, yet in the public's eye they are passengers more than athletes. They drive souped-up Porsches and, as the stereotype would have it, tend to cavort with long-legged blondes. But even the cockiest of jocks is regularly humbled, thrown by mounts, disqualified by stewards, heckled by gamblers. They have no off-season and take no vacation, except when hurt or suspended. Riding is their life more than their living. They do it again and again, no matter the cost.

The chaplain looks up, happy to see that his unorthodox choice of verse has drawn an audience. "Six billion people on this earth, and you're set apart," he tells the jockeys. "Thirty of you here. God made you the best in the world. Think about it. How much love is that?"

**I**N THE ICY DARKNESS, WHEN THE THERMOMETER IS stuck in the 30s and the purple glow of the San Gabriels has yet to rise from the north, time travels backward. Rush hour is just getting under way, but 14 miles northeast of downtown, hooves already are pounding the loam, easier to hear at this hour than see. Finches flutter in the murky light, feeding on the fresh manure. The horses snort, nostrils flaring. Great clouds of steam come billowing out.

During Santa Anita's winter meeting, which always opens the day after Christmas and this year ends the day after Easter, the racing runs from Wednesday through Sunday, with first post at either 12:30 or 1:00. Even when the track is closed, though, jockeys are here, seven days a week, often before dawn. Nearly 2,000 Thoroughbreds are stabled at Santa Anita—under the supervision of about 150 trainers—each animal an anxious, quivering masterpiece of inbreeding that requires a daily romp to stay sharp. Exercise riders are hired to do most of the light galloping. But the jocks, if they want to ingratiate themselves with the trainers and earn a shot at the best mounts, are expected to volunteer whenever a full-speed workout is in store.

"Trainers choose who they want to be the stars," says Desormeaux, who will earn his 4,000th victory this meeting—at 31, the youngest jockey in history to reach that milestone—but still has to curry favor in the mornings. "Our job is to convince them that we're the one."

Unlike most professional athletes, jockeys have no contracts or guaranteed income. They are freelancers, akin to golfers, with only the top three finishers getting a share of the purse. Payday, which is every Thursday, depends on the previous week's performance. The leading jockey might get a check for \$20,000, others nothing but a \$50 consolation fee. Golfers at least begin every tournament on equal footing, just them against the course. Jockeys need horses—or more precisely,

they need a trainer to put them on a horse, a game every bit as competitive as the race itself. Jockeys hope to be in enough demand to be able to pick and choose. But with every rider costing the same—10 percent of the winning horse's take—trainers have no obligation or incentive to stick with a losing jockey, sometimes shopping for a new rider after every race.

The cycle feeds on itself: Hot jockeys keep getting better horses to ride, while cold jockeys end up on mounts that confirm everyone's low expectations. The top ten jockeys at Santa Anita win more than 75 percent of the races, the bottom ten less than 3 percent. That is where Luis Jauregui finds himself now, a journeyman who has been on just 36 horses in the first six weeks of the meeting, so far without a win. It does not help that he was thrown and trampled on the ninth day, getting his left buttock branded with a swollen hoofprint. While recuperating, he was stripped of every mount he had been promised.

"If you stay in bed, you've lost," says Jauregui, who is up at 4:45, usually without an alarm. He says two Hail Marys, makes the sign of the cross, and by 5:30 he is at the track, sipping coffee through chapped lips, ready to ride whatever he is offered.

"You got any action?" he asks, spotting trainer Jim Cassidy one morning before sunrise.

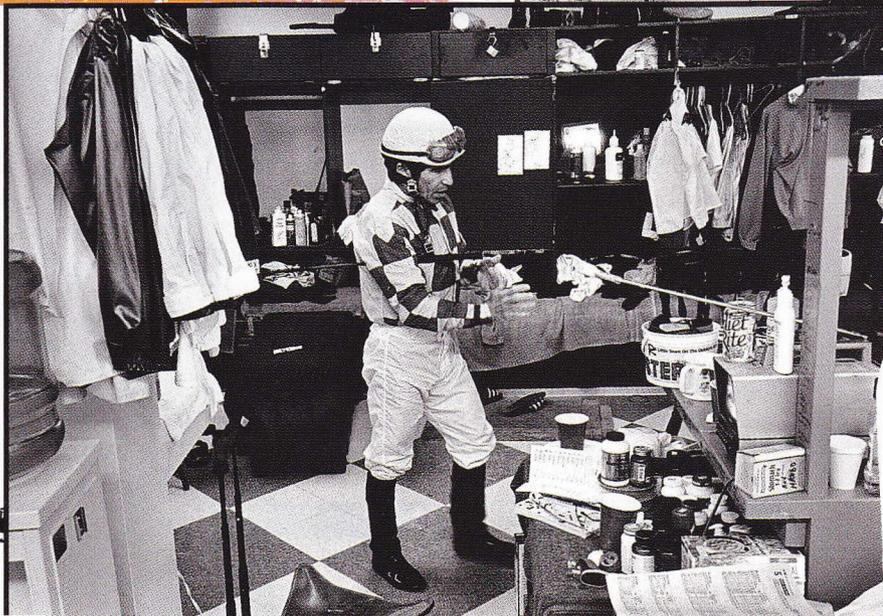
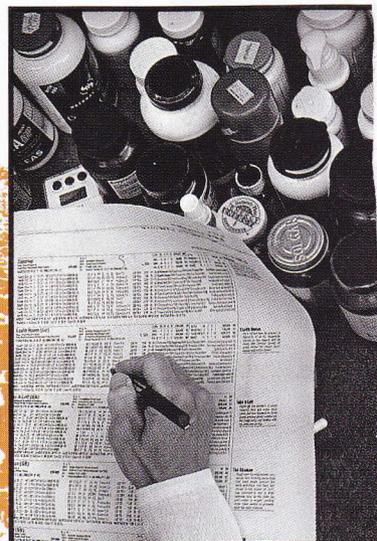
"Not for you," Cassidy says. "I got one for Desormeaux."

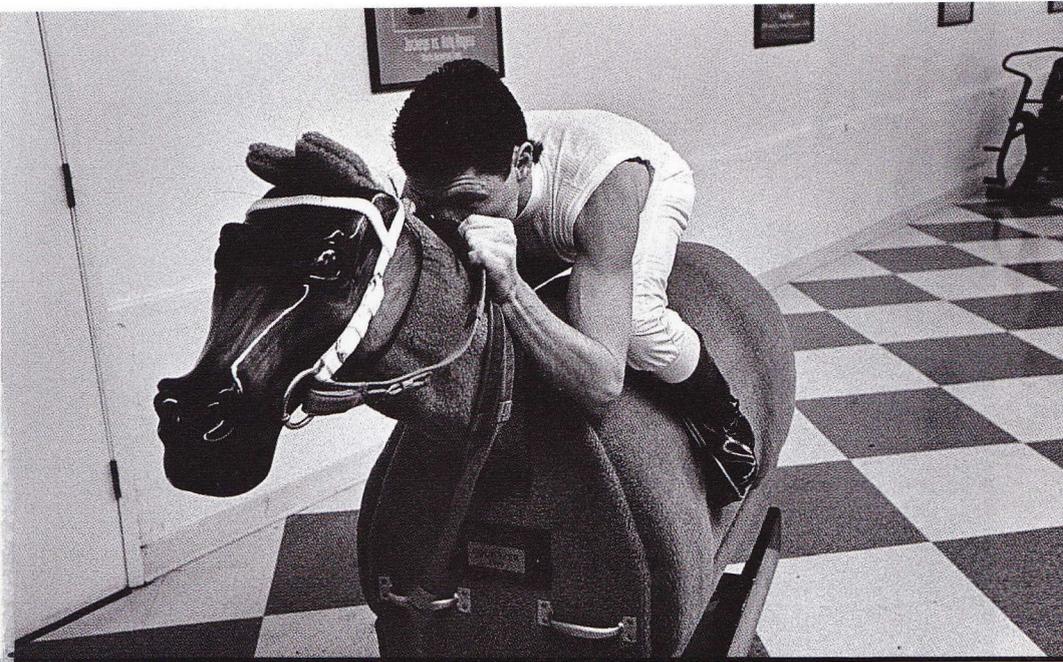
"I'll be there," Jauregui says. "His ass won't be out of bed."

Cassidy shrugs. Jauregui shoves his hands into his pockets. "When you haven't won a race," he says, "how do you sell yourself?"

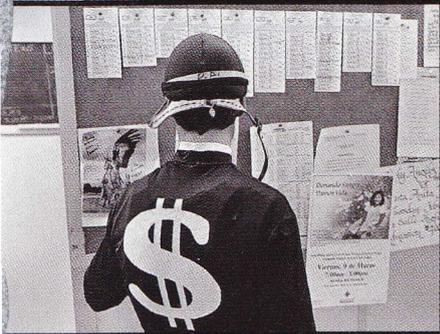
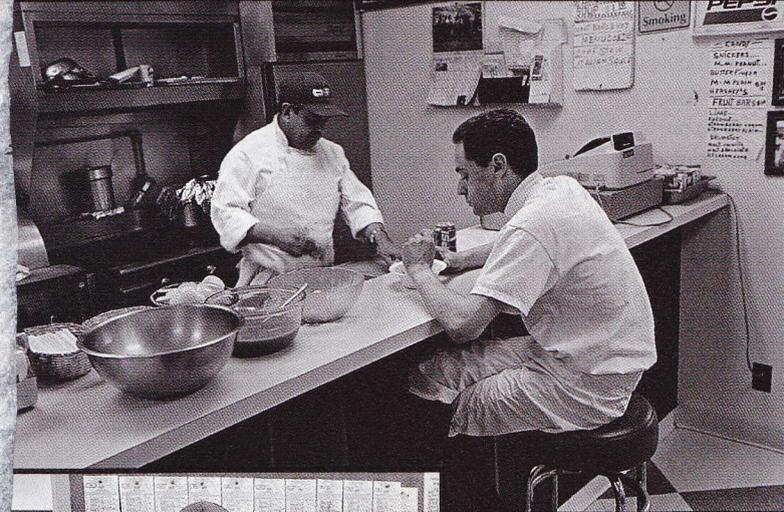
Salesmanship is not a part of the

**THE TOLL REGISTERS  
ON THEIR FACES,  
SOME NEARLY SKELETAL: EYES  
PREMATURELY CRINKLED,  
CHEEKS CREASED AND SUNKEN.**





**POUND FOR POUND:** Fifty-four-year-old Laffit Pincay Jr. (bottom left) is the Yoda of the room, existing on just 850 calories a day. In his "\$" silks, Paul Atkinson checks the racing schedule and (top) practices on an Equicizer. At the lunch counter, Iggy Puglisi eats everything that Salvador Garcia puts on his plate



job that comes naturally for most jocks. With few exceptions, these are country boys—from the backwoods of the Pacific Northwest, the ranchos of Mexico, the swamps of Acadiana—who raced in county fairs while other teenagers collected diplomas and went to proms. They tend to be

blunt and unvarnished, their lexicon straight out of the barnyard. Riding a horse, as fast and as fearlessly as possible, constitutes most of their worldly knowledge. That might have been good enough to get them to Santa Anita. But to thrive, jockeys also need to be versed in spin and buzz—the tools of Hollywood—schmoozing trainers and soothing the egos of the owners who pay the bills of the barn. “What separates the jocks here is not so much athletic skills but people skills,” Desormeaux says. “It’s not enough to walk the walk. You have to talk the talk.”

By 8 a.m., the chatter hits its peak at Clockers’ Corner, the outdoor café at the homestretch turn. Cell phones ring like church bells. Gambling tips and golf scores get swapped. “I’d rather ride a slow horse for you than a fast horse for someone else,” croons an agent. Every other Wednesday, the track issues a “condition book” that outlines the prerequisites and purses for the next two weeks of racing. Agents, who

get 25 percent of their jockey’s winnings, scribble commitments from trainers onto the pages; with six of the top ten jockeys represented by just three agents, though, the best horses usually get snatched up before anyone else has a chance. “I don’t think the public has any idea of how much poli-

tics and BS you have to go through just to get on a horse,” says Paul Atkinson, 31, who began his career on the Idaho and Utah circuits. “When you get to this level, riding is the easy part.”

At a smaller track, Atkinson easily would be among the leaders. At Santa Anita, he rides two or three times a week—and rarely on a horse that will change perceptions of his prowess. After the first month, Atkinson is 0 for 13. “I say, ‘What about Paul?’” says Atkinson’s agent, Tommy Ball, describing a typical negotiation. “They say, ‘Paul who?’ I say, ‘Paul Atkinson.’ They say, ‘What, you think my horse is not that good?’” If the decision were left solely to a trainer, Atkinson might get a few more calls. But trainers often receive their instructions from owners, many of whom are fabulously wealthy and never expect to see a profit. They are in it for other reasons—status, recreation, a link to history—and boasting of their marquee jockeys over cocktails in the Turf Club is one of the rewards. “A lot of owners would rather get *beat* with Chris McCarron or Gary Stevens on their horse than *win* with Paul Atkinson,” adds Atkinson, only partly exaggerating.

Early one morning, Atkinson heads off to the stables to make the pitch himself. He finds Bruce Jackson, a trainer of modest standing who often tries to lend his support.

“Action Jackson,” Atkinson says. “You got anything for me?”

“Depends whether you want the exercise,” Jackson says.

“You’re not gonna let me ride him, huh?” Atkinson asks.

Jackson fires a stream of tobacco.

“Yes? No? What you want?” Atkinson asks again.

“Sure,” Jackson says. “I want to see you look good.”

Atkinson saddles the horse, a four-year-old named Red Eye. He has worked the animal before, only to be removed at race time for a bigger name. “Doesn’t mean it’s right, but that’s the way it works,” says Jackson, watching as Atkinson gallops Red Eye around the track. Nine days later, Red Eye is entered in a \$56,000 race. Atkinson is in the jockeys’ room, watching on a closed-circuit TV. Red Eye wins. Chris McCarron is on board.

“Trained that motherfucker good, didn’t I?” Atkinson says.

**T**HE JOCKEYS’ ROOM IS NEAR THE SOUTH ENTRANCE OF the track, fused to the back of the saddling barn. A dirt path descends through the horse stalls and under an arched portal, all painted Depression-era mustard and artichoke. At the paddock’s

**SITTING PRETTY:** Garrett Gomez (background, top left) works a prospective mount. Jose Valdivia, wrapped in a towel, compares notes with Luis Jauregui. In starry silks, Isaias Enriquez waits to be hoisted into the saddle. Danny Sorenson (opposite, center) has been riding at Santa Anita for 23 years. Every race begins with a horseback procession through the grandstand tunnel; afterward, jockeys return this way on foot



rear wall, the dirt gives way to a double door, where an armed guard sits under a stenciled NO ADMITTANCE sign.

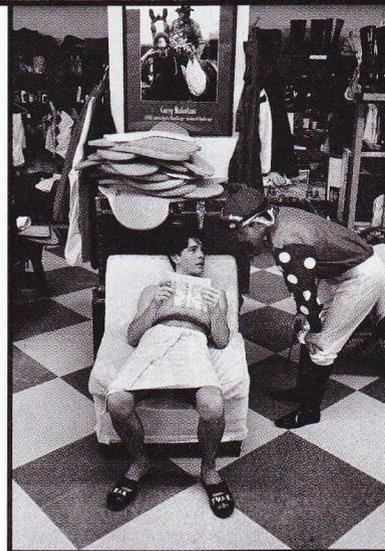
Inside, a row of bare fluorescent bulbs runs across the ceiling. The floor is a turquoise-and-gold checkerboard of tile. Open-faced wooden lockers with long benches wrapped in towels form the perimeter. The feel is at once industrial and agrarian—saddles and boots and whips and goggles, surrounded by a clutter of household cleaning supplies. At the east end there is a steam room, the temperature jacked to 140. At the west end there is a sleeping chamber. It holds four bunk beds, all with tiny ladders and junior mattresses, unmistakably built for a child.

At 10 a.m., after the last morning drill, most jockeys walk here directly from the track. They peel off their jeans and boots. Having weathered the indignities of obtaining a horse, they must alter their bodies to ride one. It is now time to “reduce.”

That is the euphemism for extracting the last few pounds from their already starved and dehydrated frames, a trial that sometimes leaves them at the brink of collapse. Jockeys are small men, but not that small—and few are as naturally light as they were when they began their careers as teenagers. With an average height of about five feet three, most still would be lean at 135 pounds. Instead, they must squeeze themselves into bodies that are at least 20 pounds slimmer, an impossibility without a daily diet of hotboxes, appetite suppressants, laxatives, diuretics, and “flipping,” the jocks’ term for the practice of almost instant regurgitation. The toll registers on their faces, some nearly skeletal: eyes prematurely crinkled, noses and chins protruding, cheeks creased and sunken, teeth capped to hide the corrosive effects of stomach acid. “We’re all dying to be jockeys, that’s for sure,” Desormeaux says.

Desormeaux is one of the superstars, expert at racing horses and courting the spotlight. Born in 1970 on the bayous of Louisiana, he grew up speaking French and waltzing to fiddles. He has deep hazel eyes and a heavy brow that betrays his emotions. He says his wife had hoped to marry someone “tall, dark, and handsome—and I figured two out of three ain’t bad.” He learned horses from his father, who promoted amateur races at a bush track on the outskirts of Lafayette. By the time he was ten, Desormeaux and his brother, who is a trainer, were racing ponies through the soybean fields, arguing over “who looked prettiest in the saddle.” As a kid, Desormeaux also loved basketball; when the Santa Anita jocks play their annual benefit game against the eighth graders of Holy Angels School, he is usually the only one able to score. But early on, Desormeaux realized he would be better served by a dream in which his size was an asset, not a liability. “I used to cry at night, hoping the Lord would make me taller,” he told a reporter at the beginning of his career. “Now I pray he doesn’t.”

At 17, Desormeaux left Louisiana for Maryland and overnight became the nation’s top apprentice jockey. At 19, he posted 598 wins, still a record for a single year. Determined to prove himself in the big leagues, Desormeaux headed for California; at 21, he was the leading jockey at Santa Anita’s fall Oak Tree meeting and, a year later, the top money winner in America. “Desormeaux has burst on the racing scene as a combination of Stan Musial, Willie Mays, and Nolan Ryan,” the late *Los Angeles Times* columnist Jim Murray wrote. But Desormeaux was still young and, it turned out, too smug for his own good. He developed a habit of giving up on horses that could not win, halting his ride even if he had a chance at second or third. Trainers—and bettors—were enraged. The stewards fined him repeatedly; twice they slapped him with five-day suspensions.



A horse named Real Quiet turned Desormeaux into a sensation again. After winning the 1998 Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes, the pair was one victory away from the Triple Crown, horse racing’s ultimate prize, which had gone unclaimed for the previous two decades. The crowd at New York’s Belmont Park made Real Quiet the odds-on favorite. With a half mile to go and a \$5 million jackpot in the balance, Desormeaux pulled Real Quiet into the lead and asked the colt to sprint. They lost in a photo finish, a moment Desormeaux has replayed in his mind every night since. “We came so far and got so close,” he said at the time. “Close enough to taste it. And now it’s all gone.”

He was back on another Kentucky Derby winner last year, Fusaichi Pegasus. But by then, Desormeaux’s quest for racing immortality was being overshadowed by his son’s battle to hear, an odyssey of tests and surgeries and therapies that has often left the jockey too sapped for morning workouts. At the end of the Santa Anita meeting, in fact, he plans to spend three months riding in Japan; races are held there only twice a week, allowing him time for Jacob’s treatment. “I can’t imagine a game that’s more fun and more thrilling and more prosperous, but the

sacrifices you have to make—sometimes it just doesn't add up," Desormeaux says. "If you had asked me at 16, 'Do you want to go through these things?' I would have said, 'No chance, I'll do something else.' Now it's my way of life. It's a world I've grown to become."

One Saturday morning, after pouring himself a cup of coffee for breakfast, Desormeaux climbs into a convertible Jaguar and pulls out

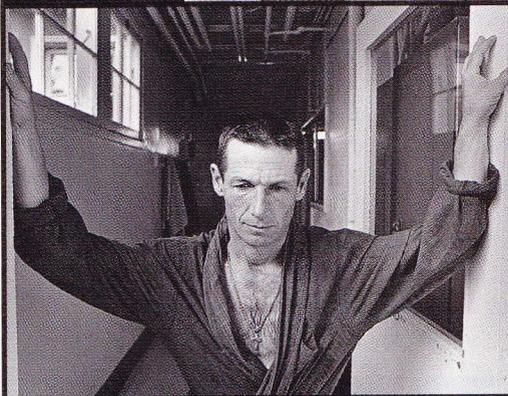
steam, lathering himself in baby oil. "My wife says I'm suffocating my body. I guess I am, but if I don't, it'll take an hour before I even start to sweat." He jogs in place, pumps his arms, lowers into a deep knee bend. The air is so heavy and wet, it is hard to breathe. A half hour later, he can feel his wedding band start to loosen.

He will race five times this day, consuming nothing; only after his final ride does he grab a cold Bud Light, draining it in a couple of gulps.

Later, after returning home, he pours a glass of red wine, buying more time before he must confront the pangs of hunger. It is 6 p.m., and Desormeaux—just two days before heading to Las Vegas to collect the 2001 ESPY Award for best jockey—has not eaten for nearly 24 hours. "I'm afraid if I put something in my mouth, I'm going to eat the house," he says. "And then the whole thing starts all over again."

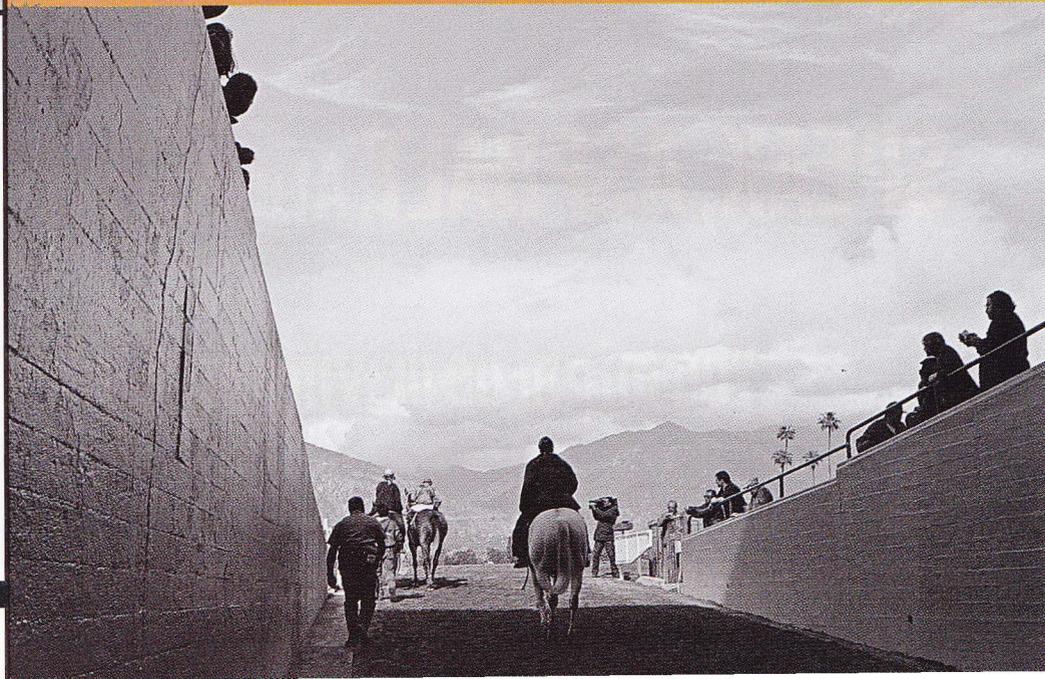
The misery is enforced by the sport's so-called scale of weights, a system intended to even the playing field, allowing younger horses to carry less weight than older ones, females less than males, routers less than sprinters. The concept is sound, but the scale has changed little in the last century. Although it might seem reasonable to take into account the evolving size of humans, the racing industry is hampered by a lack of centralized authority, no nationwide league or commissioner with a mandate to act in the best interests of the game. Power rests primarily in the hands of horse owners—and what they most desire is to see their animals showered in glory, not burdened by heavier jockeys.

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of his million-dollar home in Bradbury, which boasts a sculpture of a wild horse—mane like flames, hooves kicking at the sky—by a pool with a swim-up bar. He heads for the track, blowing past a couple of young skateboarders on his street. They scamper to the curb and flash him the finger. His mind is on his weight, 118 when he woke up, which means he will have to pull two or three pounds before he can race. It is not a huge amount, except that it is the same two or three pounds he had to pull the day before, and the day before that. "I'm like a dried-up sponge," Desormeaux says. In the jockeys' room, he strips down and heads for the

**DANGER, DISPARAGEMENT,  
SELF-DENIAL—THESE ARE  
NOT MERELY AFFLICTIONS BUT TESTS  
OF NERVE AND SPIRIT.**



Before every race, Santa Anita's clerk of scales, Kevin Colosi, presides over the same locker room ritual: Half-dressed jockeys, holding two to three pounds of riding equipment, take turns hopping onto a digital, stainless-steel Toledo. Colosi cracks his knuckles and taps a pencil, comparing the weights in the daily program with the glowing red numbers on the machine. If the assigned weights are high—between 120 and 126—few jockeys will have trouble making the cut. But if the assigned weights are low—from 110 to 116—most will be too heavy. "One-ten? You gotta cut off both my legs, and I still might not make it!" groans Paul Atkinson, who at five feet six is about the tallest rider in the room.

Some trainers are sticklers, replacing any jockey who fails to make weight. Others will accept extra weight—sometimes as much as six or seven pounds—numbers that scroll across the track's TV monitors all day, a reminder that every battle waged here ultimately is for the entertainment of gamblers.

After 15 years of fighting the scale, Corey Black finally gave up. "I was killing myself," says Black, 32, who retired in November. When he started riding, he was only 83 pounds; in the end he weighed about 124, often having to drop as many as 8 or 9 before noon. Desperate to preserve his career, he began taking Lasix, a drug usually given to horses that bleed from their lungs. In humans it functions as a diuretic, capable of flushing out five pounds of urine in a couple of hours. Black took his first pill a decade ago. It gave him cramps and an odd echo in his ears. He continued to take it five days a week, eventually building up to eight pills a day. "The day I retired, my wife cried—tears of joy," says Black, now a booking agent, who weighs a comfortable 140. "I just wasn't meant to be a jockey."

The same might be said of Laffit Pincay, who before ascending to racing's pantheon was as mortal as anyone in this room. Abandoned by his father, who was also a jockey, Pincay arrived from Panama in 1965, a brawler and a drinker. He was built like a fireplug, with a dark, Indian face and bewitching green eyes. He popped amphetamine-laced diet pills to kill his appetite. He forced himself to spend so many hours in the hotbox that he sometimes fainted on the way out. His wife, Linda, depressed over her own poor health, committed suicide in 1985. "I

was very hard on myself," Pincay says. "I used to get very upset when things didn't go the right way. It would hurt me. I had too much fire inside."

Even as he wrenched himself to make weight, Pincay dominated his profession. He won 13 riding titles at Santa Anita, another 13 at Hollywood Park, 5 at Del Mar, and 3 at Oak Tree. He became the only jockey in history to win five Eclipse Awards, given every year to the nation's top rider. Still, by the time he turned 50, Pincay had fallen from fashion. Few trainers wanted to use a man of his age. There were whispers: If he were to someday reach Shoemaker's all-time record of 8,833 wins, he would have to do it at a smaller, less competitive track. Pincay stayed. He broke the record. For most of this meeting, he has been Santa Anita's leading jockey again—riding as well as ever, just back in vogue. "I never lost hope that I would learn to take care of myself and do things better, and that's what I did," says Pincay, who has remarried, kicked his addictions, and equipped his Porsche Boxster with vanity plates that say "8834+." Where other Hall of Famers work sparingly, saving themselves for the richest races, Pincay still rides anything and everything. "Well, that's me," he says. "What else am I going to do?"

He is sitting in a rocking chair by his locker, at a table littered with herbal potions and vitamin bottles. Dosages are scribbled all over the furniture in black marker, formulas too crucial to be misplaced. The years have taught him to speak of food merely as sustenance: protein rather than lunch, ounces instead of meals. His limit is 850 calories a day, something less than a third of what the USDA recommends for an active male. To the other jockeys, Pincay is as baffling as he is valiant. "Laffit I don't think is human," says Iggy Puglisi, a young Argentine-born rider who ranks in the middle of the Santa Anita standings. "I don't know where he's from. I wish sometimes he would retire—you know, eat his steak and potatoes and not have to worry about it."

Tattooed, with spiked hair and a Ramones T-shirt, Puglisi has just plopped down at the jocks' lunch counter, a short-order grill inside the locker room. For a place so obsessed with the scale, the menu features almost nothing low-cal. There are cheeseburgers and malts, BLTs and glazed doughnuts. The cook, Salvador Garcia, runs a weekly tab for each rider.

"Sal, fix me something to eat," Puglisi says.

"I'm dying."

Turning from the stove, Garcia appears almost regal in a white, double-breasted chef's smock. He gives Puglisi a long look. "Are you eating?" he asks finally. "Or flipping?"

"Flipping," says Puglisi. No need to skimp.

A few minutes later Garcia serves him a burrito stuffed with meat and beans. Puglisi carves it with a plastic knife and fork, cleaning the plate. He drinks a can of Pepsi. "I try not to let it get out of hand," Puglisi says. "Not that it's good to do it at any time, but I try to keep it down to normal patterns. It's kind of what the sport expects you to do. There's almost no other way around it."

Garcia picks up the plate and replaces it with another, a stew of some sort. Puglisi douses it with Tapatio hot sauce.

"What is this I'm eating here?" he asks.

"It's good," Garcia says.

"Good to flip," Puglisi says.

He finishes and Garcia brings another plate, this one piled high with fruit.

"No, Sal."

"Eat."

"Okay, twist my arm," Puglisi says. He sprinkles salt on a slice of melon and asks for another Pepsi.

Garcia waves a quesadilla.

"No, Sal," Puglisi says. "No more, man."

"You hungry?" Garcia insists.

"I was," Puglisi says. He excuses himself. The disgorging is painless, no fingers or gagging; Puglisi has trained his stomach muscles to convulse on command. "I have a girlfriend, and she's not extremely happy about the lifestyle, but she is happy for me," he says. "She's a struggling dancer and knows how hard it is to get paid to do something you love."

Garcia shakes his head. He is 50, a onetime farmworker from Mexico who knows the meaning of hunger. "When I first started cooking here, I went to the bathroom and heard somebody getting sick," Garcia recalls. "It scared me. I thought, 'Oh, no, my food has poisoned them!'" He understands the jocks better now but still finds his job hard to explain. "You give them something, you think they're done, and they say, 'No, give me more.' They eat and eat and eat. These poor little guys, their stomachs are asking for it. But then they have to get rid of it. They're hungry, but they can't really eat."

He stirs a pot of chicken, breathing in the soothing vapor. "Sometimes," Garcia says, "it makes me feel like the devil."

**E**IGHTEEN MINUTES BEFORE THE first race, and again at half-hour intervals throughout the day, a security guard outside the jocks' room pushes twice on a doorbell. Inside, the assistant clerk of scales, Charlie McCaul, gets up from his desk. "All riight, riders!" he barks, a guttural cry that evokes the peanut vendors at Dodger Stadium.

An ex-jockey, Jake Mullins, is running back and forth with armloads of silks—nylons and polyesters, actually—making sure every rider has the correct uniform for each race. The "color man," he has a storeroom of more than 8,000 jerseys, and a filing system that relies largely on memory. The valets, one for every three or four jocks, are buffing boots and polishing saddles and wiping down whips. They stand at workbenches piled high with Lemon Pledge, Kleen Guard, Fiebing's Saddle Soap, and Saran Wrap, which they use to cover goggles on rainy days. The masseur, David Stark, is kneading sore backs and knotted legs. "Just like a Thoroughbred is all muscle, tightly wound, jumping out of its skin," says Stark, who has worked here for 18 years, "these guys are Thoroughbreds, too—human Thoroughbreds."

On this drizzly Saturday, the same day he spends starving himself, Desormeaux begins the morning subdued. At home, Jacob is fussy, flinging his breakfast across their marble, horseshoe-shaped kitchen counter. "No throw—eat eggs," Desormeaux tells him in sign language. It has been less than two weeks since Jacob's implant was connected. The first surgery, in November, produced no sound. In January, doctors drilled into his skull again and replaced the unit, which digitally simulates millions of tones and transmits them to his inner ear. A magnetic disk sticks to the outside of his scalp. Wires run from it to a battery-powered speech processor strapped on his back. "It's like they turned a blender on in his head," says Desormeaux, who still is not sure what his son is hearing—what he will ever make of these sounds—but felt that he owed him the chance. Jacob runs into the living room, where his brother, eight-year-old Joshua, is watching cartoons. Jake stumbles, knocking off the magnet. "Josh, fix your brother—he's unplugged," says Desormeaux. He sighs, "Now you see reality."

Race time changes everything. Only the moment matters. "Great balls o' fire!" howls Desormeaux, glancing at the clock. He zips up his padded safety vest and fastens his crash helmet, tucks his white, parachute-thin pants into his black boots and cinches his sleeves with fat

rubber bands. Desormeaux is now *El Desarmador*—"the Screwdriver," a nickname courtesy of the Latin American jocks—the manic edge of his identity unshathed. "Got nothin' else to do," he says. "Might as well win this motherfucker."

He takes one last glance at the *Racing Form*, sizing up the chances of his mount, an 18-1 long shot named Ruby Prospector, which in the past has gone out fast, then peetered in the final stretches. "Try to establish the lead. Take 'em with you. Make 'em think, 'That monkey's gone.' Then chill him out a little, the others die, and my steady *compadre* beats them all." Desormeaux rubs some moisturizing cream into his face and takes a swig of mouthwash.

"See how easy it is?"

He struts to the door, swatting his whip against the ass of an unsuspecting jockey.

"Like taking candy from a baby."

At 14 minutes before post time, the track's official horn blower, Jay Cohen, plays a fanfare into the public address system. By then, the last jockey must be out the door and up the short path to the walking ring. The owners and trainers, giants by comparison, are there already with the horses, waiting to give last-minute instructions. It is usually more than the jockeys want to hear. "Bricklayers shouldn't give instructions to doctors," says Desormeaux, who smiles and nods nonetheless. The paddock judge, Ken Goldberg, adds another stylized call. "Riiiiiders up!" he sings, the cue for each jockey to be hoisted, by his left boot, into the saddle. They head through a tunnel, under the grandstand, and onto the mile-long oval. "The horses are approaching the starting gate," track announcer Trevor Denman says before every race at about two minutes to post. A minute later: "The horses have now reached the starting gate."

Like baseball catchers, jockeys assume an awkward crouch, ankles out and knees in, stirrups almost level with their seat. They lean over the horse's neck, butts up, backs flat, a bobble away from being tossed head over heels. During the first three quarters of a race, they usually keep a tight grip on the reins—"sitting chilly," it is called—while the animal tugs, fighting to break free. In the final quarter, they set the horse loose. "Yah, yah!" they will holler, their arms pushing and pulling with each stride, sometimes reaching for the whip, spanking and pumping and driving. "I'm an adrenaline freak," says Gary Stevens, who has won three Kentucky Derbys, two Belmont

Stakes, and one Preakness. During his brief retirement he was happy to be out of pain and to eat anything that he craved. But he could not stop thinking of how he felt in those final moments down the stretch, man and beast in perfect synchrony, 11 seconds in which the world seemed to stand still. "I was missing something in my life that I couldn't replace," Stevens says.

Some jockeys are known for their brute strength, the ability to hold together a dying horse, almost carrying it across the finish line. Nobody does that better than Laffit Pincay. Other jocks are masters of pace, patiently plodding at the back of the pack, waiting for the early speed to fade. It is as if their internal clock knows just how far they can fall behind—how much horse they have left under them—before exploding out of the clouds. Eddie Delahoussaye, now 49 and in the twilight of a Hall of Fame career, is the undisputed champ. The best make the fewest mistakes, anticipating the moves of their competitors, recognizing patterns and gauging gaps in the flow of traffic. With a big purse on the line, Chris McCarron is the tactician that other jockeys dread, almost always putting his horse in the right position at the right time. Finally, there is intuition, the gift of inhabiting an animal's thoughts. Few do this better than Desormeaux. "I'm half horse," he says.

Every race is an exercise in controlled chaos, with little more than a jockey's judgment—or fearlessness—setting the rules. Some riders can be intimidated, some will not budge. Most push the boundaries at least occasionally, squeezing rivals into the rail or forcing them wide at the turns. A few have gone further, clipping heels and risking pileups. "I've never seen so many daredevils in my life," says Irv Guiney, who is 65 and rode at Santa Anita from 1948 to 1959. "They're all miniature Arnold Schwarzeneggers."

Racehorses are more unpredictable. They are nervous and pissy, sexually perturbed and easily spooked. They kick from the back and bite from the front, crash into gates, dive over fences, stumble, buck, flip, and bolt. They are also pushed to their own physical extremes; last year 99 Thoroughbreds suffered fatal breakdowns while racing or training at Southern California tracks. On opening day of the 1999 Los Angeles County Fair meeting in Pomona, the front legs of a colt named Wolfhunt snapped in the middle of the fifth race. Its jockey, 23-year-old J.C. Gonzalez, was squashed to death underneath. He was the 141st jockey killed in a racing or training acci-

dent in the United States since 1940. Number 99 was Alvaro Pineda, who was crushed when his horse reared in a starting gate at Santa Anita in 1975. One of the first was George Woolf, who owned the Derby, an Arcadia steak house that is still a favorite among race fans. He fell off his horse at Santa Anita in 1946, cracking his head on the ground. In the spill that cost him his hearing, Desormeaux suffered 16 hairline fractures in his skull and remained unconscious one and a half days. Puglisi has ruptured the disks in his lower back. Atkinson has bruised a lung. Pincay, who puts on his underwear inside out for good luck, has broken his collarbone 11 times.

"There's very few that have escaped us," says Todd Jones, who has spent the last 14 years at Santa Anita as a paramedic. One of his Huntington Ambulances follows the jockeys around the dirt during every race.

Desormeaux's mount this day, Ruby Prospector, was last ridden by a young Northern California jock named Macario Rodriguez, who came to Santa Anita in January, hoping to make a splash. But after guiding Ruby to a fourth-place finish, Rodriguez was thrown by another horse in the saddling area later that same day; barely conscious and dripping blood from his nose, he was carried back to the jockeys' room, looking as vulnerable as a lost boy.

When the gate opens, Desormeaux follows his plan, jumping to the lead. Rounding the final turn, though, the rest of the field is still breathing down his neck. He asks his horse to run, but it gives up. Pincay wins on the favorite. Desormeaux finishes last, 23 lengths back.

He returns to the jockeys' room caked in mud—in his nose, in his ears, in his mouth. He dips a sponge into a bucket. He wipes his face, spitting and snorting like a boxer, then sits down to study the next race. "I can ride," he says after a moment, "but I ain't Jesus."

**E**VEN THE BEST JOCKEY RARELY wins more than 20 percent of his races, an average that has remained fairly consistent over the years. It is, in the end, the horse that must prevail.

"A great jockey is not going to make a slow horse win a race," says Jay Privman, the *Daily Racing Form's* national correspondent. When trying to predict a winner, Privman considers a slew of other variables—bloodlines, class, trainer, distance, surface, weather—before assessing the skill of the jockey, whom he credits for only about 10 to 20 percent of a successful trip.

"Horses win races, jockeys lose races," says Jerry Antonucci, the on-track observer for *Today's Racing Digest*. "There's a reason it's called horse racing, not jockey racing," adds booking agent Darren Gusinaw. Or, as every jockey will tell you: "I'd rather be lucky than good."

After battling weight and drug problems for most of the last decade, Chris Antley staged a brilliant comeback in 1999, winning both the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness Stakes aboard Charismatic. He should have been basking in the praise. Instead, he felt undeserving. "C'mon, didn't you have something to do with it?" he was asked by Don Murray, director of the Winners Foundation, a race-track-based drug rehabilitation program that had treated him in the past.

"It wasn't me," Antley replied. "It was the horse."

The story of his descent may be extreme, but nearly all of Santa Anita's jockeys have been haunted by the same doubts. They have been blamed for failures that were beyond their control, and lauded for successes that were just as fluky. Some of them have ridden five, six, seven winners in a single day. Those same jockeys have also gone five, six, seven days without riding a single winner. One minute they can look like magicians, bringing home a 35-1 long shot; half an hour later they go back out and flop on a 3-5 sure thing. The ones who survive are not necessarily the superior riders but the ones with the most even temperament. Sooner or later, every jockey must find a way to absorb the ups and downs of a business that can go from despair to ecstasy in a heartbeat—or else his locker here will be reduced to a nameplate. "The battle," says the chaplain, Richard Mena, "is always between your ears."

After each race, at least eight or nine times a day, that steadiness is tested. As soon as the jockeys dismount—all but one of them in disappointment—the trainers are waiting at the side of the track, anxious for an explanation. Diplomacy is usually the best defense—a nod to the horse's selfless effort, a vow to improve the next time out. But having just risked their lives on an animal that failed to deliver, most jockeys are in no mood to be second-guessed, often letting trainers know that their steed is not worth the hay it is fed. "My problem is, I tell the truth," says Corey Nakatani, so dissatisfied with the quality of mounts he has been getting that, in the middle of this season, he announces plans to ride in Kentucky come April

rather than follow the circuit to Hollywood Park. "In this game, honesty doesn't pay."

Only a few minutes earlier, a time full of possibility, the jockeys merited a horseback procession onto the track. Now they have to find their way back to the locker room on foot, wading unaccompanied through the crowd. These are not hometown fans cheering their favorite team, after all, but gamblers, who usually have a few hundred thousand dollars riding on each race. Most of the jocks have learned to shrug off the abuse, but sometimes they snap. "When I was young, oh, man, I was horrible!" says Stevens, who is 38. "I've chased people up to the grandstand before—second mezzanine, in the Turf Club—and tackled them, until security arrived."

If the race is a rough one, marred by a dirty or negligent move, those emotions spill back into the jockeys' room. Chests still heaving, the riders burst through the doors, cursing and mocking.

"Payaso!" shouts Alex Solis, who has won more than 3,000 races and earned about \$12 million. He is pointing a finger at Luis Jauregui. "You clown!"

"Six riders in the race, and they're all yelling at me," says Jauregui, who seems to have cut off the entire field in the process of finishing next to last.

"You got no fucking ears," says Pincay, usually silent on these matters.

The jocks oooh and aaaah at the gravity of being upbraided by such a stately figure.

"I quit," Jauregui says.

They huddle around a closed-circuit TV, watching the replay like old friends. Few other professional athletes are expected to shower and dress alongside their rivals—not just during an occasional tournament but from morning to night, five days a week, 52 weeks a year, over careers sometimes measured in decades. Every imperfection is picked apart mercilessly, most nicknames inspired by a personal foible. "They find out what your weak spot is and dwell on it, almost to the point of being cruel," says Stark, the masseur, whom the jocks call Rubby Dub. Most of them assume he is gay, razzing him endlessly with juvenile puns. "I take a lot from them, but only when they're out here in front of each other," he says. "When they come to me, back in my room, they're always very respectful."

Learning that lesson was bittersweet for Joy Scott, one of three or four women who occasionally ride at Santa Anita. "I've spent years and years putting up with a lot of, well, misun-

derstandings," says Scott, who is 42 and a single mom. "Nobody's on your side. You have to fight and scratch to get anything." She is lying now on her living room couch in Arcadia, a jagged purple scar running down her right leg. A week before, it was crushed in a ghastly five-horse spill at Los Alamitos, a quarter-horse track where Scott sometimes rides to help make ends meet. Within days, the horsemen of Santa Anita—jockeys, trainers, agents, owners—had raised more than \$10,000. "Oh, my gosh! How can that be? Unbelievable!" screams Scott, getting the news in a phone call. Her eyes are wet. But soon after hanging up, her mood darkens. "I'm really sorry it took breaking my leg to find out how much people cared."

A zero-sum game does not allow for sentiment: One jockey's victory is necessarily another jockey's loss. On the day that Desormeaux gets drubbed aboard Ruby Prospector, he returns to finish second, in a \$22,000 race, on a horse named Yearly Habit. His fortunes improve when the stewards disqualify the winning jockey, Fernando Valenzuela, who bumped Desormeaux in the homestretch—unintentionally, it appears, but recklessly enough to interfere with the outcome. "Take 'em any way we can," says Desormeaux, who gets placed first, earning him \$1,320. But Valenzuela is irked. Back in the jocks' room, he soon is on an in-house phone with the judges, protesting a mandatory three-day suspension.

"Guys, open your eyes," he shouts. "We're out there working for food—and now you're going to take it away from me? How would you like it if someone came and took food off your fucking plate?" He slams the phone down.

A minute later it rings again. "I feel the same way about what you guys did to me," Valenzuela continues. "It seems like you have a personal problem with me. I'm really angry, sir, you gotta understand. We got guys out here killing ourselves...."

He hangs up the phone again. "Pussy motherfuckers."

A few lockers away, Desormeaux is quiet, not wanting any part of Valenzuela's rage.

"Being a jockey," Desormeaux says, "always means swallowing your pride."

**B**Y THE LAST RACE, THE JOCKEYS' room looks like a baseball dugout, the linoleum littered with mud and candy wrappers and peanut shells and spit. Boom boxes start cranking up, Van Morrison's "Moondance" in one corner, Thalía

belting out "Piel Morena" in another, Pincay's portable TV tuned now to *Jerry Springer*.

Pincay is a homebody, even declining an invitation to appear on *The Tonight Show* after he broke Shoe's record. Puglisi likes the punk clubs in Hollywood. Atkinson plays paintball. Desormeaux heads to the Cajun Way Cafe, a restaurant his wife, Sonia, runs in Old Town Monrovia. A live band turns the bar into a *fais do-do*. Food covers the tables: fried oysters, a smoky jambalaya, the creamiest crawfish chowder. Desormeaux, this night, is thinking he might actually eat dinner with Sonia, a former Miss Fitness America contender. But the restaurant is swamped, and she is too busy to sit, so the jockey cracks a Dixie and plays host, shaking hands, posing for pictures, making sure everyone is happily stuffed.

With the restaurant—and a racehorse-themed Internet site, and a company that manufactures promotional clip-ons for car antennas—Desormeaux is more farsighted than the average rider. Jockeys rarely contemplate retirement until they have no choice. Like cops or circus artists, they have learned to think of themselves as a breed apart, unsuited for the gentility of everyday life. "These fences that run around the racetrack—they weren't put up to keep people out. They were put up to keep us in," says Danny Sorenson, who has been riding at Santa Anita for 23 years. When Shoemaker first began thinking of retirement, the late trainer Charlie Whittingham would jab back: "Hey, Shoe, you know what a jockey is when he's retired? He's just another little man."

Shoe—still probably the most recognized name in the sport—is the specter hanging over them all. At four feet eleven, he was the tiniest of the tiny, a mythology celebrated by the famed Annie Leibovitz photograph of him and Wilt Chamberlain, shoulder-to-hip on the beach in matching vanilla suits. During a career that spanned 41 years, he rode 40,343 horses and won every honor there was, most of them more than once. He also faced danger, breaking his femur in 1968, taking a year to recover, then shattering his pelvis and rupturing his bladder in another spill within months of coming back. "When is enough?" he wrote in a 1988 autobiography, reflecting on those injuries. "When does a jock's time come?"

Shoe's did not come until 1991, a year after his retirement. On his way to dinner at the Derby after a day of golf and drinks, he swerved off the freeway in San Dimas and tumbled down an embankment, leaving him a quadriplegic. Po-

lice said he was drunk. Shoemaker insisted he had been reaching for a cell phone on the floor. He did his public image no favor by then suing Caltrans and the doctors who treated him at Glendora Community Hospital.

Ten years later, he is still paralyzed, confined to a wheelchair that he controls by blowing into a tube. He is divorced from his third wife. Two assistants take turns providing 24-hour care at his home in San Marino, which is filled with enough trophies and plaques to stock a museum. He is hoping to someday regain movement in his arms, "to do things for myself—shaving, brushing my teeth, combing my hair, scratching my nose—that everyone takes for granted." But he will be 70 in a few months. Horse racing's greatest icon, the legend whose final ride at Santa Anita drew a crowd of nearly 65,000, is running out of time.

"I look at it like fate, something that was supposed to happen for some reason," he says.

And the reason?

"I can't make sense of it. I know, someday, God will tell me what it is."

Where is the sense in any of this—in shrunken and scarred men who do something they know is not good for them, but can't not do it, who do it in the name of a sport that by any objective measure is dying? Is Shoemaker's misfortune a cautionary tale, symbolic of horse racing's ravages? Or is it a reminder that all of life is fickle, a license for every jockey to go for broke?

Even as they bemoan their hardships, jockeys instinctively embrace them. Danger, disparagement, self-denial—these are not merely afflictions but tests of nerve and spirit. To endure them, and triumph still, is to achieve something most people spend their entire lives seeking: a defining moment, the gift of meaning and purpose. "Even if you would tell me that doing this would cost me half my life span," Desormeaux says, "I'd do it all over again."

At 8:30 p.m., he leaves the Cajun Way Cafe to put Jacob to bed, returning an hour later with Joshua. He is driving his BMW now, a luxury SUV with an eight-cylinder engine. He guns it down the same street he did earlier that day. In a few seconds, the speedometer hits 60.

"Faster!" Josh cries.

"No, we have to obey the rules of the road," says Desormeaux, easing his foot off the accelerator. He mumbles to himself: "Gotta practice what you preach, Kent." LA