

Second-generation jockey Davis has high hopes at Suffolk Downs

By PAUL HALLORAN
FOR THE ITEM

EAST BOSTON – Like many kids, Jackie Davis always considered going into the family business, but she kept it to herself because she knew her family - especially her father - didn't think it was such a great idea.

So despite growing up around the racetrack while her father, Robbie, fashioned a career as one of the top jockeys in the country, Davis traveled a traditional path: student-athlete, cheerleader and dancer. After graduating from Saratoga Springs High School in 2005, she went to Hudson Valley Community College to study fashion design.

It took less than a year for Davis to realize she was not cut out to be the next Vera Wang.

"I was bored," she said. "I can't sit still. I would start a project and be doing it really well, then I would put it down and want to start a new one. I was always looking for a new challenge."

Her heart told her the ultimate challenge would not be found in a classroom.

"I always considered being a jockey," said Davis, who returns to Suffolk Downs for a second year when the 2011 meet opens Saturday. "My dad told me I would be really good at it, but when I got into high school he told me 'no way,' so I stopped asking."

But once Davis had given college an honest attempt and knew it wasn't for her, she had a one-track mind and no one was



COURTESY PHOTO / PAUL HALLORAN

Jockey Jackie Davis returns to Suffolk Downs for a second year when the 2011 meet opens on Saturday.

going to get in the way - not even dad.

"She threw me a curveball and I swung at it and missed," Robbie Davis said. "I pointed out all the reasons not to do it, but she was determined."

Or, as Jackie put it, "When I say I'm going to do something, it's happening."

Davis became a member of the inaugural class at Hall of Fame jockey Chris McCarron's North American Racing Acad-

emy in Kentucky in the fall of 2006. Run in conjunction with Bluegrass Community and Technical College, McCarron's school gives prospective jockeys the opportunity to learn how to ride and earn an associate's degree in applied equine science.

Six weeks into the program, McCarron called Robbie Davis, with whom he had developed a close friendship when both were riding. He had some news,

and Davis wasn't sure if it was good or bad.

"Chris called and told me she can really ride," Robbie said. "He said she was tops in the class. I said, 'You've got to be kidding me.'"

It's not that Davis doubted his daughter's ability to become a proficient jockey; he just wasn't sure that's what he really wanted.

Dad's concerns notwithstanding, there was no turning back

for Jackie. After graduating in late 2007, she landed an internship with legendary New York trainer Allen Jerkens, quickly learning she still had a lot to learn.

"He had a nice \$500,000 2-year-old that dropped me every other week," she said.

True to form, Davis kept getting back on, and she gradually impressed Jerkens and others on the backstretch with her ability to handle a racehorse, despite her 4-foot-10, 98-pound frame.

"Jackie has no fear and a never-say-die attitude," said McCarron of his star pupil. "I wish every student had her incredible desire to learn. I wish I could clone her."

Davis rode her first race as an apprentice on Aug. 31, 2008 at Saratoga, finishing next-to-last on 43-1 shot Easter Guardian. She notched her first win at Aqueduct a few months later on Nov. 5, taking 64-1 shot Blue Hill Bay wire to wire.

While she was an apprentice, Davis rode wherever she could get mounts. There was a time in the summer of 2009 she was riding at Monmouth in New Jersey, Penn National in Pennsylvania and Finger Lakes in western New York. She would routinely ride in the afternoon at Monmouth, then drive three hours to Penn National for its night card.

"You can have all the talent in the world, but not have the desire," Robbie Davis said. "Jackie does not lack desire."

Longtime jockey agent Max Hall got that feeling while read-

ing a story about Davis last year. Having been in the business for more than 40 years, Hall realizes that the majority of jockeys do not make it after losing the "bug," the 5-pound weight allowance granted to apprentices. Trainers aren't as anxious to give a leg up to relatively inexperienced jockeys without the benefit of their horse carrying five fewer pounds.

Hall read that Davis was determined to buck that trend; but he knew the chances of her making it right away on the ultra-competitive New York circuit were slim at best. So he called and asked her to come to Suffolk Downs to ride for him. He would make sure she got the opportunity to succeed, and Robbie Davis knew it was the right move for Jackie.

"You need to go where you can ride races," he said. "Jackie was reluctant to leave New York, but I told her Chris McCarron got his start at Suffolk Downs and he turned out alright."

Davis arrived on opening day last year and promptly brought home a winner. She finished the meet as the sixth-leading rider with 72 wins in 442 starts. This year, the bar has been set much higher.

"My goal is to be the leading rider here," she said, matter-of-factly.

The quest starts Saturday, when Davis rides all nine races on the card. Bet against her at your own risk.