

Day in the Life...

Of a Thoroughbred Racehorse Trainer

By Ginger Larson

Gerald "Gerry" Bennett drives South every winter, but it's not beaches or boating that attract him to the Sunshine State.

It's Tampa Bay Downs.

And Gerry doesn't come down in an RV. His arrival is marked with a couple of horse vans – hauling 25 horses, to be exact.

Who can blame him? Back in Michigan, Bennett Racing Stables would be battling frigid winter temps, while here in the South, race training continues without a glitch or holdup.

So each year, from December to May, you can find Gerry and his wife, Mary, hanging out with the Bennett Racing Stables clan in Tampa. But don't think for a moment that their time in Florida is easy-cheesy. Gerry leads a fast-paced life. See if you can keep up with a day in the life of a Thoroughbred trainer.

The bell rings and seven conditioned Thoroughbreds break from the starting gate. Pummeling down the track, their long legs churn the soil, flinging clods behind them. Sure, these horses are fast – but what about the man who trains them? Someone has to keep stride with the million-dollar athletes.

At Tampa Bay Downs, Gerry is in charge of keeping his barn of 25 racehorses moving. He's there each morning to mix feed, direct workout lengths and intensity, instruct the grooms on magnetic blankets and treatments and to personally spend time with each horse, observing its unique characteristics.

"Horses are just like people," Gerry says. "All of them are a little different."

Gerry acknowledges each horse's personality and keeps their physical differences in mind when prescribing feed variances and workout methods and treatments. He keeps a careful eye on each horse, watching for signs that they are off their feed or are tender from a workout. Gerry keeps vigilant records on each horse.

Horse dentists, veterinarians and blacksmiths frequent Gerry's barn in

order to keep his athletes in top condition. Each part of the horse contributes to its performance. Teeth, air passageways and feet connect with bloodlines and training to build on each other in the development and maintenance of a running machine.

Gerry's quick pace might not match the speeds of a Thoroughbred's gallop, but no one can clock his thoughts. His mind is racing – gauging each horse's progress, predicting their performances in upcoming races, finding the perfect race for each horse, scheduling suitable jockeys, studying the competition and looking for new athletes to join his team.

Gerry must keep the barn in balance with the right number of maidens, 2-year-olds, 3-year-olds and older. That way they constantly have horses in races.

“Horse business is a very competitive business,” Gerry says. “You always have to put horses in the right spot.”

After the morning workouts are complete, Gerry heads over to a nearby training facility where he is preparing other Thoroughbreds for the track. He comes back to the Downs to watch the races. Gerry spends plenty of time poring over the racing program which shows the current schedule, horse records and jockey, owner and trainer information.

Some days you win. And some days you lose. Whether Gerry stands in the winner's circle at the end of the 7 furlongs or not, he admits he doesn't race just for gold and glory.

“I like the horses,” he says. “You have to have a rapport, a chemistry, almost a sixth sense with them.”

And have two quick feet and a mind to keep track of 25 horses. The horses are not the only ones racing.

Ginger Larson

Ginger Larson is a junior at the University of Florida, majoring in agricultural communication.

She enjoys writing and photography and, of course, cheering on the Gators.

Food Mart for Horses

Jerry and Nancy Porello provide the World's Best Equine Feed at Tampa Bay Downs. By Ginger Larson

Jerry and Nancy Porello used to shuffle cards; now they are doling out feed. The former Las Vegas 21 dealers from Cleveland, Ohio decided to

play the odds and start a feed business at Tampa Bay Downs, Tampa Fla. "We were mostly city kids. We didn't have any horses," Nancy says.

The couple began their small feed business in 1976 when the track was still called Florida Downs and have witnessed the track's growth as well as their own over the past 28 years. The feed store has now expanded to include supplies and horse walking machine rentals and has moved its location from amidst the horses to behind the barn area.

AAA Feed and Tack carries a variety of Seminole Feed products: Blue Ribbon 12, Blue Ribbon 14, High Efficiency, Challenge, the Gold Chance pellet line and the track's best seller, Victory!. Victory!'s textured feed and beet pulp is high in fat, which provides added energy.

Most trainers come from the north where Seminole Feed does not ship, and they want to know what is comparable, Nancy says. Seminole Feed satisfies the trainers.

Jerry walks the shed rows every morning and takes feed orders. Most trainers rely on him to judge the feed storage area, make the orders and have fresh feed ready for the horses. He uses a walkie-talkie or recorder to send the orders in to Nancy or Kim Porello, their niece, who call in the feed shipments directly from the all-natural Seminole Feed mill in downtown Ocala, Fla.