

 spotlight on  
TYLER GAFFALIONE



# BORN

RISING STAR TYLER GAFFALIONE MAKES

# TO RIDE

A BIG IMPRESSION AT KEENELAND



Tyler Gaffalione outrode his older peers when taking leading rider honors at Keeneland last fall.

By Charlie McCarthy | Photos by Eliot J. Schechter

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**T** Tyler Gaffalione didn't need a horse to begin life as a jockey. "I used to ride the arm of the couch," said Gaffalione, the son and grandson of jockeys. "Then for my

10th birthday, my dad had an Equicizer made for me. The best present I ever had.

"I put it in our basement," he said. "I would watch the races and ride along with them."

Not only that, he'd wear riding silks, pants, and boots for a "ride," switch into a robe between races, then put on new colors for the next start.

"One time I was on the phone with a client," Gaffalione's father, Steve, said. "Tyler walked outside and a couple of minutes later came back in with dirt and grass all over his helmet. I turned and said, 'Tyler, what's wrong?' He said, 'Jock came over at the three-eighths pole and dropped me, Dad.'

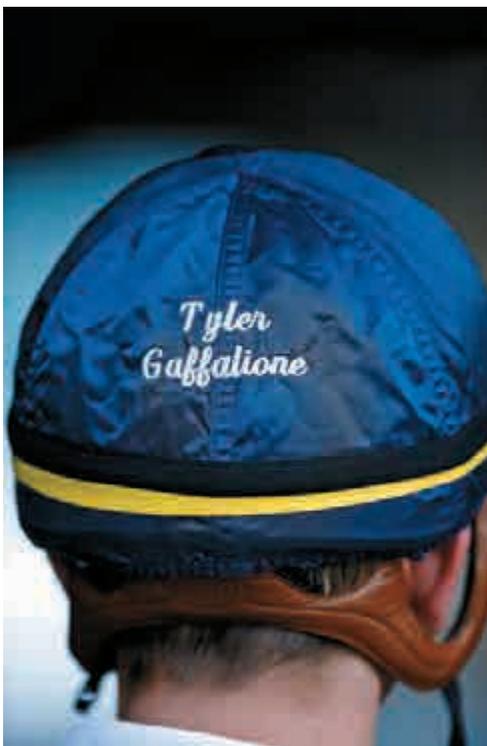
"Anything that could happen, Tyler was covering it from the beginning."

Well, there's nothing make-believe about Tyler Gaffalione's rides now.

The 24-year-old Florida product and



Gaffalione rode Next Shares to victory in the 2018 Shadwell Turf Mile at Keeneland.



## VITAL STATS:

**Born:** Sept. 12, 1994

**Birthplace:** Kansas City, Kansas

**Residence:** Southwest Ranches, Florida

**Height:** 5 feet 3 inches

**Weight:** 112 pounds

**Siblings:** Three older sisters, one younger brother

**Note:** Father, Steve; grandfather Bobby; and cousin T.D. Houghton, all jockeys

2015 Eclipse Award winner as outstanding apprentice jockey returns to Keeneland this spring after earning leading rider honors here in the fall, his first full meet at the track.

"I didn't have the highest expectations. I just wanted to go and make a good impression," Gaffalione said. "And everybody knows Keeneland. It's just a privilege to ride there."

"When you have those opportunities, you have to take advantage of them."

Gaffalione certainly did that this past October, when he won 15 times in 74 starts and earned \$1,341,023. He finished in the top three 27 times.

Memorable Keeneland moments for the young jockey began in earnest on the meet's first Saturday.

"I won my first race early in the day and was just



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Gaffalione bagged another Keeneland graded stakes, this one with Shamrock Rose in the 2018 Lexus Raven Run.

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so happy I wasn't going to go 0-for-the-day," he said. "Then later in the day, I won the Shadwell Mile. There was just an electricity in the crowd ... how loud they were.

"Coming down the stretch, I could hear the crowd. It was my first million-dollar win, so it was pretty incredible. I was just letting everything soak in."

Gaffalione's pedigree gave him an appreciation for Keeneland and its traditions, such as the trophy presentation on the grass for big stakes races.

"Since I was a young kid, I always saw the great riders getting their pictures taken there, holding the trophy," he said. "That was my first time getting to do it, and it was even better than I imagined."

Gaffalione's 2018 Bluegrass highlights included riding 5-year-old gelding Next Shares to a 3¼-length victory in the Shadwell Turf Mile Stakes on Oct. 6 for trainer Richard Baltas. He also was aboard Mark Casse-trained 3-year-old filly Shamrock Rose for her triumph in the Lexus Raven Run Stakes on Oct. 20.

Both trainers spoke highly of the young jockey.

"He has a good attitude. He's levelheaded. He finishes strong. He understands a race," Baltas said. "He knows how to map out a course on a horse, and he knows how to finish. He's a heady guy."

Casse agreed.

"I love his positive attitude — that's always important to me," Casse said. "I try to be a positive person and surround myself with positive people. He's definitely a positive kind of guy."



GOADY PHOTOGRAPHY

Trainers praise Gaffalione for his positive attitude.



LESLIE MARTIN/COGLIANESE PHOTO

Gaffalione gets the customary dunking after his first victory, at Gulfstream Park on Sept. 7, 2014.

"Of course, the most important thing is his ability. I've said it for a few years — I think he's a great rider. I've said more than once he's the next Johnny [Velazquez]. He can ride any type of horse; he's an extremely strong finisher; and he thinks when he's out there."

Casse also trained the mare Salty, whom Tyler rode to victory in the La Troienne Stakes at Churchill Downs last May for his first grade 1 win.

"I like that when Tyler messes up, he comes back and says he did. Because you know what? They all mess up at times," Casse said. "It doesn't matter how great they are; it's tough to be right all the time and have things go perfect. I'd rather have a rider say, 'Hey, I screwed up' or 'You know what? I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.'"

Gaffalione's first equine of note was a pony called Chipper Jones, named by Tyler in honor of the famous baseball player. He got the pony when his father, having suffered a career-ending neck injury, trained and galloped horses at a small farm in Ocala, Florida.

While working horses at the farm, Steve Gaffalione first noticed his son's talents when Tyler was about 13.

"We had a filly we had been working with for a few weeks, trying to get her right. So I rode a horse we claimed and Tyler was on the filly," Steve said. "I heard him coming at about the eighth pole, and I looked over and just had to do a double take — he just looked so good. It was one of those moments when I said, 'Wow, what do we have here?'"

And these days?



Said trainer Ralph Nicks of Gaffalione: "The first time I put him on a horse, I saw a lot of natural ability."

"I told Tyler it took me nine or 10 years to get where he is at now," Steve said.

After returning to South Florida and through high school in Davie, Tyler continued to work horses. Father and son agreed Tyler would not embark on a riding career until after graduation.

Shortly thereafter, Tyler Gaffalione began his professional life at Gulfstream Park on Sept. 5, 2014. He scored his first win in his third career start two days later.

A year later the young Gaffalione won five races on a card with horses trained by Ralph Nicks.

“

COMING DOWN THE  
STRETCH, I COULD  
HEAR THE CROWD...”

— TYLER GAFFALIONE  
ON WINNING THE SHADWELL  
TURF MILE

"I don't know who, or how, or what was the most rewarding that day," Nicks said, "for four 2-year-olds to win on a day like that, him as an apprentice, or for a trainer to win five out of five on one track. It was an outstanding day."

As for Gaffalione, Nicks liked what he saw from the start.

"The first time I met him you could just tell, No. 1, his focus was good," Nicks said. "The first time I put him on a horse, I saw a lot of natural ability."

The young jockey scored another milestone with his first Kentucky Derby ride,



On a winter morning at Gulfstream Park, Gaffalione helps tack a horse before he mounts. Opposite, the young rider makes the rounds of the Gulfstream barns.

on Calumet Farm's Patch in 2017. They finished 14th.

Tyler's late grandfather, Bobby Gaffglione, rode Rexson's Hope to a 10th-place finish in the 1984 Run for the Roses. (Note: Bobby and Steve spelled their last name differently to avoid confusion.)

"The Kentucky Derby was so much more than I could ever have thought," Tyler

Gaffalione said. "It was so special. I couldn't imagine getting to ride it every year. That would be amazing."

After establishing a presence at Gulfstream Park and Gulfstream Park West (formerly Calder Race Course), Tyler Gaffalione began to ride outside of Florida. On dark days in Florida, he'd go to places such as Saratoga Race Course and Kentucky

Downs.

Gaffalione and his agent, Matt Muzikar, talked about really branching out from Florida in 2017, but the plan came to fruition last year, thanks largely to a commitment from trainer Mike Maker.

Gaffalione and Maker previously had teamed for Enterprising's win in the Muniz Memorial Handicap at Fair Grounds in April



2017; for Taghleeb's victory in the W. L. McKnight Handicap at Gulfstream Park in January 2017; and for Fast and Accurate's triumph in the Spiral Stakes at Turfway Park in March 2017.

"He was an award-winning jockey, so obviously the talent and ability are there," Maker said, "and we've had a lot of success together. I think [Kentucky] fits well for him."

Muzikar agreed.

"I thought it was time we change some things up and went to another level," the agent said. "It was a situation where we were trying to get some Breeders' Cup mounts, and I thought it could happen by going to Keeneland."

Six days after last fall's Keeneland meet ended, Gaffalione rode Hat Creek Racing's Chelsea Cloisters to a second-place finish in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf Sprint.

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Steve Gaffalione beams with pride when discussing “my best friend.”

“Tyler has never done anything to embarrass me or let me down in any way, shape, or form,” Steve said. “He’s a great kid all around. I couldn’t be more proud of him as a rider, but I’m even more proud of the type of person he is.”

Tyler, in turn, credits his father for playing a major role in his success.

“I’ll call him up after a race and ask his opinion on races,” Tyler said. “We’ll watch replays together. He’s just a great supporter of mine.

“The great thing is he’s honest with me — he doesn’t sugarcoat it. When I mess up,

he lets me know. He’s great for me. He’s really helped me learn.”

Tyler Gaffalione also has received advice and guidance from some of the country’s most successful trainers following workouts and races.

“Todd Pletcher taught me a lot about how to ride better-quality horses,” he said. “Chad Brown taught me a lot about riding the turf, saving ground, knowing when to pitch out. Christophe Clement taught me a lot about patience, setting the trip, and finding the best way around.”

The plan for Gaffalione in 2019 is to ride at Keeneland in April and head to Saratoga before returning in the fall to Keeneland, Churchill Downs, and then Gulfstream Park.

Asked his ultimate goal, Gaffalione said he dreamed of winning the Triple Crown. “I want to be mentioned among those greats,” Tyler said. “That would be pretty special.” **KM**



Gaffalione looks forward to riding at Keeneland again this year.

