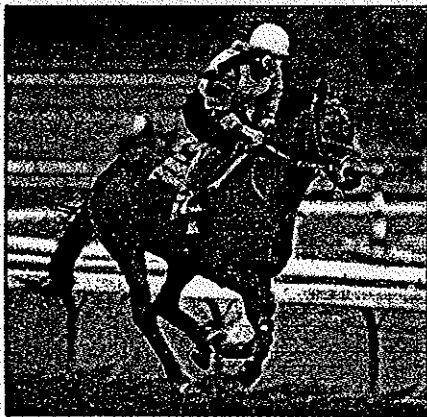


Gentle rider defends her style



A MORNING RUN is taken on Kelly Canyon by Gail Ruffu.

'Horse listener' sues tracks over 9-month work ban

By Howard Breuer
STAFF WRITER

ARCADIA — Race horses seem to believe in Gail Ruffu, an exercise rider at Santa Anita Park.

Her problem is the horse racing industry doesn't.

Ruffu, 49, of Monrovia has filed a lawsuit against Santa Anita, Del Mar and Hollywood tracks, the California Horse Racing Board and other entities, seeking money for back pay and damages because they banned her from the tracks for nine months.

The ban was reversed last May by an administrative judge in Los Angeles who found the action unfair and unwarranted, and prompted by track

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GAIL RUFFU trains and exercises 8-year-old Manila Sterre, one of two horses owned by Melanie McDonald, at Santa Anita Park racetrack.

Staff photos by WALT MANCINI

RUFFU

Exercise rider sues tracks for ban

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officials put off by her unique style.

Her attorney, Steven Haney, said Ruffu is a "horse whisperer" who will take the time to know and study a horse in a manner that many in the whack-em-and-run-em world of horse racing are uncomfortable with.

Haney said track officials don't like her gentle, upright riding style, or her insistence that the industry stop using drugs on horses and stop racing 2-year-olds.

"The people who are in control of the horse racing establishment don't know how to do things Gail's way," said Haney. "They don't have the patience or knowledge or the skill to do that."

Members of the Board of Stewards — the Santa Anita-based body that imposed the ban on Ruffu in August 1997 — refused Friday to discuss the matter because of the lawsuit.

"We have no comment on the Gail Ruffu matter," said board member Tom Ward.

Ruffu says she's not sure that she's a horse whisperer. She's never even seen the 1997 movie "The Horse Whisperer" in which Robert Redford portrays Tom Booker, a trainer whose quiet voice can reach into the heart of a horse and bring it peace.

"I'm a horse listener," Ruffu said as she gently stroked Manila Sterre, an 8-year-old that she helps train.

"I listen rather than speak to them," she added. "I try to hear what they're trying to communicate."

She said that she can virtually psychoanalyze a horse by observing how it behaves in its stall. If its ears are pinned and it keeps moving to the back of its space, it's unhappy. If it's charging the gate, something is wrong.

She said she is driven by her perception that the industry is needlessly engaging in bad practices that are causing unnecessary horse injuries and deaths. She said she winces in pain each time she sees someone mistreat a horse and each time a horse breaks a bone.

As she spoke outside Manila Sterre's stall after a workout, the horse nuzzled its face close to hers and stayed near her.

Near the stall is her small, windowless office, where she keeps fliers that she writes and distributes to trainers and owners she meets at the track.

The fliers cite statistics and expert studies and say 2-year-olds should no longer race at the Breeder's Cup because they are too susceptible at that age to racing injuries that will decrease their ability to win future races.

Ruffu insists she comes to horse racing not to bring it down, but to improve it. She says her suggestions are all good for the horses, and therefore good for horse racing.

"I'm one of horse racing's biggest fans," Ruffu said. "But I

love the horses more."

Ruffu said she's rather shy, and enjoys walking around the track with her Jack Russell terrier, Sparky, snuggled inside her jacket because it warms people up to her.

That shyness, she said, is partially why she wants to achieve her goals through working with horses instead of lobbying people.

But she added she thinks trainers and owners will only become interested in what she has to say if she's a winning horse trainer.

To prepare, she spent many years learning about horses.

The Texas native moved to Europe in 1967 and earned the British Horse Society horse masters and assistant instructor degrees. She helped run riding schools in Germany, she said, and at the same time competed

in various competitive events such as barrel racing and show jumping.

She also studied dressage, in which she trained horses to move and prance gracefully, a sort of ballet for horses.

She has also done a lot of reading, and continues to study at a small equestrian library at Santa Anita, where she began work in the early 1990s.

Several trainers would later testify at Ruffu's appeal that she had success with horses that other riders couldn't handle, according to the judge's findings in the case.

Trainer and owner Melanie McDonald said Ruffu easily fixed a horse that was cramping up after every run.

"Whatever techniques she used, they worked, because the horse started galloping quite nicely," McDonald said.