

# Little Joe Verrone: one of a kind jock's agent

by Ryan Goldberg

**L**ittle Joe Verrone may well be the longest-active jockey's agent in the country. He is 86 years old, and has spent the last 60 years as an agent. His riders have won, by his count, more than 6,000 races. In New Jersey, where he has plied his trade for nearly 50 years, he is an institution.

One morning in early September at Monmouth Park, he had some privileged information to disclose. This one concerned not his jockey but himself. He leaned in close and lowered his already soft voice.

"I've been in the game all of my life," he said, his voice slightly cracking, "and I have to say one thing. I enjoyed every minute of it. But I'm giving you a scoop. I'm going into retirement now; I'm riding away from all of this."

The Meadowlands this fall will be his final meet. Coincidentally, his first and last jockeys will have been named Rivera—Fausto and Luis, respectively. The first Rivera came, in 1950, at Waterford Park (now Mountaineer) in West Virginia. In between, Little Joe has carried the book of such jockeys as Larry Adams, Paul Kallai, Don MacBeth, Dave Penna, Danny Nied, Herb McCauley, Nick Santagata and Mike Smith. His partnerships were long and successful, a rare thing for his profession; he worked for Kallai, Nied and Santagata for more than 30 years.

His most famous jockey, in fact, is one he did not work for but whom he mentored at the start of his career—Bill Hartack. Hartack, who won five Kentucky Derbies, was a loner, tough and recalcitrant, but Little Joe was one of his few friends.

"Guys like Little Joe were part of the fiber of the game," says Bob Kulina, a longtime friend and Monmouth's general manager. His late father, Joe Kulina, arranged for Kallai to immigrate from Hungary in 1962, and then matched him with Little Joe. Kallai was Kulina's first-call rider for more than a decade.

For his age, Little Joe—who stands five feet tall—is a marvel. Kulina calls him Dorian Gray, referring to the Oscar Wilde character, saying he has not aged in 40 years. His memory is sharp, same as his wit. His stories drip with staggering detail of people and places and horses. In his spare time he writes songs.

For his size, and his personality, he has always stood out. He wears a suit and hat to the races, a dashing figure among his more sartorially challenged peers. He shakes the pills for post positions, a daily task entrusted to him a long time ago. A few years ago, a plaque inscribed with the words "Little Joe's Corner" was placed in his customary spot outside the

racing office where he stands during the draw.

He has been a friend of celebrities and athletes, their friendships the outcome of a time when racing melded seamlessly with sports and entertainment. Come to think of it, he is a celebrity himself. At Monmouth, he cannot walk more than a few yards without somebody stopping him or calling out his name. The mounts his jockey gets are largely out of loyalty to Little Joe.

His distinguished career was far from predetermined. He grew up in Johnstown, Pa., once a booming steel town 60 miles east of Pittsburgh, famous for its three floods, the first of which was the "Great Flood of 1889." He had four brothers and two sisters, and their father worked in a steel mill.

In 1942, he was drafted into the Army. By his own account the smallest staff sergeant in World War II, he was decorated with the Purple Heart and nominated for the Silver Star for valor in the Battle of Okinawa, in which he was wounded. He only described what happened off the record. The memories still seem to pain him. "Nobody wins a war," he said. "Everybody loses."

Following the war he returned to Johnstown and worked in a steel mill, heating rivets for boxcars. Less than two years later, as one of the new guys, he was let go. The

next day he talked to a local guy named Joe Reggino, who owned billiard halls and cigar stores. More importantly, he owned horses, then stabled at Laurel Park. Reggino gave Little Joe a thousand dollars and said he should go spend time around the horses and see if he liked it.

For the next two years, Verrone walked hots and oversaw training and learned how to exercise horses. He intended to become a trainer but, following a riding accident in which he broke a bone in his neck, he became an agent on the advice of trainers Frank Wright and Marvin Greene. He set out on the leaky roof circuit—the minor league tracks and fairs of Ohio, West Virginia, Maryland and New England. He became close friends with Frank Whiteley, whom he considers the best trainer he spent time around.

As an agent, he needed a nickname. "Anything that's little can't hurt you," he explained. "So when they see you and you're a competitor, they say that's Joe, we don't have to worry about him. . . Boom!" He punched his fist into his other palm—"When I hit 'em a couple of times, oh, wait a minute, whoa, then they start realizing."

A few years into his career, Verrone received a phone call from a judge and attorney he knew from Johnstown. They had a potential jockey from Ebensburg, a coal-mining town nearby. They told Joe he was the valedictorian of his class, and Joe said to send him on a bus to Waterford Park and he would pick him up. The kid was Bill Hartack.

Little Joe helped arrange for trainer Junie Corbin to have his contract. He took Hartack under his wing, two sons of mill workers, pointing out which jockeys to watch—one for his gate skills, another for his ability to judge pace. Hartack, then 19, won the third race he rode on a horse named

Nickelby. He'd make it to the major tracks within a year.

Of all the circuits Verrone traversed in the next decade, before he met Kallai and ultimately settled in New Jersey, he enjoyed Maryland above all. He began meeting celebrities and sports figures and politicians.

At Laurel or Pimlico, he gave tips to J. Edgar Hoover. He drove Chuck Dressen, the Brooklyn Dodgers manager, from the airport to the track. For 40 years he was close with Art Rooney, the owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers and a life-long horseplayer and owner of tracks and horses. Patsy Cline, the singer, was his close friend until her untimely death in a plane crash in 1963. His list of other celebrities he has met is long. "How could you meet people like this," he asked, "if I wasn't in the business?"

With Kallai, a former boxer and rider in Hungary, Little Joe had his first and biggest star. Kallai was as tough as leather hide, once described, appropriately, as "a cross between Bill Hartack and Paul Bunyan." He once jumped a fence and slugged a heckling bettor. In his 15 years of riding in the States, the first 11 of them with Little Joe, he won 1,718 races. (Kallai was convicted of race-fixing in 1977, a charge he denied to the end of his life. He fled to Europe and later returned to Hungary, riding until the day he died three years ago.)

Still, there were times when Little Joe found creative ways to get mounts. Tom Barry, who won the Belmont Stakes twice, as well as a Monmouth training title, trained for Art Rooney, a fellow Irishman. Barry did not want to use Kallai. One day Little Joe saw his friend Rooney on the Monmouth backstretch. "I said to him, 'I got a jock, his name's Kelly.' I said he comes from County Cork, Ireland. I said I can't get a mount from Tom."

Finally, months later at Pimlico, Barry, in his thick Irish accent, asked Little Joe if his

rider had a call in a race. Kallai got the mount and Joe told his rider, "When you go in that paddock and you talk to him, you just shake your head. I don't want you to say a word. Shake your head, yes or no, OK? Don't talk."

The horse won. "And [Kallai] gets off, and I see Kallai looking up at the guy, and I said, 'Uh-oh, uh-oh'. . . They came from the winner's circle, and coming over [Barry] saw me. 'Hey, Little Joe, what part of Ireland did you say this boy comes from? He's Hungarian;

I know he is! He has an accent like the Gabor sisters.'" Verrone laughed heartily. He said Joe Hirsch once used the story in his column.

Over the last decade he has spent the winter in Arizona, where he has family. His late wife, Rose, whom he married in 1958, died 27 years ago. He said he might return to Florida in the winter and spend the rest of the year in Johnstown, where a sister still lives in the old homestead. If he does anything in horse racing it will be as an owner.

No one-trick pony, he can spend more time on his amateur song-writing. The last one, "The Girl Next Door," he wrote in early September about his neighbor in Arizona, who he says is like a sister. They're good lyrics, but they can't touch a song he wrote in the 1960s in praise of the Civil Rights movement and denouncing segregation. The encore goes:

*The trouble with our society  
We're living in a lie  
Everybody wants to go to heaven  
But nobody wants to die* ★



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