



# Beyond The Law: Barbara Dresser, Harness Racing Groom

Interview and photos  
by Daniel J. Murphy

Ronald Reagan, the former president, once remarked that there was nothing better for the inside of a person than the outside of a horse. On the grounds of the Cumberland County Fair, Barbara Dresser, a licensed harness racing groom, visits with her family's Standardbred horses and demonstrates why this is so. The horse that she leads around the fairgrounds is not only enormous—tipping the scale at over 1000 pounds—but also stubborn on this particular day. However, with a few calming words, Barbara is able to quickly establish a rapport with the animal and get him to fall in line. After observing Barbara's work with her horses, one realizes that horses have great unappreciated depth: they exhibit distinct personalities, show their feelings, and, like young children, can test limits. It is Barbara's job to make sure they feel valued and cared for, while also reining in their mischievous impulses. Dresser, who maintains a real estate practice at Bergen & Parkinson, LLC, in Saco, sat down with the *Maine Bar Journal* to discuss her interest.

**MBJ: How did you become interested in harness racing?**

BD: I grew up on a farm in Vermont and we had horses there

from the day I was born. When I was growing up we showed Morgan horses all around New England. In the late 80s, my parents bought their first Standardbred race horse and we've been involved with harness racing ever since. I have held a harness racing groom's license here in Maine and in other states for many years. Being licensed as a groom enables me to be in the paddock to work with the horses on race days.

**MBJ: For the uninitiated, what is the paddock?**

BD: The paddock is a secure area that all *pari-mutuel* tracks have, whether it be a fair track or one of the two commercial tracks here in Maine—Scarborough Downs and Bangor

Raceway. It's an area that is sectioned off and restricted to licensees and the horses entered to race on any given day.

**MBJ: How many horses does your family own?**

BD: I think right now they have about a dozen. They have three or four racing this summer, a few broodmares and some babies that will race in a year or two, with any luck. They've also got a couple of retired Standardbreds that live on the farm.

**MBJ: How would you describe harness racing for our readers?**

BD: Harness racing a sport where the athletes are horses instead of people. Here in Maine, we race on half-mile





tracks at commercial facilities and fairgrounds around the state. Drivers sit in sulkies behind the horses, as opposed to Thoroughbred jockeys who ride in a saddle. Harness horses are Standardbreds that have been bred for generations to go fast and to be competitive. They want to win. There are two types of Standardbreds—trotters and pacers. Trotters travel with a diagonal gait in which the right front foot strides at the same time as the left hind foot. Pacers have a lateral, side-to-side gait with both legs on one side moving at the same time. The trot is a horse's natural gate but the pace is much faster.

**MBJ:** Tell us about your responsibilities as a harness racing groom.

**BD:** I have it pretty easy compared to the folks who race horses for a living. I live in Saco, so if we are racing at Scarborough I usually meet our trainer and

his wife at the paddock. They bring the horses that are racing that day and all of the harnesses and equipment. I dress the horse I'm taking care of in its harness and make sure it's ready to warm up about an hour before race time. Some horses are quite content to stand on their own while they are waiting and some require babysitting. They are all different. After they race, I strip off the harness, bathe the horses, put the equipment away and then load everything back into the trailer and send them on their way. It's a lot of time spent for a race that typically lasts two minutes or less—especially when you finish last!

**MBJ:** It sounds like a pretty full day.

**BD:** It is. The amount of time I spend in the paddock varies depending on how many horses we have racing and what races they are in, but most

days I'm there for at least four hours. Our trainer usually has upwards of 25 horses in training at any given time and typically races two to four horses per race day. After a day of racing at Scarborough, I can hop in my car and head home. The horsemen aren't so lucky. They ship back home, finish the work they didn't have time to finish before they left for the races and then start the cycle all over again the next day.

**MBJ:** In relation to the role of groom, what are some things that you can do to try to help your horses perform well in competition?

**BD:** Like any athlete, horses are able to move more freely and go faster when their muscles are warm. They go out onto the track in between races for a few warm-up laps about an hour before they race. When they come back in we keep them covered with a blanket so that their muscles don't get cold.

Part of my job is making sure that each horse's equipment is put on correctly and is fitted properly. Accidents are bound to happen, but there is less likelihood of something going wrong when we are careful and thorough.

**MBJ: What are some of the challenges of being a harness racing groom?**

BD: For me the biggest challenge, aside from getting away from the office to get to the races, is the physical activity. Some horses, usually the ones that need the most babysitting, make you work harder than others. I'm not able to wrestle with the bad actors like I used to, but there's always someone nearby who is willing to help out. People who earn their livings as horsemen keep an eight-day work week with little rest during the busy season. I made one trip to the fair in Presque Isle this summer when one of my parents' horses raced. We traveled five hours

one way on a Sunday for one race and then came home. The next day our trainer raced at a track in Massachusetts. On Wednesday, he was back in Presque Isle. He finished out the week racing at Scarborough on Thursday, Presque Isle on Friday night, and Scarborough on Saturday and Sunday. The harness racing industry is made up of some of the hardest working people I've ever known.

**MBJ: What are some of the rewards for you being involved in harness racing?**

BD: One of the biggest rewards for me is when one of my parents' horses gets a win or does better than I expected the horse to do. It's a great feeling. I'd like to tell you there are huge financial rewards, but there aren't too many people getting rich from being harness horsemen. Most make a living in the business, but they are in

this particular business because they love what they do.

**MBJ: Has there been any intersection between your life as a lawyer and your interest in harness racing?**

BD: Not a lot. I was appointed to the Harness Racing Commission by Governor Baldacci last year. The Race Commission is responsible for rule making and regulation in the industry and my legal training has been a benefit to me there. I have done a few closings for people I know in the industry and have performed a handful of wedding ceremonies for horsemen, but that's about it.

**MBJ: What is the best advice that you've ever received?**

BD: The best advice I've ever received has also been the hardest to follow: "Don't get attached." My parents raise foals each year that they race as two- and three-year-olds in the Maine Breeders Stakes program. They occasionally keep one to race after it graduates from the stakes program, but most have to be sold to make room for the next crop. It's hard to see them go but it's part of the business. As much as we'd like to, we just can't keep them all.



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