

Her life on track

Piermarini's priorities stable

By Nancy Marrapese-Burrell, Globe Staff | August 15, 2007

John Piermarini is a man of great faith. He believes in God devoutly. He also has faith in his wife's talent -- as a spouse, mother of two, and jockey.

It is the last role that, at times, makes him the most ambivalent. On the one hand, Tammi Piermarini is the leading rider at Suffolk Downs and one of the best in the nation, and her husband is her agent. On the other, he's well aware from their many years in the industry that the perils are many. As father to 5-year-old Izabella and 11-month-old Johnny, he sometimes finds it difficult to separate the ambition of the business side from the protectiveness of the partner side.



Tammi Piermarini opened the Suffolk meet with a win on Blind River Fox and hasn't stopped. (PHOTO COURTESY OF CHIP BOTT)

"That's one thing that's very hard on us, but she has nerves of steel and ice water in her veins," he said. "It never bothers her. It is very tough on me nerves-wise, yes."

For Tammi, who has 57 wins, 42 seconds, and 43 thirds in 294 starts this season, there is no room for worry. The 40-year-old veteran said everyone is aware of the hazards, and there is no need for them to be dwelled upon.

"I can't afford to think about it," she said, her steely blue eyes narrowing. "If I start thinking about safety issues, it can cause an accident and it's time to get out of the business."

That doesn't mean she isn't cautious. She doesn't take unnecessary chances.

"If a horse makes it to the gate with me, I'm all out to ride it 100 percent and I give it my best," she said. "But there have been times already, two or three occasions, where I have scratched horses in the afternoon because I don't like the way they feel warming up. I just don't think it's their day."

"I'm out there to win and I try all the time, but if I don't like the way they warm up and I've never been on them before in the morning and never got a chance to even see how they go, I'd rather scratch them and be safe than to go out there, leave the gate, ride them as hard as I can, and have something happen. Things like that do happen. I've had numerous horses already break down with me."

High-risk business

Though she's had much success since she started in 1985, one of her victories came under tragic circumstances. On Oct. 24, 2005, Piermarini was aboard Monsterous Mitch in the ninth and final race at Suffolk. The weather was dreadful and the grandstand empty. It was in that race that 58-year-old jockey Michel Lapensee was killed.

Accidents are a reality in the sport, and Piermarini has had her share. Her husband said he consulted a priest, with Tammi by his side, about a month before their wedding in May 1999.

"I told him, 'I am very religious and I believe in God. I'd love to get a blessing to keep her safe out there,'" John said. "It's a very, very dangerous business. I said, 'I'm not asking for anything out of the norm as far as great fame, a lot of winners, a million dollars. I just wanted to have a blessing to keep her safe no matter what transpires.' And he did."

Tammi said she constantly has bumps and bruises and suffers occasional broken bones. In 2003, John said, he spent 14 hours at Massachusetts General Hospital because his wife was run over by a horse and left with a couple of broken vertebrae.

"The horse in front of her suffered a broken knee," he said. "Her horse catapulted her over and she was run over by the horse behind her. But she wanted to go again."

A horse-sitter

As Tammi Campbell, Piermarini grew up with horses, albeit show horses. When she moved to Salisbury from West Newbury, she was baby-sitting for a family that had thoroughbreds. She began cleaning stalls in addition to looking after the kids as a way to make money.

"They had probably 10 thoroughbreds," she said. "Mostly broodmares and foals. They had some yearlings and an older filly coming back off a layoff. So I'd do the stalls either after school or before school. I baby-sat. I kind of lived there."

"I wanted to learn and I liked working with the horses, even if it was cleaning stalls. They asked me one day, 'We know you can ride a little bit and we know it was just show horses, but would you be willing to break in some yearlings for us?' I said, 'Yeah, sure.' I was 14 or 15 years old then. When I was 16, I went to the racetrack and got my groom's license."

From there, she progressed to exercise rider, then assistant trainer, and at 18, when she became eligible, she got her jockey's license.

Piermarini thought jockeys were all no taller than 4 feet 10 inches, but at 5-3 and a lean but muscular 110 pounds, she realized she had a talent for it as well as a competitive fire.

"I'm not going to be shy," she said. "I'm not going to say I like just riding because I'm with the animal and the competitiveness. I like the money, too."

"I'm a very competitive person. I hate to lose. If I'm going to get beat, I'd rather get beat by a few lengths than a neck, nose, or a head. When you get beat by a neck, nose, or head, no matter how many years you've been riding, I'll sit there and say, 'Well, maybe if I had done this,' or 'Maybe if I had done that.'"

"In my mind, I know when I've ridden a good race and when I haven't."

She left racing twice, once because she had to and once because she chose to. She was forced from the track in 1998 when she contracted viral meningitis. At one point, she dropped to under 80 pounds.

"She was given last rites," said John. "We didn't think she was going to make it. I know how close to death my wife was. But she's made of iron."

Piermarini suffered a number of recurrences, each requiring a spinal tap. She figures she's had about 20 of them, but only one since the birth of her daughter in 2001.

During her hiatus, she announced her retirement and started training horses. But she missed it, and in 2002, she came back and has been going strong ever since. She races at Tampa Bay Downs during the winter and last year raced until she was 3 1/2 months pregnant with her son, which didn't thrill her husband.

"I was absolutely, positively [against it]," John said. "But she didn't want to quit. I remember the day we pulled the pin. She was on this horse that had an extension blinker on. That is usually a sign that the horse does something crazy on the turn. It was a horse she had never been on. The horse went into the gate and flipped over backwards. The vet scratched the horse, but Tammi was fine. She had three more [races] to go, but I looked at her and said, 'I think the man upstairs is trying to tell us something.'"

Remarkably, she was only out from May to September. After her second Caesarean section, she was back racing before her six-week checkup. Her son was almost eight pounds and she lost 25 pounds giving birth, so weight was never an issue.

"Even the nurses were saying, 'You make us sick!' " she said with a laugh. "When I went back to Tampa [to race], they all saw a baby and they freaked. They said, 'You were beating us pregnant?' I was the eighth-leading rider out of 160."

Compromises necessary

John said it has been a balancing act to find the right mix of work and family. He thinks it's more difficult for female jockeys.

"There are a lot of female riders out there but none that have a lot of children and have a successful win percentage," he said. "We've tried to do both."

He didn't always feel that female jockeys could compete against men. Seeing his wife race changed his mind.

"I said they don't have the finish a man has in this business," said John. "I said some of them were gifted, they had the hands. To me, at the end of the race, when a horse is getting tired, the finish is essential. I never thought a woman could have the finish of a man, the physical strength to get a horse home."

"When I met my wife, I had told her in years past, as an owner, I had never ridden a woman on a horse. Not being a chauvinist, I just didn't think they had the strength. By watching my wife, I stand corrected."

When it comes to their relationship, the Piermarinis believe in setting boundaries because of the myriad roles they play in each other's lives. They commute from their home in Amesbury together, spend all day at the track, then commute home together.

"The business never ends," Tammi said. "He's always on the phone with trainers or owners. Say I have a bad day or rode a bad race; I don't hear the end of it. Sometimes you want to get away and not hear anything about racing. But we're a great team. We have great communication between us."

Suffolk revival

The Piermarinis are encouraged by the improvements Suffolk has made. They are hoping that with the reintroduction of the Massachusetts Handicap after a two-year hiatus Sept. 22, the area will embrace racing again.

"When I first started riding, the grandstands were packed," said Tammi. "Hot Dog Safari day [an annual event to raise funds for the fight against cystic fibrosis], that day is packed. That's what it was like when I first started riding back in 1985."

"The bigger racetracks cater to families with plenty to do for the kids, and that's what Suffolk is aspiring to be. I've seen a lot of changes just in the people's attitudes. It's been nothing but positive. There's a playground, flowers, they're fixing up the backside one barn at a time."

"I think it's happening rather quickly. I didn't expect to see the turnaround so quick. For many years, you've heard, 'Oh, we're going to do this, this, and this,' and nothing ever comes of it. [Richard Fields, the newest member of the ownership group] says it and it gets done. I like that."

"It's only going to better racing," said John, referring to the MassCap. "Any time you can get a track national coverage is great for business. That's our Super Bowl; that's our World Series. Horses that have run in that race have made the Racing Hall of Fame. That tells you we're headed in the right direction."

As for how long Tammi Piermarini will continue to saddle up, she's not sure. "I'll just take it as far as I can," she said. "When I was out [on maternity leave] with my daughter, I did train horses. I do love the horses. I have a passion for them."

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