

**KENT DESORMEAUX AND RED IS THE COLOR**

**By**

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(This is an archived article from 1993 on the jockey Kent Desormeaux. Since the writing of this article, Kent has won three Kentucky Derbies, two Preakness's, and one Belmont.)

In May, I begin to become enthralled at the prospect of heading to the Del Mar horse races in Southern California. Here in the East, the racing at Delaware Park is starting a lengthy 150-day meet. This anticipation keeps me recreationally occupied until my beautiful wife Rocky and I leave for Del Mar where we are able to watch some of the greatest racing in the world. We are especially excited about Del Mar this year because a new clubhouse and paddock will be completed, which will complement the new grandstand finished the prior year. We had mixed feelings about the "new" Del Mar, but decided to reserve judgment until after experiencing the 1993 racing season.

My genuine interest with Del Mar has a lot to do with a jockey by the name of Kent Desormeaux. The Racing Form first brought to my attention the name Desormeaux, winning race after race on the Maryland racing circuit in 1988. I was so curious that I took my Mom, who has been a life-long racing fan, to Laurel to take a look at this young rider, who, as I was to find out later, was only seventeen years old. On this particular day, he won five races. Needless to say, Mom and I did quite well.

Barry Alberts, who is one of my retired jockey friends, told me that Kent was indeed a splendid rider and a fine young gentleman. Barry informed me that the riding colony affectionately referred to Kent as "The Kid."

Since my fascination with a Maryland jockey by the name of Nick Shuk, who died from throat cancer in the early '80s, I had not found a rider that made me want to become an ardent racing fan again--until now. I realized that Kent encompassed the same ability to make racing an art form of beauty, grace, and exceptional style as Nick had done in the '50s.

Also in the '50s, there was a superior race car driver by the name of Alfonso de Portago, who captured the world with his beauty and artistry. His favorite car was a Ferrari, and his favorite color was red. His poise and savoir-faire was the material of a legend-in-the-making until his untimely death at a very young age.

As I stood in the paddock watching the Kid, I could not help but reminisce about Alfonso de Portago. The beautiful man who captured the hearts of both men and women of all ages as he thrilled the car racing public with his exceptional skills and daring behind the wheel of a racing red Ferrari on the major race tracks of Europe. With his exceptional good looks, posture, and artistic style, he became the subject of writers and poets.

Like de Portago, the Kid was indeed lithe and darkly handsome. As he stood next to the trainer and owner, I could not help but notice his excellent posture and his graceful, confident moves. It

was evident he was a well-disciplined athlete. One could see how extremely gracious he was with the owners and guests. While to the trainer, he visibly directed his concentration as to what needed to be accomplished. When the Kid was hoisted into the saddle, one sensed that if the horse had any abilities at all, the Kid would use all his expertise and style to get his mount across the finish line first.

There was something in the Kid's personality--something that exuded beauty and class. I knew immediately that I had found the embodiment of Alfonso de Portago in Kent Desormeaux, the jockey--and the color was indeed red.

I kept up with Kent by way of occasional visits to Maryland and reading The Racing Form. The Kid continued to win and win throughout 1989 and 1990 in Maryland. Mom and I were still cashing bets and enjoying the Kids daring and exciting riding style.

In 1990, I learned that the Kid had moved on to California to tackle the likes of McCarron, Pincay, Stevens, etc. on probably the toughest riding colony in the entire world. I missed him very much and no longer made the trek from Delaware to Maryland because I knew that I would encounter him on my yearly trip to Del Mar.

When Rocky and I arrived in Del Mar for the 1992 race season, the Kid was no longer the Maryland Kid. He had established himself

solidly on the California racing scene. In fact, when the 1992 Del Mar meeting began, he was well on his way to becoming the Eclipse award winning rider for 1992. From what I could piece together from sports writers, he had married a young lady from his home area of Louisiana and had settled into domestic life near Santa Anita.

In the paddock at Del Mar, Kent looked to be the same cultivated and graceful rider he had been in Maryland. In fact, all the California riders looked healthy, confident, and quite successful in their chosen career field. Kent usually walked from the jockey's quarters with Cory Nakatani. The two seemed to enjoy each other's company and seemed to have developed a genuine feeling of friendship. They exhibited a youthful playfulness in their respective personalities. It was as if horse racing was serious, but at the same time, fun.

During that 1992 meet, Kent was doing considerable riding for his first major California connection in trainer Bob Hess, Jr., who seemed to arrive on the Southern California major circuit at approximately the same time Kent made his break from Maryland. Their newness and youthfulness created quite a combination in win percentages. Even then, one could see Kent moving well beyond the Hess connection because of his demand from all the top trainers and major stables.

Knowing that I had discovered Kent long before the power brokers of Southern California and the public had any idea of who Kent Desormeaux

was and what he could do on a horse, made me feel somewhat superior. Of course, this was not true, but it was a great fantasy to live with, and I believed that in Kent there was room for some fantasy. He seemed to possess a charismatic edge and style over any other rider in the world.

Rocky and I had a routine at Del Mar with Kent. After the first few races were over, we would leave our seats and head for the paddock to watch Kent. When the saddling was completed, we would go to the edge of the winner's circle to watch the race and wait for Kent to, hopefully, enter as the winner. At a 27 percent winning percentage, we were often treated with our desire. He was always excited and animated with his audience. He gave the impression that he was totally involved and that he wanted to win by using his artistic style, determination, luck, or whatever was needed to accomplish this task.

When he won, he wanted everyone to know that he had done it. In fact, he demanded it. He wanted you, the fan, to see his abilities and to appreciate them. He loved this spotlight, he loved the attention, and most of all, he loved winning--no matter if it was a \$3,000 or a \$300,000 race.

As with any great artist, it was not a selfish victory. He offered an invitation for his fans to get involved in the moment--to

be involved in the victory. Yes, the spotlight was definitely his, but he could make room for you to share a ray or two. In fact, it was that ability and that ability alone that made his style such a work of art and magnificence--a style that I had seen before in two other legends.

When Kent lost, he was his own worst critic. He would get down on himself and just scuff along with his shoulders slumped on his route from the unsaddling to the jockey's quarters. However, back in the paddock for his next mount, he seemed to regain his composure and his sense of humor.

On one of our Kent-watching forays, Kent joked with the security guard that this particular mount, which was going off at unheard of odds, was his last chance to wind up in the winner's circle for that day. It turned out to be a rare day when he did not enter the circle.

We observed that Kent seemed to always make room in life for small children. He made children feel comfortable and important while they returned the openness with their quiet admiration.

Rocky and I spent the evenings hanging out in La Jolla, but Kent was never far from our minds. We wondered if he came into town to eat. Every time we saw an exotic car in front of an upscale restaurant, we wondered if it could be Kent. We looked for a vanity tag and any other symbol that we thought might indicate that it was

truly Kent. Without much luck in our amateur sleuthing, we opted for another fabrication that Kent would be nowhere near La Jolla--just in a Bronco or utility vehicle and would be in bed early while living near Del Mar--a quite man.

The big event for Kent, besides being the leading rider at the 1992 Del Mar meet, was winning the Pacific Classic on Missionary Ridge at better than 20:1.

After the close of the 1992 Del Mar meet, Rocky and I headed back to Delaware where we were able to watch Kent one more time when he came back East to ride winners in the Maryland Million. He stayed for a few extra weeks and rode quite a few winners before returning to California. We kept up with Kent with The Racing Form and vicariously stayed involved in his life.

We read that Kent had a very serious spill back in California and was very fortunate to escape with his life. Our concerns were squelched when The Racing Form indicated all was well, and he was soon back in the saddle again.

The 1993 Del Mar meeting soon rolled around and we were ready to connect back up with Kent and verify for ourselves that he was really okay after his near-fatal spill. I was particularly interested to see if it had changed him in any way and to see if there were any evident personality changes from the 1992 meeting.

On a typically beautiful Southern California day in July, Rocky



and I caught the 1992 Eclipse winning rider as he was the last to leave the jockey's quarters to make the walk to the new paddock, which was big and beautiful, but it had lost its intimacy and innocence of the earlier classical period. It evoked a different feeling--more of a modern sports complex and less of the cerebral qualities of the Crosby era. But the people were rich and beautiful, the horses were magnificent, and the track was truly beautiful. Kent himself was resplendent. He looked taller, darker, richer, and more confident than what I saw in 1992. He had a more at-home and mature look. He seemed to be very comfortable with his position as one of the premier jockeys in the world.

As the days went by and he continued his high winning percentage, I could not envision Kent at another track. If anything can be said about California, it is the type of place that respects style and grace. In fact, they put a very high value on people who embody all that beauty and style. To the style-conscious crowd, Kent would be their ultimate incarnate of their ideal.

What I looked for in Kent was his ability to carry such a demanding load. For a jockey like Kent who takes chances, there will be people in the horse racing world who are easily threatened by such an overt show of artistic expression and decision making. They could misinterpret it as cockiness or aloofness, and they could show a

certain hostility toward Kent. People can say some very nasty and manipulative things. For someone as sensitive and artistic as Kent, it could cause some self-doubt, accepting too much responsibility for mistakes, too much blame for certain failures, too much self-criticism, and accepting certain failures.

I always looked for this in Kent because I wanted him to be able to withstand the pressures of a very demanding sport that can often be demeaning. What I wanted for Kent was to have him see himself as someone having very exceptional abilities. I wanted him to be centered, realistic, and rational about as many aspects of his life as he could and try not be perfect--to give himself some room to make some mistakes. In his own art and in his unrestricted form of expression was where his true talent was the strongest. If he lost this, he would still be a great rider, but I felt that it was his artistic and elegant edge that over a period of time would give him his greatest victories. For the true artist, a de Portago, a Shuk, or a Kent Desormeaux there would always be mistakes, but those mistakes also represent chances that often lead to greater artistic expression.

In late August, Rocky and I were leaving the track for our car when Kent and a couple of his jockey friends walked by us. Hoping Kent had not noticed us as his shadow; we slowed down and waited to see if our fantasy was correct. What kind of car would Kent climb into? We

watched Gary Stevens straddle his motorcycle, and we watched another jockey climb into a truck, and we watched Kent walk over to a covered vehicle. With his showmanship, he, ever so gracefully, removed the cover that revealed a red Ferrari. He deposited the cover in the trunk, slid behind the wheel, and, as if he were sprinting a high strung thoroughbred from the gate, he maneuvered the Ferrari through the track traffic and drove into the stunning Southern California sunset.

Kent Desormeaux is a living legend and a dream in the making. Presently, the color is red, and it fulfills the fantasy.