

Justin Rivera and Logan Bearden The Aiken Training Track's Next Generation

By MARY JANE HOWELL, PHOTOGRAPHY BY BARRY BORNSTEIN

Justin Rivera and Logan Bearden were two horse crazy kids growing up in northern California, who met by chance on the racetrack, fell in love and ended up settling in Aiken. Well, perhaps it was not that simple or easy, but the end result is the same: Today Justin and Logan are the operators of their own racing stable, drawing on a deep well of personal experience and surviving in an industry where surviving is not easy, especially in these uncertain times.

Justin quite literally grew up on the backstretch of Golden Gate Fields, a racetrack with a spectacular view of the San Francisco Bay. His mother, Beth, was a groom for such luminaries as the late Hall of Fame

Mexico, working the circuit of Sunland Park, Ruidoso Downs and Zia Park.

"I liked the horses and the people in New Mexico," Justin recalled. "The level of horsemanship was amazing. Many of those riders and trainers had this incredible feel for a horse – and that is something that just can't be taught. You either have it or you don't: it is the basis of real horsemanship. You can learn the technical stuff but that innate feel for a horse is something altogether different."

Justin worked in New Mexico for a couple of years, but went home to California in 2016 after injuring his hand in a starting gate accident. His first job was working on a ranch in the hills outside of San Francisco.

"I ponied horses for a couple of months and my dad said that if I wanted to gallop, I would need to lose weight – and if I did then I could gallop for him at the track."

Justin credits his dad for putting him on nice horses – and in turn those horses taught him to be a better rider. In 2017 Justin was



trainer Bobby Frankel, while his father, Tirso, was an exercise rider, assistant trainer, blacksmith and a Jack of all trades at the track.

"My parents would bring me to the track each day before dawn, and I would sleep on the straw. When it was time for breakfast, we would go to the track kitchen," explained Justin. As he grew older, Justin would walk hots before going to school, and when he graduated from high school in 2009 he went straight to work at the starting gate.

"I was a big, burly guy because I had played football, so being part of the gate crew was a good job for me," he explained.

Crammed into the close quarters of the starting gate with an adrenaline-pumped Thoroughbred is not for the faint of heart, but Justin thrived in the environment. He eventually moved to New

galloping not just for Tirso, but for Jamey Thomas and Tim McCanna, both regulars atop the training standings at Golden Gate.

While Justin was growing up on the track, Logan was riding horses from the time she could walk. Her parents – Chris and Carol Bearden – were eventing trainers operating out of their facility in Martinez, a town in the East Bay region of San Francisco. Chris had trained with the United States Equestrian Team from 1980-1984 and ten years later he purchased a farm that would be known as Poplar Place Stables. With three barns, two arenas, a gallop track and miles of trails, Poplar Place was heaven for young Logan.

"My parents gave lessons, trained, ran clinics, had summer camps and Pony Club – really a little bit of everything," Logan said.

When Logan was 14, her mother was diagnosed with brain cancer. The “big” horse in the barn at the time was a gray Thoroughbred gelding named Catch of the Day (Marlin for short). Logan’s parents decided that she was ready to compete Marlin, and so a long-term relationship began. Carol was able to watch her daughter compete on Marlin several times before she passed away.

Logan graduated from high school in 2014 and needed to make some money as she continued to compete Marlin. One day she took a client’s



horse to the racetrack at Golden Gate Park and was intrigued by that unknown world. The trainer offered her \$50 a day to walk hots, an opportunity she couldn’t refuse.

“One day I showed this trainer a video of me going cross country and he said I should be galloping racehorses, not hot walking them!”

Logan would spend the mornings at Golden Gate, then return to Poplar Place to teach lessons and help her father and farm manager Trish MacDonald run the farm.



In 2016, when Justin was making his return to the track, Logan was already a regular there in the mornings, but the two kept missing one another. In 2017, Logan made her first trip to Aiken, giving herself six months to compete on the eventing circuit. When she returned to California, Aiken and all its possibilities were still on her mind. Her father had retired to Hawaii, so Logan and Trish were trying to build the family business back up. It was an uphill battle.

“Trish had found this farm in Williston (South Carolina) and I thought that perhaps California might not be my future after all.”

Justin and Logan finally met at a “Friendsgiving” dinner in California in 2018, and the pair’s official first date was Justin helping to pack up Logan’s car for her move from California to South Carolina.

Justin flew to Aiken a month later to spend Christmas with Logan,

and by the end of January he left California as well, settling in with Logan and making connections within Aiken’s Thoroughbred community.

“I started working for Brad Stauffer and Ron Stevens in February and in October I got some horses on my own,” explained Logan, referring to the trainers who run Legacy Stables at the Aiken Training Track. Today, Justin and Logan operate their own racing stable under the name of Poplar Place, a nod to Logan’s roots. The top horse in the stable today is a 3-year-old gelding named My Boy Paddy, owned by Ron Madden. Paddy was second in his race at the recent Aiken Trials, the Iselin Hall of Fame Trophy, which was won by Calibogee, a horse owned by the local veterinarian Jamie Carter.

“Paddy saw the rear-end of a horse for the first time in that race,” said Justin. “I was very pleased with the race – he was in it to gain experience and he certainly got that.”

Paddy was Logan’s third mount of the day and she was thrilled with the race. “He was full of excitement and just really loved running. The four and a half furlongs was not his ideal distance – he is not a sprinter – but he did well despite that.”

Logan was already a known entity to Paddy’s owner – she had ridden his filly Gallanor to victory at the Trials in 2018.

“I thought at the time that Logan was an excellent rider in that she had an immediate rapport with the filly,” explained Ron Madden. “When Logan and Justin started their operation in Aiken, I was very comfortable giving them some of my young horses to break and ride in preparation for training at the track.”

Ron Madden has plenty of racetrack experience. He bred, owned and raced horses in his native England before moving to Kentucky and then to Aiken in 2006. He races under the name of Jellicoe Creek Farm and, in his mind, the way Justin and Logan operate their racing stable is similar to the way European trainers run their operations.

“In Europe a trainer has his own yard – his own pastures, stables, gallops and training facilities. A trainer has a horse from a very young age and therefore, throughout every step of raising this horse, the trainer gets to know his or her foibles, idiosyncrasies and capabilities. Every horse is different and in order to get the best out of the horse you need somebody who recognizes that fact and adjusts the training accordingly. I believe this is what Justin and Logan do so well,” explained Ron.

Although COVID-19 has delayed their plans, Justin and Logan are still intent on moving their racing operation from Aiken to the Fair Hill Training Center in Maryland for the summer. Ron is perhaps their biggest supporter in this venture.

“By getting Justin and Logan to continue working with my young horses at the race track, all the knowledge gained from the months working on their early education is not lost,” Ron said. “The symbiotic partnership of Justin’s experience as an assistant trainer and Logan’s experience in riding will result, I am sure, in a successful racing career for them and my young horses.”

This winter, Poplar Place Racing operated out of one of the Whitney Barns at the Aiken Training Track. There were racehorses, Logan’s eventing prospects, a goat named Sherman and a scruffy three-legged dog named Mr. Peabody. Juan Nolasco and Melchor Moreno groomed, Lola Keene was the working student, Kathleen Wilson was a second exercise rider, and Dana Digerlmo did everything from being the pony rider to putting on ice boots. Trish MacDonald, who has watched Logan grow up, is the glue that binds the operation together.

“I think it is hard to match Aiken as far as training horses,” said Justin. “The track, the dirt roads and hacking into Hitchcock Woods. How can you beat it?”

Although Justin and Logan are excited about the prospect of training at Fair Hill – they are just as excited to return to Aiken next fall.

“We hope that we can make this a steady routine and eventually have more young horses to train as well as older horses that need time off or some rehab work, which I love doing,” said Logan.

