

Local Jockey Beats the Big Boys

Dirk Crane, part-time resident of Willcox, Arizona, leads 2011 national jockey statistics in two categories

For racing fans, the best jockeys are household names, like Peyton Manning, Tom Brady and Drew Brees are for the football crowd. So it comes as no surprise, that the 2011 nationwide jockey statistics are led by such greats as two-times Eclipse Award winner Ramon Dominguez, Hall of Famer Mike Smith, and 2011 Kentucky-Derby-winner Johnny Velazquez. And Dirk Crane.

Dirk ... – Who?!

That is what the aforementioned riders, as well as Rafael Bejarano, Javier Castellano, Kent Desormeaux, Martin Garcia, Garrett Gomez, Julien Leparoux, Rajiv Maragh, Corey Nakatani, Joel Rosario and three-time Kentucky-Derby-winner Calvin Borel must have asked themselves. Crane, a 38-year-old native of Rexburg, Idaho, and part-time resident of Willcox, Arizona, took the lead in two of eight categories.

With a whopping 6.56 percent, he beat third-place finisher Mike Smith (5.40 percent) decisively by percent of stakes wins from mounts. Canadian rider Nate Smith ranked second with 5.88 percent. Crane finished also atop the category for percent of wins from mounts with a strike rate of 30.33 percent, ahead of Nate Smith (30.15 percent) and John Davilla Jr. with 29.91 percent. For both categories only riders with 100 or more mounts were considered.

But now, who is Dirk Crane? And what is his secret that he beats the 'big boys' with just 122 mounts in two categories, both of which are

a measure of 'efficiency'? By sheer numbers, all jockeys are distanced by Mountaineer-based DeShawn Parker, who scored twice in 2011 for the most wins (400) and winners (323). The highest success rates, however, were recorded for Crane.

Growing up in Rigby, Idaho, where his father worked at the County Fair's racetrack, Crane

spent his first summer grooming horses, cleaning stalls and filling water buckets when he was 13 years old. By the end of the summer he was galloping one horse.

The self-taught rider, who as a child rode his grandparents' horse "in the pasture," couldn't hide his talent, and from then on all through his high school years he galloped horses every morning before classes started. "I made \$300 per month," remembers Crane with a boyish smile that hints at the fun he had as a teenager earning what was a lot of money then, simply for doing what he loved.

At age 16 he took out his jockey license and started riding races. Initially, his mounts were exclusively Quarter horses, and to this day that breed accounts for the majority of races he rides. "I had some 500 starts last year," he recaps in a short break between conditioning two 2-year-old fillies at Fleming Thoroughbred Farm. "Less than 25 percent were on Thoroughbreds." That makes his accomplishments only more impres-



Leading in two categories: Dirk Crane



Dirk Crane at Fleming Thoroughbred Farm's Training Center in Willcox, Arizona

“Breaking and training young horses gives me an edge in the races”

sive, because his wins in Quarter horse races were not counted for the statistics published in the March 17, 2012 issue of Thoroughbred Times.

Yet it gets truly mind-boggling when Crane reveals that he typically spends seven or eight months of the year, from September through March or April, breaking and training young horses at the Fleming family's state-of-the-art facility in Willcox, Arizona. At best, he spends five months riding races, mostly in Elko, Nevada, and Boise, Idaho, where his wife Sarah is a racing official at Les Bois Park. The majority of the year, however, he's starting colts – maybe that's his secret?

“Definitely yes,” he says, “it gives me an edge in the races.” An admirer and student of Clint Anderson, one of the most acclaimed Natural Horsemanship trainers worldwide, Crane loves to watch the youngsters develop. And he takes the clues they give him about their personality

and way of going from the round pen to the track – for the benefit of both. While he lays the foundation and unlocks their potential for future success in racing, these young horses “teach me to pick the mounts I want to ride, and how to ride them.”

Mostly working without an agent, Crane is the regular jockey for three or four stables, and often also gallops their horses in the mornings. Still there are many times where he got on an unfamiliar horse – and won. “I compare their



In his spare time, Dirk Crane enjoys team roping on “Rock”, his registered Quarter horse gelding Pretty Bucks Dozer (foreground).

“What brings me back to Willcox year after year is the weather and the people I work with”

personalities and physiques, how they move and respond, to the ones I’ve started.” In the brief time between ‘riders up’ and ‘they’re off’ he adjusts his riding style and race strategy to what he perceives are the individual preferences of his respective mounts. And he does so with great success, as the statistics prove.

Outwardly unmoved by the national spotlight and local fame, Crane stays focused like a laser beam on the job at hand. By the end of this season he will have started already over one

hundred Thoroughbreds at Fleming’s training center with his intuitive method. For each horse the goals are clearly defined – be it a futurity race, a two-year-old in-training sale, or careful re-conditioning after a lay-up – and he strives to deliver with precision.

So what brings him back to Willcox, year after year? “The weather in Arizona, and the people I work with” he says, praising the Fleming family’s dedication and professionalism. It clearly matches his own.

“And the young horses,” he is quick to add. Continuously improving his skills by attending yet another clinic with Clint Anderson, he admits that starting colts and getting them ready to win is his true calling. And it is his long-term career perspective – after racing. Until then, however, racing fans can look forward to seeing more of him. And even racing’s greats will know his name.

—Dorothee Kieckhefer



LES BOIS PARK

JULY 6, 2011
\$5200...Purse

R W DUSTY'S GIRL.....Place
CHARGING.....Show

LADY'S SECRET STAKES

SAINTLY SPIRIT

Race# - 6 - 6 1/2 FURLONGS - 1:21.42
THOROUGHBRED STAKES

photography
KC

JIM GRIGSBY...Owner
DRU HALL...Trainer
DIRK CRANE...Up



Saintly Spirit was one of Dirk Crane’s 122 Thoroughbred mounts, and he guided her to a stakes win