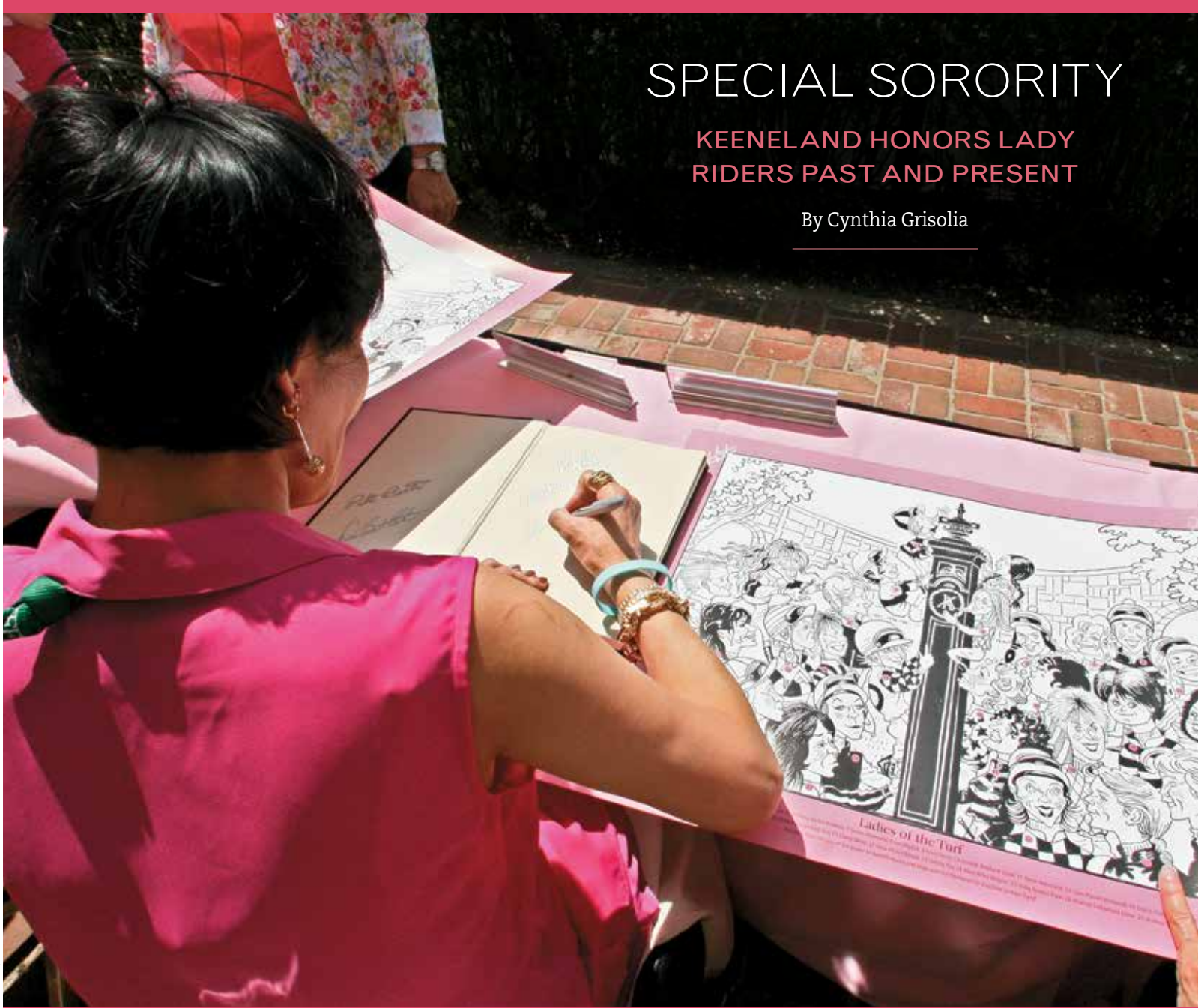


# SPECIAL SORORITY

KEENELAND HONORS LADY  
RIDERS PAST AND PRESENT

By Cynthia Grisolia



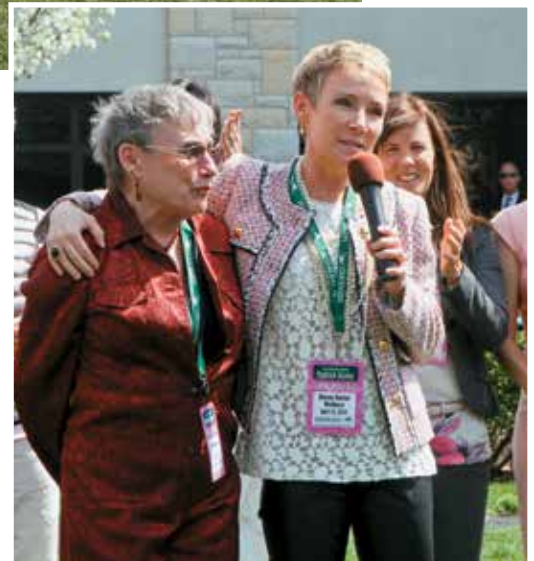
KEENELAND/CODY PHOTOGRAPHY

Riders signed personal items as well as a commemorative poster created by the cartoonist Peb at a special event at Keeneland in April to honor female jockeys.



**In the paddock at Keeneland, Julie Krone and Donna Barton Brothers are kneeling in reverence.** On a quintessential Sunday afternoon during the track's spring meet, the two former stars of the horse racing universe are paying homage to another luminary: Kathy Kusner, who in 1968 became the first licensed woman jockey.

The now silver-haired Kusner is here as part of a special, day-long salute to girl jocks, and when track handicapper Mike Battaglia introduces her to the fans as a vanguard in Thoroughbred racing, Krone and Barton Brothers assume their pose of worship. "This is like meeting my idol," said Krone, whose riding career is not without its own milestones. "No, wait, it's more than that," she gushed. "I'm enamored with her — enamored!"



**Top, some 20 lady jockeys gathered in the Keeneland paddock for "Ladies of the Turf Day." Above, Donna Barton Brothers, with her mother, Patti Barton, spoke movingly at the event.**



Julie Krone embraced Keeneland starting gate chief Robert "Spec" Alexander.

"We're just smitten," added Barton Brothers, a top rider herself and now a racing analyst for NBC Sports, "just smitten."

On April 13 Keeneland hosted "Ladies of the Turf Day," a celebration to honor the industry's female jockeys both past and present. The event was combined with Kentucky First Lady Jane Beshear's Horses and Hope Day, a breast cancer awareness initiative for women on the backstretch, and more than 20 lady jocks — some of whom are also cancer survivors — were in attendance, representing more than 45 years of turf history.

In addition to the paddock ceremony, the women had breakfast at the Keeneland Library, took part in numerous photo ops (Vicky Baze, the first woman to be a leading rider at Longacres near Seattle, even took a selfie with a lead pony), and presented the winning trophy after the Horses and Hope Race, where entries donned pale cherry saddlecloths and the tote board glowed hot pink, the trademark color of breast cancer research.


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The fans got their turn with the athletes, too, when they lined up around the paddock for an autograph-signing session of a commemorative “Ladies of the Turf” poster created by famed caricaturist Peb. A few hundred men, women, and children queued up for signatures and raised \$1,000 for Horses and Hope and for the Permanently Disabled Jockeys Fund.

“Ladies of the Turf” day was the brainchild of Barbara Thomason, wife of Keeneland President and CEO Bill Thomason. Inspired by Pimlico’s Lady Legends race, held each May on the Baltimore oval, Barbara Thomason wanted to find a way for Keeneland to pay tribute to these influential riders. Now in its fifth year, the Lady Legends contest showcases all female riders and proceeds go to breast cancer research. “Barbara asked what could we do to make our day special?” said Rogers Beasley, Keeneland’s vice president of racing. “And we talked about having a whole day to honor these lady pioneers.”

Beasley credited his staff and members of creative services and the public relations team for working tirelessly to organize the event, which brought riders from as far afield as California, Arizona, Florida, and Ontario. “Their willingness to come together and join us here was a great thrill,” he added.

For the women riders it was a special gathering. Many knew each other from their riding days; some had never met. Most, like Krone, a Hall of Famer and one of the most successful female riders in the history of the sport, were in awe of the trailblazers. Over a lunch of crab cakes and shrimp salad, the

Left, young fans had their commemorative posters autographed. Below, P.J. Cooksey and Keeneland bugler Steve Buttlemann shared a special moment.



KEENELAND/PHOTOS BY Z

women were soon comparing notes and swapping war stories. “I was once in a race where the other horses had crossed the finish line, turned around, and were coming back before I even hit the wire,” recalled Andrea Seefeldt Knight with a laugh. She later became the first woman to win the Pennsylvania Derby. “Oh, you want to talk bad, talk to me,” quipped Kaoru Tschuiya-Chatfield, the first Japanese woman to ride at Keeneland. “They should have paid us more for those horses.” Then Patricia “P.J.” Cooksey, the first woman to ride in the Preakness Stakes, rallied the crowd. “Anyone want to put five dollars in a pot and bet a few Superfectas?” They all did.

In the Sport of Kings, this was truly a meeting of its unsung queens, but it could just as easily have been a covey of school girls reminiscing at a high school reunion — if the school in question was the one of proverbial hard knocks.

### Trailblazing a difficult path

In November 1967 Kathy Kusner decided she wanted to be a jockey. A lifelong rider, she was already a member of the U.S. Equestrian team. (Before her career ended she would be a three-time Olympian and a show-jumping silver medalist.) But the Maryland Racing Commission turned down her application for a license. “They would rather have died,” said Kusner. So she hired a lawyer, and thanks to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 Kusner became the first woman eligible to ride in a recognized horse race in America. She was also the first to shoot a hole into the male

bastion of the sport. "After getting the license I can't tell you how many places in South America and South Africa invited me to ride," Kusner added. "They had this huge betting handle because they never had a girl before. Maryland didn't get that — that they could use it. They had this archaic attitude that girls can't do anything."

An injury while show riding prevented Kusner from becoming the first woman to compete against men in a pari-mutuel race. Instead, it was 19-year-old Diane Crump who got a leg up on longshot Bridle 'n Bit at Hialeah Park, Fla., on Feb. 7, 1969, and — amid boos and jeers — galloped into sports history. The following year Crump rode Fathom in the Kentucky Derby and notched another first for the girls. But even with those barriers smashed, the mentality didn't shift much. "You still couldn't get mounts," said Crump. "For years I broke yearlings, I galloped 20 or 30 horses a day. It didn't matter how hard you worked, there was still the reservation that you're not sharp enough or strong



THE BLOOD-HORSE LIBRARY

Kathy Kusner went to court to get a jockey's license.

enough to ride a race."

"Back then it was so new," noted Jason Neff, director-producer of

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Clockwise from top left, Barbara Jo Rubin endured protests and curses; Abigail Fuller made history with filly Triple Crown winner Mom's Command; Vicky Baze reached a milestone 2,000 victories in 2011; Rosie Napravnik became the first female rider to win the Kentucky Oaks, aboard Believe You Can in 2012; Julie Krone was the first female rider to win a Triple Crown race, the Belmont, with Colonial Affair in 1993.

## ALSO ON THE GUEST LIST

Joining Krone, Barton Brothers, Kusner, et. al. were these other notable Ladies of the Turf:

**Stacie Clark-Rogers**, based in Ontario, is the daughter of trainer Joan Clark and owner Peter Clark. She won 87 of 791 starts between 1993 and 1996 and was nominated for the 1994 Sovereign Award as outstanding apprentice in Canada. In 2013 Clark-Rogers produced HRTV's Eclipse Award-winning documentary *Saratoga WarHorse*.

**Tammy Fox** is the daughter of jockey-trainer Billy Fox and the sister of jockey Billy Fox, Jr. She was the first woman to ride in Keeneland's Blue Grass Stakes when she rode her family's Big Courage to a fourth-place finish in 1991. She still gallops horses for her longtime partner, Eclipse Award-winning trainer Dale Romans.

**Suzie Picou-Oldham** rode for a season between 1975 and 1977, earning 22 wins out of 247 starts. Her father, Clarence, was a jock as was her husband, Johnny Oldham. Daughter Jessica is a graduate of the North American Racing Academy.

**Tami Purcell-Burkland** was a stakes-winning Thoroughbred rider as well as top Quarter Horse jockey — she is the only female jockey to win the All-American Futurity at Ruidoso Downs and the Champion of Champions at Los Alamitos. Burkland was inducted into the Texas Horse Racing Hall of Fame in 2013.

**Jennifer Rowland-Small** was one of the other pioneer women, riding from 1971 to 1977. A leading apprentice at

Timonium and Marlboro in Maryland, Small later became a Thoroughbred breeder.

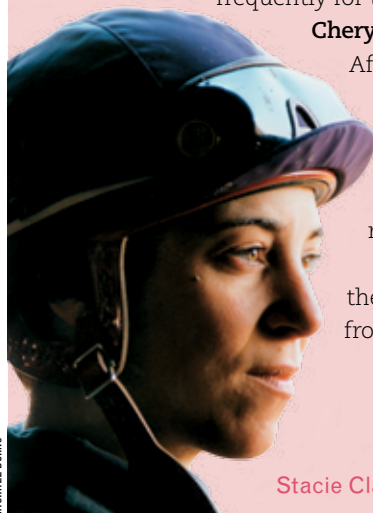
**Melinda Spickard Vest** was a noted rider and stakes winner in Kentucky and Ohio with more than 400 career wins. She rode frequently for trainer Jerry Romans.

**Cheryl White** was Thoroughbred racing's first African-American woman rider. She began her career at Thistledown, where her father, Raymond White, was a trainer. She later rode Arabians and Quarter Horses and was a five-time leading rider of Appaloosas.

**Mary Wiley-Wagner** rode primarily on the East Coast and in the Mid-Atlantic region where she notched 277 wins from 2,656 starts.



Tammy Fox



Stacie Clark-Rogers



Jennifer Rowland-Small



Rosie Napravnik took time from her Keeneland riding duties to sign the commemorative poster.

the forthcoming documentary *Jocks*, which chronicles the history of women riders. “Men had been riding all their lives without women, and now women were coming in and taking away their livelihood — their manhood really.”

Even having a mount didn’t guarantee a woman in the irons acceptance. A few weeks after Crump’s historic Hialeah race, Barbara Jo Rubin was set to make her debut in Miami at Tropical Park, but the male jockey colony there protested and threatened a boycott. In her early races “Barbara Jo was cursed at,” said her husband, Gordie Gubin. “People threw bricks. They yelled, ‘Go have babies.’” The incidents led Rubin to leave the United States and ride at Hobby Horse Hall track in the Bahamas where she posted not only her first race but also her first win. “Things started changing when there were more women on the track,” said Rubin, “but I think the women jockeys after us still had problems with trainers who liked you galloping their horses but would still rather ride the guys.”

Crump estimated it was a full 10 years after her inaugural rides before attitudes began to level off at the track. By the late 1980s, in the glory days of Barton Brothers and Krone, things had become a little easier for women. “I started riding in 1987, and when people would say to me, ‘Oh, it’s harder for women than it is for guys,’ I would say, ‘No, it’s not — not compared to how it was,’” said Barton Brothers, whose mother is former rider Patti Barton, the first woman to win 1,000 races. “The women from 1968 to 1975 made people open to the fact that a woman could be as good as a guy,” she added. “I couldn’t have done what they did.”

## Hard-won acceptance

As the ninth and final race on the card wrapped up, fans filtered into the parking lots. Upstairs in the Keeneland Room, the ladies of the turf began preparing for the trip home. Abby Fuller, daughter of owner Peter Fuller and regular rider of the champion homebred Mom’s Command, went around and asked everyone to autograph her program. Some exchanged cards and phone numbers (“Call me!”), while others turned reflective. “It was great that Keeneland cared enough to bring everybody together,” said Kaye Bell, who in 1972 was the first woman rider to win a race on the Lexington oval. “We’re basically the pioneers but I think we’re the forgotten bunch.”

In 2014 a female jockey is no longer a novelty. Consider the careers of Chantal Sutherland, Rosemary Homeister Jr., Emma-Jayne Wilson, or superstar Rosie Napravnik, who in 2012 became the first woman to win the Kentucky Oaks. She won the Oaks again in 2014. Last fall Napravnik became the first woman to be leading rider at Keeneland.

“It’s part of the culture now,” said director-producer Neff. “It’s accepted. Unfortunately, there’s very little information out there about the accomplishments [of their predecessors].” Indeed, there are few narratives or best-sellers revealing the stories of the first female jockeys; there’s no big-screen *A League of Their Own*. Instead there are the Lady Legends races and days like the one Keeneland hosted where a fan begs an autograph and a lady jock has a chance meeting with a former groom from the Bahamas who remembers her first race. But then again, not one of the ladies of the turf would ever say they did what they did to end up in a record book. “I just wanted to ride,” said Crump. “And when you love something that much nothing else matters.” **KM**



Keeneland president Bill Thomason toasted the lady riders.