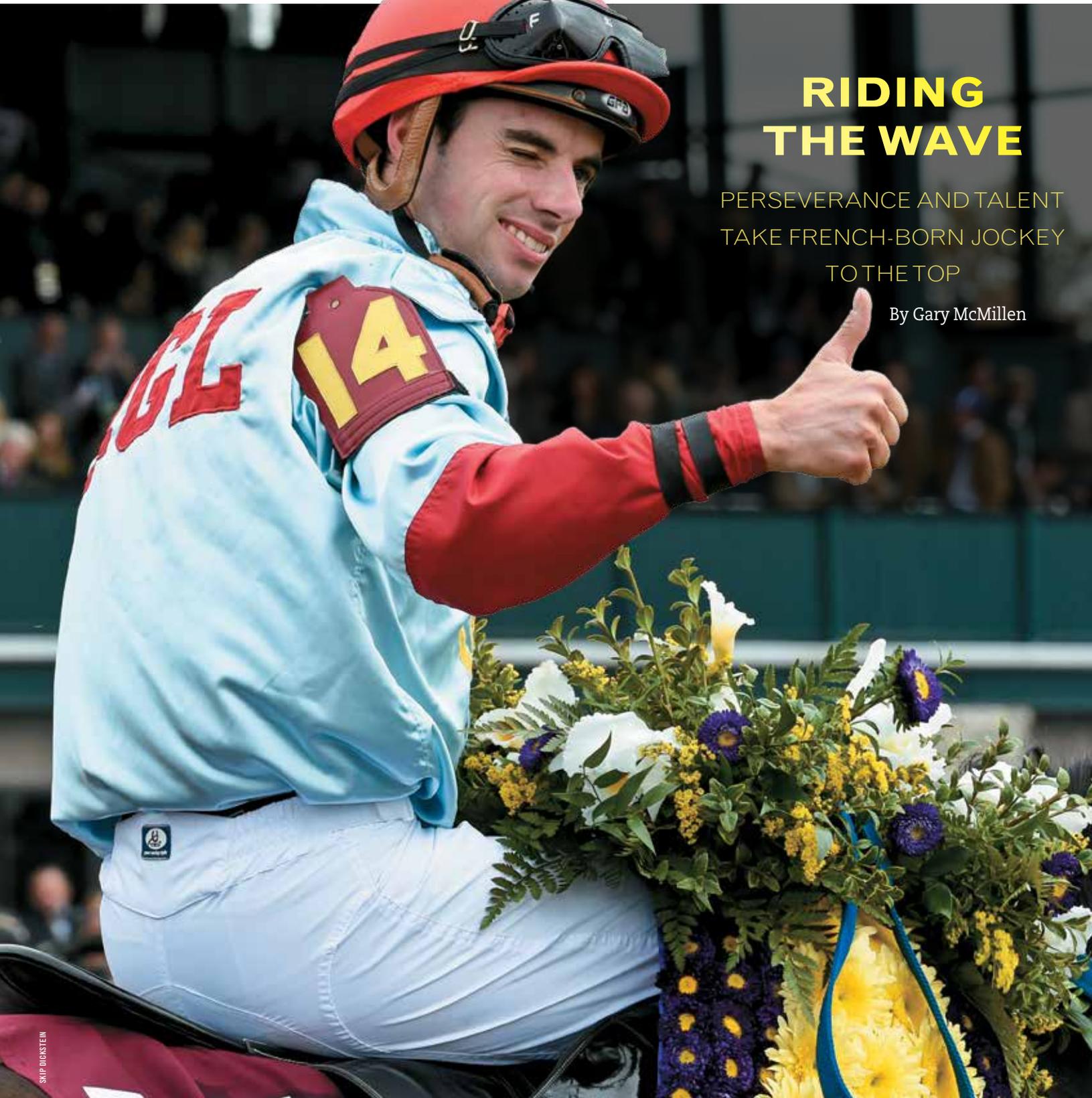


RIDING THE WAVE

PERSEVERANCE AND TALENT
TAKE FRENCH-BORN JOCKEY
TO THE TOP

By Gary McMillen



SKIP DICKSTEIN

Florent Geroux signals his satisfaction after guiding Mongolian Saturday to victory in the 2015 Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint.

Jockey Florent Geroux is a rare mixture of fire and ice.

A scalding desire to win and a cool self-correcting intellect have produced a blueprint for his ascent to the top ranks of American racing.

Geroux, born in the Haute-Normandie region of France, has taken a path to success that would not fit the typical pattern for a jockey's career development. Living a short distance from the holiday seaside resort of Deauville, Geroux grew up in the fast lane and was accustomed to the bright lights of city life. Feeding cows and milking goats were not part of his daily chores. His father was a jockey, and the young Geroux accompanied him to the local racetracks, soaking up the exposure to the sporting life. "I was used to the city way of things," Geroux recalled. "I rode the train or took the tram everywhere. I never had a driver's license until I came to the United States."

The young Geroux fell comfortably into the pattern of racetrack life and followed his father into a professional career as a jockey. Soon Geroux was

winning races and earning money in France, but he had an inner itch. In 2007 Geroux, passport in hand, ventured to the United States on a 90-day travel visa. His intention was to ride here, but, if things did not work out, he would return to the safety net of France. "The trip was more curiosity than ambition," Geroux explained. "I was a big fan of watching the big races like the Kentucky Derby and Breeders' Cup on television. My idea was just to come over here and check things out. It wasn't like I had a plan or a goal to make anything special happen."

Florent in Wonderland

Geroux's first days in the United States were spent in a state of sensory surprise. He arrived in Los Angeles in the dead of winter, and people were wearing short-sleeve shirts. "I liked the climate right away," he remembered. "It was cold in France when I left, but in California I was excited about the warm and sunny weather. I had seen the United States in movies, but it was exciting to see it firsthand."

Open and free access was the next

thing that impressed Geroux. "The supermarkets, the banks, the stores, and restaurants were open all the time," he recalled. "In Europe the businesses are on a tighter budget, and they close the doors to save money and not pay the workers. I could see more flexibility in the lifestyle here and the importance of customer service."

Call it the magnetic force of karma or call it plain and simple serendipity. Geroux migrated to Gulfstream Park in south Florida and was serving as an exercise rider for trainer Patrick Biancone. He was getting the feel for American racing but lacked connections. On the flip side of the equation, racing official Doug Bredar had become disgruntled with the robotic bureaucracy of the profession and was testing the water for becoming a jockey agent. There was one problem: He didn't have a jockey. A chance conversation in a clubhouse elevator changed everything. "I bumped into trainer Patrick Biancone and asked him if he knew of any talent," Bredar recalled. "The next day my phone rang and it was Biancone telling me to come to the barn. He told me there was somebody there that I should meet."

Bredar expected hours of negotiating and complicated contract arrangements to take place at the first meeting with Geroux, but "When do we start?" was the young rider's immediate response. Geroux, who had been frustrated trying to break into the tight network of big yards in Europe, was ready to test the waters of American race riding.

"You read where the United States is the land of promise," said Geroux, who exchanged his travel visa for an approved work visa. "I decided to stay and take advantage of the opportunities."

The window of opportunity was there, but it did not open easily. The first months of the relationship between Geroux and Bredar were a struggle as the two got off to a slow start. Geroux would later go on to win three Breeders' Cup races and 25 other graded stakes, but at Gulfstream Park in the spring



MARSHALL BLEVINS PHOTOS

Geroux, who rode at Fair Grounds in New Orleans earlier this year, describes the United States as a "land of promise." Success, though, did not come overnight.

of 2007, he was an unknown commodity and went one for 57 with his mounts. Career defeat, however, was not an option. No one threw in the white towel. "I saw a really sharp kid with loads of intelligence," Bredar said. "I knew that once the riding ability caught up with what was upstairs in his mind that things would take off."

"To start off at Gulfstream would be difficult for any rider," Geroux recalled of the early obstacles. "That's a hard meet to break in for anyone."

Plus, language skills and understanding the nuances of instructions in the paddock were serious issues. For Geroux there was no Berlitz, Rosetta Stone, night classes, or memory flash cards. "I learned English from the ground up," he



Says Geroux: "I learned English from the ground up."

explained. "Talking to people, watching TV, and listening to the radio was the way I learned. Until you get in the environment when you are speaking every day and hearing the different phrases, you are not able to respond and tell a trainer what happened in a race. You can say what you know, but you can't say what you think. Learning a language is just like riding race horses. It's a step-by-step process."

Alert and attentive to the moment, Geroux does not provide scripted answers to questions. Did he consciously change European riding tactics to adapt to the United States? "No. You don't think along those lines," the 29-year-old said. "It just comes along with time and you don't force it. When riding races and I lose or

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FLORENT GEROUX

make a mistake, I don't get mad. I try to learn from it and make that be the way. What did I do wrong? What could I have done differently? I memorize those moments, and it builds up so I don't repeat mistakes. That is my theory of things."

Florent Geroux's name, which rolls off the tongue as smooth and fluid as his riding style, slowly broke through the barriers. Trainers began to put him on better horses. The results were not sudden, but when he moved his base to Chicago in 2010, things started clicking. He was winning races, cracking the top 10, leading the Hawthorne meet. "A lot of people started to know me," Geroux recalled. "It was easier, and my business increased."

In 2015 the pendulum finally swung in Geroux's direction. A solid summer of winning races around the country was highlighted by two days at Kentucky Downs where he won five races on the card. By the time Keeneland Race Course opened for the fall meet, Geroux's name was part of everyone's conversation. Never underestimate the power of momentum. "We were red-hot," Geroux said. "People want jockeys who are winning races. It wasn't like we had some special plan just for Keeneland."

Paradise found

Geroux got the message that there was a unique personality and character to the Keeneland environment. It wasn't the same old grind. "You have to love the place," Geroux said with emphasis. "You can spend time on the farms that are just a few miles away. The people love horse racing. You can just feel it when all the college kids come out to the track. You can see it in their eyes. People are interested and knowledgeable about the horses. It is hard to describe, but the whole place just has a very cool atmosphere."

Keeneland hosted its first Breeders'



SNP DICKSTEIN

Catch a Glimpse earned Geroux the first of his two Breeders' Cup victories last fall at Keeneland when she captured the Juvenile Fillies Turf.

Cup World Championships soon after the 2015 fall meet, and Geroux made his presence felt by winning the TwinSpires Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint aboard Mongolian Saturday and the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies Turf on Catch a Glimpse. The three-quarter-length win on Catch a Glimpse gave Geroux an extra dose of pleasure. "I had ridden her once at Woodbine on a big stakes day just because they needed a jockey," Geroux remembered. "The trainer [Mark Casse] decided to stick with us and ride her back in the Breeders' Cup. He could have easily gone with someone else. It was really nice and honest of him, and those are things you remember."

Geroux's small family is building its own scrapbook of victory memories in graded races. His wife, Kasey (whom Geroux met in Chicago), and his two daughters, 4-year-old Olivia and 3-year-old Celine, are winner's circle celebrants whenever Dad wins a major stakes.

Picking winners can be a complicated combination of pace analysis, post position research, pedigree knowledge, and factors of class and speed. Or it can be simplified to identifying the hard teamwork of a dedicated jockey agent and a talented rider. Agent Bredar and Geroux complement each other in ways that are producing results. The two talk daily and



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Geroux celebrates Mongolian Saturday's victory with the gelding's colorful connections.

work through some difficult and agonizing decisions on which horses to ride. "Florent gives me excellent feedback," Bredar explained. "He tells me when he gets on a horse in the morning if he is really high on it or it's no big deal if we don't ride it."

"You don't get there overnight," Bredar continued about Geroux's development. "It takes time in this game for the word to get out. Your name might be mentioned as winning a stake here or there or you can be leading rider. But people want to see for themselves what you do on their horses, and then once you get some momentum, you have to seize the moment."

Collect enough dust and you can build a mountain. Geroux's evolution into a rising star has been a case history of perseverance. The statistics of his achievements do not illuminate the hidden formula of passion and reflection. "You can't force success," Geroux said of his current presence in the spotlight. "People have to see for themselves what you can do on their horses. Once they get more aware of you, it leads to better-quality horses. The basic thing is all about learning from your mistakes. After that — if you want to be at the top of the game, you have to work hard for it. Nothing comes easy. Everything takes time. That's the way it is and you accept it." **KIM**