

KENT DESORMEAUX: ANOTHER DAY IN THE SUN

By: John M. Toothman



Growing up in the mountains of Williamsburg, West Virginia was somewhat difficult for me mainly due to my slight build. I can distinctly remember wondering why I was so different from my peers and if I would ever find a place for myself in life.

By the time I was in high school, I was 5'7" and weighed 110 pounds. I loved basketball and wanted to play and be a member of the team. The most I was able to accomplish was to become the team manager which meant that I helped keep score and made sure that the oranges were cut into quarters for the team's half-time break. This was not my forte.

My mom tried to keep my spirits up by saying, "You are just different, and you will really appreciate being slight of build when you get older. You could be a writer, an artist, or maybe a Hollywood actor."

In my junior year, I visited my aunt and uncle who lived in Delaware. On a typical hot and humid summer day, my uncle asked me if I would like to join him for a day of racing at Delaware Park. My family had workhorses on

the farm in Williamsburg, but I had never been to a racetrack to watch thoroughbreds run.

The pageantry of the magnificent horses, the silks, the fashion, and the wall of sound totally captured me. I was hooked. The jockeys, in particular, gave me an immediate connection because they were also slight of build yet incredibly strong and courageous in what looked like a very dangerous profession. My adolescent mind sparked the idea that one day I could become a jockey.

During my continued visits to Delaware Park, I discovered my hero in Nicholas “Nick” Shuk who in the early 50’s was the leading rider in Maryland and the top jockey at Delaware Park. Nick had an irreverent sophistication that appealed to adolescent mind. His swagger conveyed that he had seen it all, heard it all, and had taken all the challenging licks such as the hotbox, the falls, and the politics that go along with being a jockey. This was a perfect match for an impressionable kid in search of his identity.

I never became that jockey because reality presented me with a different path. I shot up to 6’2” and topped the scales at 145 pounds. My jockey fantasy was over, but it still lived in my heart. Nick was my connection to racing, and I kept up with him throughout his racing career. When I needed a lift, I would always go to the tracks where Nick was riding.

In my early forties, I finally met and became friends with my hero Nick Shuk when he was in his early fifties and suffering the ravages of cancer. I had become that skinny college professor/writer as my mom predicted and

together Nick and I completed his biography, *The Reinsman: The Nick Shuk Story*.

After Nick's death, my connection to racing became less important in my life. My mom still loved racing, and she loved to gamble. In her true Irish passion, she was lucky at horses, poker, blackjack, and finding four-leaf clovers. Going to the races with her usually meant winning. One day when I was feeling low, she suggested that we drive from Delaware to Pimlico in Maryland for a day at the races. Once arriving and getting my mom settled in the dining room, I started to handicap the races and could not believe the form on a 17-year-old jockey named Kent Desormeaux who was the leading rider in Maryland. One of my life-long racing buddies informed me that this kid was on his way to become one of the best riders in the country.

I went to the paddock to check the kid out, and I could not help but notice that there was something very different about this young jockey. He reminded me of Nick, and I felt a very similar connection. The look was different, but he had that same irreverent style. I had the sense that he certainly had the talent and charisma to become a top jockey.

The extraordinarily gifted kid won five races that day, and my mom and I left the track with a very respectful bankroll. I was hooked again. I had found another hero, a brash daredevil kid from Cajun country. Kent was an artist on a horse, reckless and willing to risk it all. I could not help to think that the style-conscious California racing community would be calling him soon.

My wife Rocky and I have met Kent on many occasions and have followed Kent's career through the years in Maryland, California, New York, Kentucky, and Florida. We celebrated his victories in the Kentucky Derby, Preakness, and Belmont. His long list of impressive wins culminated into his induction into the Hall of Fame.

Of course, as Kent rose to the top of his profession, there were near misses, personal battles, and the usual politics—the good, bad, and the ugly. Any fan of racing knows about the Real Quiet Triple Crown miss, the problems associated with Big Brown, and the alcohol problems that have dogged Kent. It is obvious that both his personal and professional life, as it does to all of us, have taken a toll on Kent's psyche. I know that Nick Shuk waged many of the same battles as he worked on maintaining weight, recovering from spills, and just sustaining the business that he built up over the years. This part of a jockey's life is massively arduous and can lead to serious missteps in decisions and directions.

I remember asking Nick why everything went sour in his late forties. He felt that the trainers had a tendency to only ride the younger jockeys and as he aged, they would not even look his way. This rejection of his talents led him to look for young, up-and-coming trainers with developing stables. At the age of 52, Nick was able to win 57 races from 510 mounts.

Kent was able to do all the things that Nick dreamed of doing but could not attain. However, right now Kent needs a new leg up--someone to believe in him and his abilities. It will soon be Triple Crown Season, and if I were a trainer

of any age with some talented stock, I would be looking Kent's way.

The young, brilliant chance-taking kid is still alive and well in Kent Desormeaux. Yes, he has done it all—both good and bad. He has made mistakes that he personally regrets, but I still believe that Kent is that Hall of Fame jockey and deserves another day in the sun atop a winner.