



# French Flair

## Young Jockey Conquers Kentucky

By Claire Novak

**I**n a quiet barn on the backside of Keeneland Race Course, far away from the pageantry of the afternoon races, Julien Leparoux is cleaning a bridle. He wipes the silver bit, neatly crosses the rubber reins, and strips a damp sponge down the cheek pieces until the mahogany leather gleams in the morning sun. Behind him, horses and

hotwalkers circle the shed row. Beside him, Patrick Biancone studies his training records. Before him lies a long day of racing — and, most likely, winning — but for the moment, he is focused on the simple task at hand.

Leparoux is in no hurry. He earned his reputation as a steady, patient rider while becoming Keeneland's leading

jockey during the 2007 spring season (he finished the meet with 22 wins to earn his third consecutive title at the Lexington oval), and he is secure in his position as one of Kentucky's top competitors. Multiple graded stakes victories and a

*An apprentice only a year ago, Leparoux has had amazing success.*



KIRK SCHLEA

## JULIEN LEPAROUX

subsequent Eclipse Award as last year's outstanding apprentice have not stirred his calm demeanor; he thrives on an early morning schedule developed during his formative days as a hard-working exercise rider, and it will never be an imposition for him to hold a horse or wipe down a saddle.

The 24-year-old jockey has already galloped five horses this morning, his elegant frame molded into the saddle, his sensitive hands giving, taking, and directing the course of his mounts. Finished with those duties, he will meet agent Steve Bass to discuss the week's upcoming races. Bass worked to pitch Leparoux's talent in the early days, but now he strives to achieve harmony among the trainers who vie for his client's riding services. It's not an easy job. During this meet, Leparoux has a mount in almost every race on every card — and there's no questioning the young jockey's justified popularity at Keeneland, where he made racing history in 2006 as the only apprentice to win a riding title in the track's 70 years.

The son of a former jockey turned assistant trainer, Leparoux grew up in the fabled horse country of Chantilly, France. His desire to become a jockey was frowned upon by his father — who was well aware of the sport's occupational hazards. But even as Leparoux watched televised races as a child, riding the back of the family sofa with an old whip in hand, both knew he eventually would ride great Thoroughbreds.

"At first my father didn't want me to race," said Leparoux, who stands five-foot-five and tacks 108, filling the ideal jockey-sized frame. "When I was 11, riding jumping horses, those were not racehorses, so that was okay. When I started to ride Thoroughbreds, he supported me, but at the same time he said, 'I don't really want you to do that.' But when I got my visa to come to the United



Leparoux has a reputation as a steady, patient rider.

States, he was happy."

In the summer of 2003, after honoring his father's request that he finish school, Leparoux flew to Saratoga for a two-week vacation. Then 18, he became reacquainted with Biancone, the French trainer who had known Leparoux as a youngster in France. That winter he began to work for Biancone's string at Santa Anita in California.

Although he desperately wanted to become a jockey, Leparoux made no demands upon his employer. He knew race riding was not a career to be taken lightly. Determined to succeed, he was still willing to wait for the right opportunities.

"I didn't say I wanted to be a jockey," he said. "Everyone knew it, of course, but I never told them. At that time it was not a good idea to say anything because I was not good enough. I told myself, 'Just stay back and learn. When you're better, you can say something.'"

An astute study, Leparoux worked to improve his English and develop a

horseman's understanding of the racing game. Self-confident yet distinguished, he endeared himself to owners and trainers alike. He handled horses with poise and refinement, and by 2005 he was in the saddle for morning works aboard Biancone's top contenders.

That summer he launched his racing career, planning to take the big step at Suffolk Downs. But Massachusetts racing authorities did not grant him a license.

"It was funny because they'd never seen me ride," the jockey recalled. "It was to be my first race, and they didn't want me at their track, so Patrick said, 'Okay, if you don't want him to ride at your track, he's going to ride at Saratoga.'"

Facing stiff competition during the talent-laden New York meet, Leparoux booted home his first winner Aug. 18 and followed up with two more victories.

"Julien was a polished rider coming into the business," said agent Doc Danner, who took the jockey to Kentucky that fall after his longtime client Pat Day retired. Leparoux was soon fielding calls from other trainers, and when Danner returned to Oaklawn Park because of



LeParoux earned his second grade I victory aboard Martin Schwartz' Asi Siempre in the 2006 Spinster Stakes.

prior commitments, Bass became the jockey's agent. A few months later the duo embarked on one of the most successful apprentice seasons in racing history.

Riding at Turfway Park in 2006, LeParoux won 167 races during the winter/spring meet, breaking the mark for most wins in that season set by Rafael Bejarano in 2004. Continuing on the Kentucky

circuit, the two shared leading rider honors at Keeneland. LeParoux also caught the attention of TVG stage producer Michelle Yu, his current girlfriend.

"Keeneland is the best track for me," said the jockey, who lives in a newly purchased home on the outskirts of Louisville, exactly 55 minutes from Lexington. "It's a short meet, so it's fun to ride there. Every day is exciting, and now that the Polytrack is here, it's even more exciting."

Last fall, on the way to his first out-

right riding title at Keeneland, LeParoux scored one of his greatest career wins when Martin Schwartz' Asi Siempre took the Juddmonte Spinster Stakes and gave the jockey his second grade I victory. (He won his first grade I in August 2006 when piloting Schwartz' Gorella to victory in the Beverly D. Stakes at Arlington Park.)

"I remember the race, that's for sure," he said. "Asi Siempre ran good on the turf before, but she used to train on Polytrack and was very impressive. She won easy. It was great for me because all jockeys want to win grade Is, and that was a big, tough race."

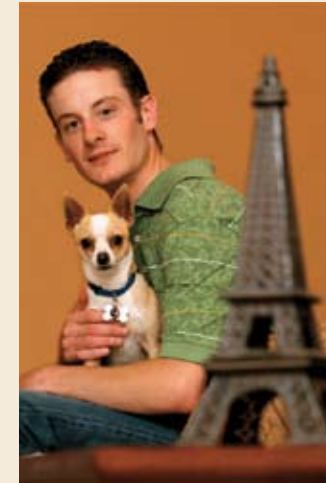
That year LeParoux also shattered the previous record for races won by an apprentice at Churchill Downs. He did the same at Saratoga, and at Turfway he topped a record that had been standing since 1968 for most wins in a fall meet. He ended the season as North America's leading rider with 403 wins and \$12,491,316 in earnings, more than any other apprentice in racing history.

The 2007 fall racing season marks a significant milestone for LeParoux; this September he celebrates his one-year anniversary as a highly successful journeyman.

"Over time he polished himself and became a stronger rider," said Bass. "If he keeps going the way he's going, he has the potential to be at this level for the rest of his career."

"The best thing about Julien is he doesn't get rattled," veteran rider Mark Guidry said. "He's pretty even-keeled. He can adapt to basically any situation that comes up, and he handles himself with more maturity than a lot of the kids that are riding now. He's a good rider and a good person, and I wish him all the luck in the world."

Asked how it feels to be the leading rider in the jockeys' colonies of Kentucky, the quiet Frenchman laughs. "Good, of



LeParoux at home with Cee Sir and strolling in the Keeneland paddock with girlfriend Michelle Yu.



Lexington photographer Matt Goins, who caught LeParoux in an anxious moment, won the 2006 Eclipse Award for best photo.

course!" he said, and his wry smile indicates that to feel otherwise would be unimaginable.

The secret to LeParoux's success does not lie solely in the innate talent that has brought about several impres-

sive career achievements. His maturity, combined with his incredible calm and focus, have earned him universal respect. When leading the standings at Keeneland and Churchill, he does not push aside the pressure that comes from

such a position, nor does he embrace it. Instead, LeParoux approaches competition with a tranquility that equalizes Thoroughbred racing's highs and lows. Victory is celebrated. Defeat is accepted. Simplicity remains imperative.

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## JULIEN LEPAROUX

“If you’re looking for him to validate himself, he’ll never do it,” said Michelle Yu. “He’ll never say, ‘Yes! I’m wonderful! I’m the next Pat Day!’ ”

“I’m not like that,” said Leparoux. “I don’t like to say anything. I may think about it, but I don’t say it. I just prefer to stay back and try to learn and do my job.”

And that’s why Leparoux, with only three years as a professional rider under his slim belt, has been transformed into a major player on the national racing scene — and stands a good chance at ruling the Kentucky circuit for many years to come. 🐎

Leparoux looks to have a bright future as a top U.S. rider.

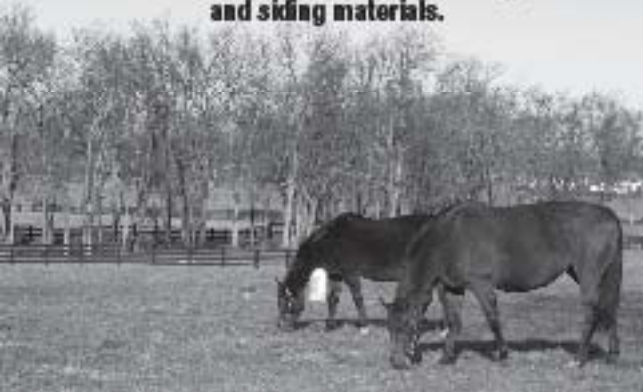


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