

Race Track Industry Program Grads Get Jobs

By Julieta Gonzalez



Leslie Johnston

Sophomore Susie Raisher attends to Chance of Liberty at the UA farm.

Ninety percent of the students in the Race Track Industry Program at The University of Arizona in Tucson gain immediate employment upon graduation. This unique program was developed in direct response to a need for college-educated employees with business skills and an in-depth knowledge of all areas of the field.

Established in 1974, the Race Track Industry Program (RTIP) is one of the only programs in the country begun primarily through the efforts of industry leaders. The bachelor of science degree program in animal science in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, with a Race Track Industry program option, includes an overview of the racing industry and a course in race track management and marketing, animal care and management, regulatory issues and racing laws. The 2005-2006 academic year marks the first time a master's degree is available within the RTIP business-based curriculum.

Students choose an emphasis in business or animal management. The business path is structured for students planning careers in management, marketing or regulation. The animal management path is for students interested in training, sales, the breeding industry or farm management.

Students also participate in the program's annual Symposium on Racing. This is the largest conference of its kind in the world and is held each December. Students organize and manage the event. They have the opportunity to meet and interact with many of the parimutuel industry's

best-known and respected leaders. The RTIP conducts an accreditation program for officials who oversee racing throughout the country.

Internships are an integral part of the educational experience in the program. Students may intern at race tracks, farms and racing-based organizations across the United States and abroad.

Leading thoroughbred trainers who have graduated from the program include Kentucky Derby winning trainer Bob Baffert and trainer Todd Pletcher, who has trained champion thoroughbreds throughout the world. Baffert is a native of southern Arizona and Pletcher was North America's leading trainer by earnings in 2004 and set the record for most wins at Belmont in 2003.

Fernando "Freddie" Garcia, age 21, whose family owns a ranch near McAllen, Texas, is a UA junior enrolled in RTIP.

"Ever since I was born, my family has raced quarter horses. They'd race them around the country, in Texas and California. We have cattle as well, but I'm the only one in the family interested in the horse side of the ranch."

Garcia graduated from La Joya High School in 2001 in La Joya, Texas. He enrolled at the UA and is presently interested in the equine and animal management part of the program. "I love everything about the program, the classes, the professors, the Symposium. I met a lot of people from the racing industry at the Symposium and had a mentor lunch with the simulcast director from the race track at the Los Alamitos, a quarter horse race track in California. That

was really exciting." The Symposium brings about 1,000 industry professionals to Tucson who may very well end up hiring graduates of the UA's program.

Garcia credits the RTIP program and the annual symposium for giving him great professional contacts for the future.

"I want to learn more about the race track management side of it and how to run a race track," he said. "Right now, I'm gaining more knowledge and a stronger and solid academic foundation about horses. But I'm keeping my options open. Anything's possible at this point."

Garcia had another exciting experience with the United Tote Company. The company, training its employees on a new betting machine, sought students to help them with the employee training. United Tote trained students and, in turn, the students trained the employees on betting procedures and terminology. Garcia and some of his fellow students went to New York to help.

"We got to see those big race tracks in New York, like Belmont Park and Aqueduct," he said.

Garcia recommends the program enthusiastically to potential students.

"I really like this sport and the people I've met here are the best," he said.

As far as advice to students who are considering the field, Garcia says, "Just give it a shot. Life is too short to work in something you're not really going to love. I can see myself working in the industry for the next 40 or 50 years of my life."

RTIP Director Douglas Reed says that the most successful part of the program is "what separates us from everybody else.

"We have a great curriculum, a great faculty with experience in the industry and a low student to faculty ratio. We bring in at least 10 guest speakers a semester who are real people from the real world talking about the real things they do day in and day out. These people are involved in all aspects of the industry — trainers, race track managers and horse breeders."

Reed also emphasizes that the students in the program become involved in class projects within the industry that are "real projects." Examples are student-run projects recently for the Owners and Breeders Association surveying attitudes about medication policies. They've also completed projects for the track associations including surveys on best practices. The results of these projects have been produced, published and met relevant needs within the industry.

Such a strong program, however, creates its own unique problem, said Reed, although it's a problem almost any university program would envy.

"We have more people who want our interns than interns who are available. We have a great supply-demand problem. For example, we have about 20 tracks who want our interns this summer and we have only six interns to place. We can place them almost anywhere because of our reputation and because of the demand," he said.

Ryen Hanna, age 18, from Bremerton, Wash., is a second-year student who enrolled in the program because she loves horses and finds that racing is a "very accessible way to be involved with them. I want to get into the field after graduation, maybe breeding, buying and selling, all of it."

Hanna came to the UA because it was the only program available where she could pursue her studies in the field and because of the program's reputation. "Through these people, I've met other people who will further my career,"

says Hanna of her professors and of the experiences they've provided in the classroom, through visiting lectures and the annual Symposium.

"Everything I've learned here will come in handy not only in running a race track, but in running a breeding farm as well," says Hanna. "We learn about what horses need in order to be successful on the track. While many people are interested in learning about the

business side of the track, I think we get just as much out of the program on the animal side."

The RTIP will begin a master's level program for the 2005-2006 academic year. This program will help meet the needs of students who range in age from 18 to 50-something, for those who transfer here from other universities or for those who desire a second career.

Reed, who also teaches two semesters of race track management and supervises independent studies programs, has had experience as a racing official and as the past vice president of a company that managed two race tracks, most recently in New Mexico.

The program draws students from across the United States where racing is popular. Graduates are presently employed nationwide as well as in Japan, Korea, England and Ireland. There is also an exchange program with the University of Limerick which will be expanded.

Reed said that he "can't go to a race track nor an industry meeting without running into a number of RTIP alumni. It's a great feeling." ❖

