

## CHAPTER 1

# Long Legged Lady

### *May 5, 1984, Churchill Downs Racetrack, Kentucky*

A girl with long red hair, perhaps eight years old, was sitting high atop her father's shoulders, watching the horses load into the gate for the 110th running of the Kentucky Derby. They were standing in the packed grandstand at the stretch near the starting gate; nearly a quarter mile separated them and the finish line. She was holding a sign that read, "Beat the Boys! Althea!" She wanted to see a female horse win the prestigious race, something that a filly had accomplished only twice since 1875.

This filly, Althea, had drawn the dreaded rail post position. She was calm when she entered the gate. Althea was waiting behind the gate because 19 additional horses were still to be loaded into the starting gates, including another female. The other filly, Life's Magic, shared the same trainer as Althea: D. Wayne Lukas. The betting public believed the two fillies had a real chance; they were the favorites at odds of only 2.8-1, coupled in the wagering together.

After the outside gate, number 20, was loaded, the starter's bell rang and the gates sprung open!

The crowd of 126,000 fans roared as Althea broke just a bit slow, but recovered and frantically dug her hooves into the hard brown Kentucky soil, desperate to get in front of the other 19 charging horses. She was sprinting now, taking the lead running while on the inside part of the track near the white rail, past the fans, and into the first of the two long turns.

The red-haired girl's father yelled, "Althea's in front!"

She smiled and shouted, “Go girl! Go girl!”

A horse named Swale, a colt, was the one most expected to battle the favored Althea, (at 3-1 odds), and he settled just off the speeding filly on the lead as they charged into the turn at nearly 40 mph. With the sound of 80 hooves pounding into the track, all horses were seeking the immortality of a Derby win for their trainers and owners.

Althea now opened up on Swale by one-and-a-half lengths into the first left-handed turn.

The 71-year-old trainer of Swale was Woody Stephens of Kentucky, and like many successful older men, he had lost his politically correct filter some years before. Just that morning he had yelled to Lukas, “Dammit Wayne, keep your fillies out of my way.”

“Althea won’t be in your way, Woody. You’ll have to catch her if you can.”

“You’re wasting your time. Keep the girls running against girls.”

Lukas had been the first trainer in history to enter two fillies in the same Derby. He had been mocked and criticized by other trainers, the media, and many racing fans, for doing so, despite how Althea had defeated the colts in three other major stakes races already in her short career. To win a Derby requires a different type of horse—a horse that can race the classic distance of one-and-one-quarter miles and survive the long stretch run against the best horseflesh on the planet.

Just before the start of this race, a male fan yelled, “You’re going to lose again Wayne...next year bring a colt!”

So far, in the 1984 Kentucky Derby, Lukas looked like a genius as Althea led the thundering pack into the backstretch. Hooves pounding, Swale and Althea were throwing back chunks of dirt into the faces of their nearest pursuers, nearly two lengths behind them. Swale began his attack on her outside right flank, challenging her for the lead. She felt his energy and dug in again, accelerating into the final turn, flatly refusing to yield to the larger colt on her outside. The huge raucous crowd had wagered \$25,000,000 and the anticipated battle between the two betting favorites was on!

Now the red-haired girl could see the horses charging directly toward her position near the rail at the start of the stretch. “Come on, Althea! You can do it, girl!”

Swale was running easily under his champion jockey Laffit Pincay Jr. while Chris McCarron on Althea was furiously pumping his arms forward, urging the smaller filly to keep the battle going. She fought gamely to hold the second position as Swale rushed past, but the colts were making their ambitious stretch assaults now.

The other filly, Life’s Magic, was caught in a wall of horses and making no impact.

Pincay, one of the most physically powerful riders in history, urged Swale forward with his piston-like arms, matching in exact rhythm the colt’s giant strides as they surged away from the field.

Althea was spent from her early race speed. McCarron, feeling her fatigue beneath him, did not draw his whip. She lapsed to fifth, then 10th, then 15th, exhausted. At the wire, Althea beat only one horse that had been pulled up earlier in the race. She finished over 30 lengths behind the winning Swale and his celebrating trainer, Woody Stephens.

Lukas watched as Althea finish 19th after Life’s Magic came in eighth. Despite winning 131 races, and smashing the all-time money won record for a single racing season, Lukas had failed for the sixth consecutive time in the world’s most well-known horse race.

### ***July 17, 1986, Keeneland Racetrack, Lexington, Kentucky***

Two years after that race, the San Diego Chargers helmet logo stood tall on the tail of a gleaming private jet as it banked hard over Keeneland racetrack in Lexington, Kentucky. Trainer D. Wayne Lukas loved this part of horse racing—the private jets and traveling with billionaires who were committed to buying the best horseflesh in the world. Tall, lean, and fit, with gray hair and designer sunglasses, he looked every bit the Hollywood movie star. Many movie stars aren’t tough, but Lukas was a former bareback bronco rodeo rider, and raced quarter horses as a jockey when young. He had been a rock-hard cowboy who came up through the ranks, training first on the rodeo circuit, and then the

cheap track quarter horse circuit from the Midwest, to Texas, and then on to Southern California. He had spent years sleeping in the beds of pick-up trucks and shaving with cold water in front of side view mirrors. He had come from nowhere and now was the dominant thoroughbred racehorse trainer in the world.

Billionaire Eugene Klein was a man used to winning by playing aggressively and now competed with the best racehorse owners in the game, in the richest possible stakes races. In recent years, Klein had sold his Seattle SuperSonics NBA team, his San Diego Chargers NFL team, and his other considerable business interests to focus on a new passion—thoroughbred horseracing.

The private plane's flight attendants were former Chargers' cheerleaders who were stunning in their short skirts and white blouses. Both blonde and nearly as tall in heels as Lukas himself, they were used to being chatted up by passengers, but Lukas seemed not to notice them. Lukas was as handsome a guest as they had ever served, other than a few of the Chargers' players, and they tried to catch Lukas's attention. He was oblivious to their flirtations.

Lukas was looking to see what other private planes were already on the ground. As the plane taxied on the tarmac, Lukas pointed out to Klein some of the private jets owned by bidding competitors already on site. The largest of the jets dwarfed all the other planes. It belonged to sheik Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, the defense minister of Dubai. Oil money was a different kind of money; it escalated competition at the horse auctions. The sheiks of Dubai who were also there were led by another horseman with the status of Lukas: the handsome and always impeccably dressed European, Robert Sangster. The sheiks were nicknamed The Doobie Brothers.

Also parked front and center on the tarmac was the jet of Greek shipping magnate Stavros Niachros. Stavros was born in Athens to a wealthy family, and by boldly investing \$2,000,000 into a shipping business, he now was the richest magnate in the world. His personal history included four wives, each considerably younger than the first.

Lukas knew that this was going to be an epic Keeneland sales auction of prime horseflesh. He was out of his seat before the plane stopped, standing at the door, waiting for it to be opened. A man of immense

## THE GREATEST GAMBLING STORY

energy, he was up at three a.m. every day to train and watch his horses. By five a.m., he was on the phone to his people in Florida, Kentucky, or Southern California, and all the other barns where he kept stables of the fastest racehorses in the world. At the auction today, he wanted to inspect the young horses on the block with his team of assistant trainers, bloodstock agents, and veterinarians who'd already been there for days evaluating the talent.

Only 14 years older than Lukas, Klein looked more like Lukas's father. Normally, Klein was considered a well-dressed man but next to Lukas he looked somewhat disheveled. Lukas could do that to anyone except Robert Sangster.

A private black Lincoln limousine carried Lukas and Klein down the long drive past the huge trees and white picket fences to the Keeneland Sales Pavilion, next to the historic Keeneland racetrack. The entrance to Keeneland is the most beautiful track entrance in America. The 1986 Keeneland auction was to open at 10:00 a.m., and the sales ring crowd was charged with excitement in a quiet, subdued way. The bidders were flush with hundreds of millions to bid. It was hard for these competitive rich men not to let themselves get carried away when bidding against other powerful rich men. The bidders were acutely aware that in just over a year some of these men would be standing in winners' circles accepting the trophies representing the richest, most prestigious stakes races in Kentucky, New York, California, and Florida. These billionaires were men at the top of their professions, and they were used to winning. They could afford to win and never planned on coming home empty handed. However, things can get complicated when bidding against the other richest men in the world. Often enough, a horse slips through an auction under the radar like the Triple Crown champion Seattle Slew—a racehorse that was sold for \$17,500 as a yearling. No horse was going to be cheap today.

At 11:00 a.m. Lukas, wearing a freshly pressed white linen suit, rich blue tie, and white Stetson hat, opened the bidding on hip number 308 at \$1,000,000, the highest opening bid ever recorded.

Robert Sangster smiled at Lukas and went up by an incredible incremental bid jump of \$500,000. The bidding for one horse continued faster than Lukas had ever seen, with \$500,000 being up bid every ten seconds: \$3,000,000, now \$5,000,000, now \$8,000,000; and then the displayed bidding board stopped at \$9,999,999 because it was out of digits and didn't go any higher.

The bids kept coming.

Klein had expected some competition, but not like this! His eyes were blinking rapidly, and he was afraid to move for fear he would be mistaken as bidding. "Who the hell are these guys?" he whispered to Lukas while remaining ramrod straight in his chair. "These guys have gold balls!"

The bidding was slowing now and only going up \$50,000 per bid as Sangster competed against another secretive bidder that Klein could not even see. Finally, at \$10,200,000 the gavel fell to Robert Sangster and his European buyers as the crowd cheered for the first time that morning.

Lukas as always looked polished, calm, and cool, but he knew he and Klein had to regroup, and fast. Lukas had a total budget of \$8,000,000 from Klein and his other clients for the auction and quickly realized they could not go toe-to-toe with this new kind of insane oil money. Apparently, \$8,000,000 was chump change for this group at the auction. Lukas had recognized this possibility long before the sale and told Klein quietly under his breath, "Go to Plan B."

Lukas knew the Europeans and the sheiks wanted proven classic winning bloodlines with colts they could breed as stallions for decades to come. But Klein and Lukas only cared about winning stakes races and purse money now; they didn't care if they did it with colts or fillies... or goats. If the horse looked like it could run, they were going to bid, especially if the horse was female and for sale under \$300,000.

Lukas and Klein had not been born to money like the sheiks and other heirs to fortunes who were playing here with money from their parents' estates, and they were steadfastly committed to beating both the Arabs and the swells at their own rich man's game. The blue-blooded Kentucky owners and wealthy Arabs did not like the brash, tall, Jewish billionaire from Beverly Hills who was trying to invade their private

## THE GREATEST GAMBLING STORY

club accompanied by the fast talking, slick suited Lukas. Let the auction competition continue!

Lukas had learned something valuable in his early years as a quarter horse trainer, sleeping in his pick-up truck and training horses on the cheap, rock bottom level racing circuits in Texas, Arizona, and Oklahoma. At these low-class, bottom purse level tracks, the horses ran in a straight line with their ears pinned back and flat out for 350 yards. In the quarter horse stakes races, the fillies regularly competed against and beat the colts head-to-head. Lukas believed strongly he could train thoroughbred fillies to run against the males and beat them in prestigious races, despite his being laughed at by the macho good-old-boys trainers' network from Los Angeles to New York. Despite failure with his two fillies in the 1984 Kentucky Derby, he believed a female could and would win that race again. Lukas had a proven eye for horseflesh, regardless if he was buying a \$600 quarter horse, or a half a million dollar thoroughbred.

Suddenly there was commotion as a wild, tall, leggy, gray filly was led into the ring. She was not happy while being led out for display and wheeled around the auction stage trying to free herself from both her handler and the leather lead attached to her halter. Two additional horse handlers came forward trying to constrain her, and one made the mistake of grabbing hold of her left ear. She reared and kicked, striking a glancing blow to the third handler that sent him careening to the floor. He had seen enough of this damn horse, as earlier that morning he had witnessed her bite two older male stallions while being led to her holding pen.

The 1-year-old filly was not slim and trim like the other yearling females that had daintily pranced in all day like they were stepping in snow. This gray filly was built more like a tall version of Mike Tyson, with dappled hindquarters that showed muscles like an older stallion. Lukas noticed she was pulling her handler around wherever she decided to go, not where he was trying to lead her.

She grunted loudly and violently threw her head to the side, pulling her handler completely off his feet as he was trying to hold on to the bridle of this huge and spirited animal. The bidding on her opened at \$100,000 and Klein told Lukas to go to \$250,000. When the bid

reached \$300,000, Klein gave Lukas the signal to keep going, \$350,000, \$400,000, then \$500,000 and finally to \$575,000. Lukas had told Klein she was Lukas's top-rated filly in the entire sale and both men were ecstatically high-fiving each other when the gavel fell. The purchase of Winning Colors ended their auction and Klein sprinted out of the pavilion to call his wife Joyce, excited to tell her about the last filly they had just bought for \$575,000 by outbidding the oil money rich Arabs.

Joyce asked, "How much did you pay for an unraced 1-year-old filly?"

"Five hundred seventy-five thousand," Klein said, and then paused. "Yes, honey, we went way over budget...but hell, buying horses was your idea. I want you to be happy!"

Young 2-year-old thoroughbred fillies don't have testosterone running through their veins making them big and often stupid like their brothers. Just walking down the shed row, colts will prove they are born different than their sisters. They dart their heads out of their stalls to play by biting faces, hands, or any other extremity within reach. Their sisters usually nuzzle up to their grooms and handlers, playfully prodding to get more carrots or just to get rubs and affection.

Winning Colors was different. She would physically intimidate her grooms and especially the other horses around her, regardless of their sex or age. She was high strung and when someone tried to put a halter on her, she would rear back and threaten to kill them. Eventually her handlers learned to put on the halter disassembled, and then put it back together after it was slipped over her head.

As she aged, Winning Colors filled in with even more muscle. She was so tall, seasoned horsemen in the barn couldn't believe she wasn't a grown, older, male racehorse. Now a 2-year-old, Winning Colors looked like a 4-year-old mature, full-grown male.

### ***Barn of D. Wayne Lukas at Santa Anita Racetrack, May 1986***

In May 1986, Lukas called one of his young grooms, Luis Palos, into his private office. The 25-year-old groom had been with Lukas for

## THE GREATEST GAMBLING STORY

two years now and was a smart, hard-working, polite, and quiet young man from Mexico City. Luis came to work on time in clean blue jeans and polished cowboy boots. His jet-black hair was neatly trimmed and combed.

Luis was worried. He had never been called into señor Lukas's private office, and feared he was to be let go. He said, "Hola, señor."

Lukas shook his hand and looked him straight in the eye for three seconds. "Luis...I like you. I've been watching you. You come in early every day. You look sharp and work hard."

"Gracias, señor."

"I have a filly for you. She's special. She needs someone like you. I want you to personally take care of her...Winning Colors."

Luis smiled. He wasn't being fired. He'd been chosen to work with the big filly. "Si, I know her. Ella es la gran potra [filly]. Posiblemente...a little...dangerous."

Lukas laughed, "Yes, that's the one. She's your responsibility now. You take good care of her, Luis...and you can make more money. I need you to travel with her, too. I know you have a wife and three children. Can you go on airplanes with her? You will be going to New York with her soon."

"Si, señor. My wife can watch mis niños...no problema."

With that, Luis was personally assigned one of the most promising young horses in a stable of over 200 horses. Since Santa Anita racetrack in Southern California was their home base, Luis knew Lukas would check in on him multiple times per day. But he also knew he could advance his career, and one day, perhaps become an assistant trainer and stop having to perform the daily hard manual labor required of a groom. Luis was being paid \$6.25 per hour, \$2 over minimum wage, to care for a 2-year-old horse now worth over \$1,000,000.

Luis treated her like she belonged to him, even making his wife, Mariana, pack special treats in his lunch pail to give to the filly every day. He was known to have said, "If I don't bring her food every day she will kill me! Really.... She will kill me!"

On his first day with Winning Colors, Luis had made the mistake of grabbing her by the ear. She violently threw her head into him, giving him a black eye and bloody lip. Luis learned not to let anyone, ever, touch her ears. He feared for anyone who got too close to her, as they could get hurt, and, injure her in the process. Winning Colors only let Luis touch her anywhere near her head, and the stablehands learned to always have Luis present to calm her down when the veterinarians or blacksmiths came to work on her racing plates (shoes) and hooves.

He was tender with her, and she learned to trust him. She relaxed when he spoke to her. He nicknamed her Mamacita.

Luis liked working for Lukas because he loved the horses—but not the hours. At most barns, the day would start early at 4:30 or 5:00 a.m., but for the Lukas barn, it started at 3:30 a.m.

The other barns would start with the assistant trainers, grooms, and hot walkers trying to get warm around the coffee pot, but the Lukas barn allowed no coffee pot distraction. Lukas had a worker every day that just groomed the ground while following every man, woman, and horse around to rake the footprints into a special, Lukas-selected fan pattern in the dirt. The trainer Willard Proctor had been quoted as saying of Lukas, “I don’t know if he can train a horse...but he sure can landscape.”

The Lukas barn looked like a Four Seasons Hotel compared to the other barns, always with fresh flowers planted everywhere and D. Wayne Lukas logos all over the stable blankets, trucks, water buckets, flowerpots, horse halters, saddles, t-shirts, hats, and jackets around the barn. His assistant trainers teased Lukas, “Where’s the gift shop?” Lukas would occasionally send stablehands home if they reported to work in dirty clothes. But the men and woman working there knew that like a Special Forces unit of the US Marines, they were the best in the business, and everyone in horseracing knew the Lukas barn was the best in the nation.

The track’s horses and trainers are typically located behind the tracks and are referred to as backstretch workers. At every racetrack in the nation, these workers are very similar. The tracks have acres and acres filled with hard-working men and women, mostly from Latin American countries like Mexico and Guatemala. The trainers and the owners are the bosses, the horses and the jockeys are the stars, but the labor and

skill required to care for the horse population in the backstretch stables falls on the backs of these people.

Workdays often exceed 12 hours, whether under the blistering sun of Texas, or the freezing cold mornings of New York, or New Jersey. The cleaning of barns, walking mile after mile with the prized horses to cool them down after workouts, feeding, bathing, and caring for the health of each equine athlete requires a staff that has the right expertise. The racehorses are big, powerful, and often unpredictable; only experienced horse people can co-exist with the animals. Nearly every backstretch worker can tell stories of being bitten or kicked. The backstretch workers travel the circuit from racetrack to racetrack throughout the year, leading a nomadic life in often close to poverty conditions that bring their communities into very close friendships.

A top horse can be worth \$5,000,000 or more, but even an above-average thoroughbred at a top track can earn \$40,000 or more in prize money per year. The experienced and dependable grooms and workers can be just as important to the success of a fragile racehorse as the trainer, and the staff becomes emotionally attached to the fast, beautiful animals in their care twenty-four hours per day.

Luis traveled everywhere with Winning Colors. The short trips were easier; cross-country trips were more difficult. After their first flight from Santa Anita to the historic Saratoga racetrack in New York, Luis often stayed with Mamacita in the barn at night, even though he was off the clock. Although he was tending a beloved animal, Luis spent time thinking of his wife and children, 3,000 miles away and in their own beds.

The racing calendar has seasons, as the track circuit venues change about every three months. The biggest race meets of the entire year are held at the three spa tracks that are summer retreats for the wealthy: Del Mar racetrack in San Diego, California, Keeneland Racetrack in Lexington, Kentucky, and the famous Saratoga Racetrack, a three-hour drive north of New York City. The most expensive, best-bred horses in the country were all pointed to the top stakes races each summer at these exclusive venues. Winning Colors was ready to make her debut on the Saratoga stage, at the grandest of racetracks, against the best and most expensive young fillies in training.

### *August 13, 1987, Saratoga Racetrack, New York*

Before he left California, Luis promised his wife he would stop betting on the horses. She'd noticed his meager take-home pay was often far less than it should be. He hoped Mariana wouldn't look in the box in the closet where they kept their savings because he'd bet all they had on her on the day Mamacita was making her debut. He told all his fellow workers, "She is the one," as he'd personally wagered \$900.

The race wouldn't be easy, as a full field of 11 top young fillies were competing against the tall gray filly. Despite not being the morning line favorite when printed in the race day program, the word was out on her ability, as she had opened in the Saratoga third race betting at 6-1 but was now bet down to the solid fan favorite at just under 2-1. Luis was smiling like a proud father as he led her under halter around the enormous infield paddock in the front of the Saratoga track. Winning Colors' local jockey, Randy P. Romero, was shocked to see the size of the massive filly when he met her in the saddling area.

Luis told the jockey, "Just hold on and don't fall off...she will do the rest, amigo, I promise...and if you fall off, you owe me \$900."

The other eight well-bred fillies were led to the starting gate for the one-turn, seven-furlong race (each furlong is one-eighth of a mile) adorned in their bright colored racing silks from the stables of other wealthy owners and their top ranked national trainers. Many of the other fillies were sweating in the August New York heat and humidity, but Winning Colors appeared cool and dry.

On the way to the post, Winning Colors lunged at two other competitors, a game she liked to play. The huge metal starting gate is a frightening beast to young racehorses, but Winning Colors, in her yellow and blue colors, calmly entered stall number three and stood rock still, as the other 10 fillies loaded. When the starting gate bell rang, the gates snapped opened, and Winning Colors nearly pulled Romero's legs out of the saddle irons with her acceleration. In 10 strides, she was a half-length in front of the field while battling two other well-bred and well-bet fillies sprinting down the backstretch.

Thoroughbred horseraces are carefully timed into quarter-mile segments. As each quarter of a mile is completed, the elapsed time is

posted on the television monitors and on the tote board, located in the center of the track, which also displays the horses' current betting odds. Each quarter-mile segment is usually run in around 24 seconds, but the first quarter-mile is usually run faster than the later quarter-mile segments of the dirt races, as the horses become tired in the later stages of the race.

Races are usually run at distances from three-quarters-of-a-mile (one-turn sprints), up to one-and-one-quarter miles (two-turn routes) for races like the Kentucky Derby. Top racehorses can run nearly 40 mph, but don't go full speed for an entire race as they must reserve their energy for the later parts of the race and hold off the late charging "closers" at the finish. The finish line is often called "the wire," as a wire runs overhead to assist the photo finish camera. Younger (2- and 3-year-old) racehorses are not nearly as fast as mature racehorses, aged four to seven.

Female horses of all ages, like humans, usually run several seconds slower than their male counterparts over the course of a race. Winning Colors was proving to be the exception. As a 2-year-old filly, she was now cruising at a blistering 22-and-one-fifth second first quarter-mile pace—a fast pace for a seasoned older horse, and incredibly fast for a 2-year-old female.

During the race, Romero was trying to reserve her speed and save energy for the long home stretch, known as the Graveyard of Champions. The Saratoga racetrack stretch leading to the finish line is long and tiring to horses, and many a well bet, well regarded, previous champion horse had tired and lost their good lead in the stretch run for home. Winning Colors was flying out on the lead, bounding away from the other fillies with each of her huge strides. She was going full out and entered the left-hand stretch turn one-and-one-half lengths in front, as the other fillies made their charging moves, but she was now hitting her full speed. She'd decisively opened by four lengths over her closest pursuer, exited the turn, and took dead aim for the wire. She darted a bit to her left in the stretch run, nearly scraping the white paint off the inner rail with her gray body. The pursuing jockeys were whipping and yelling encouragement to their fillies, trying to catch the flying Winning Colors, but they were doing so in vain.

She wasn't just beating the field; she was embarrassing them. At the finish line 1,000 feet away, Luis was red-faced, jumping up and down, shouting at the top of his lungs, "Go Mamacita! Go Mamacita!"

Jockey Romero took hold of her near the wire, tucked his unused whip away, having never asked her to fully extend herself. Winning Colors coasted home in front of the second-place horse by nearly three lengths at the wire, with the rest of the field strewn back nearly 20 lengths behind. Luis was running around the track holding his tickets high to the sky and yelling, "Si!...Si!...Si!...Si! Esa es mi chica!"

Soon there would be \$2,700 in the box in the closet of Luis and Mariana Palos.

### *August 17, 1987, Rancho Santa Fe, California*

Later in the week after the race, D. Wayne Lukas and Eugene Klein met in San Diego to discuss race plans for Winning Colors as they now knew they had something very special in the tall and feisty filly. They flew her back by private jet and bedded her down back at her home Santa Anita racetrack, 17 miles east of Los Angeles.

Lukas was not known for patience with horses and was often criticized for running his young horses too often. However, he was being especially patient with his new promising starlet. He chose to wait from August to the end of December to run her again at Santa Anita.

Top horses can occasionally capture the imagination of the American public the way Seabiscuit, Seattle Slew, or Secretariat did, but the problem is that a horse's racing career is short. Most top ranked horses today race two to four times at age two, five to eight races at age three, and another five to eight races at age four. Typically, top stakes horses are retired after age four when their breeding value is high, compared to the limited purse income they can win while racing. By the time the horse is a recognized star at age three after winning a Derby or other top high-profile stakes race, the horse probably has less than another 18 months to race before a life of retirement. The horse's fame is so short-lived that a true fan base cannot be easily developed. A comparative top human athlete such as an NFL quarterback, or Major League Baseball pitcher or hitter, will typically have a 10- to 15-year career playing their sport, but the careers

of the four-legged stars are short lived. The animals themselves typically live into their 20s but race only a few years of their lives.

At the age of 25, jockey Gary Stevens was just three years removed from a coma that left him unconscious for 16 hours after slamming into the Santa Anita rail. It was a frightening training accident that was caught on video in all its gruesome detail. For many months, his speech pattern was impacted. Upon regaining consciousness, he learned that his right knee was nearly destroyed, and his promising career likely was over. Stevens was quoted as saying he did not fear being on a horse's back and resumed riding in six months. In many ways, the biggest stars in horseracing are the jockeys. Stevens, Idaho born, with boyish good looks and a smile to charm the ladies, was becoming a Southern California favorite among the race fans.

Jockeys who avoid career-ending injuries can race for many decades. This career longevity is made far more difficult because the jockeys, including their saddle, clothing, and whip, must weigh less than 114 pounds on race day. As the jockeys mature, like most humans, they usually thicken and gain weight. Stories of jockeys eating, then purging, are typical for the vocation.

Bill Shoemaker was still racing strong at 57 years of age, and still an elite rider 45 years into his career. Most of the US top jockeys come from the same Latin American countries as the backstretch workers and are a tough-as-leather, fearless group of mostly men. Stevens was unique among top riders as he was American born. As American as apple pie, Stevens was handsome and easy for US fans to relate to. He began his riding career at age 12 by convincing his dad to put him on quarter-mile sprint racehorses. His older brother Scott was a top jockey and had refused to ride a crazy horse named Little Star because of her history of flipping over and trying to pin the jockeys under her. When Scott refused to ride the crazed animal, Gary stepped up to ride Little Star, and went on to be a leading rider in Seattle. Scott became like a coach for Gary and taught him the nuances of race riding.

Being a racehorse is dangerous but being the jockey on the horse's back is far more perilous. Racehorses run at high speeds for short bursts,

yet horses' ankles are smaller than a human's ankles, and must support the 1,000-pound charging animal. A top, seasoned jockey may race as many as six or eight races per day, five days per week, totaling nearly 1,500 races per year. A rider falls during a thoroughbred race about every 500 rides, so the statistics indicate that an active top jockey will hit the ground about three times per year.

Stevens had become a leading rider for Lukas by overcoming his traumatic injuries, and because of his talent and hard work. He rode hurt in 1986 and early 1987, still not fully recovered from the Santa Anita accident, but now was finally riding fully fit and healthy. Not yet a star, Stevens was a rising young talent, and was a leading rider at the Southern California race meetings held at Hollywood Park, Del Mar, and Santa Anita. Lukas liked to hire him, and he was a favorite of Klein for his personal stable.

One morning he told his brother Scott, "You can't imagine what it is like to ride for Mr. Klein. He sends limousines for me to come to his ranch. And, my God, you should see his private jet! He never lets me fly commercial when I ride his horses at other tracks. Brother, we are from Idaho and now it's the big time!"

Scott as always was happy for his little brother's success. He knew how hard it had been for Gary to achieve this level of racing achievement. He had watched Gary at age seven be diagnosed with Legg-Calve-Perthes syndrome, a degenerative disease which destroys the hip socket joint, requiring him to wear a metal brace for 19 months. Gary's first attempt to break into the ultra-competitive Southern California jockey colony had been a disaster; he'd won only four races in 90 attempts. Lukas and Klein had changed his life, yet he remained humble and aware a jockey's life is a fragile existence. Stevens had only one weakness at the track and that was his penchant for fighting with other jockeys after races. If he could control his temper, and not be suspended, his future was bright. He just needed one special horse to prove his talent.

### ***December 27, 1987, Santa Anita Racetrack, California***

Modern thoroughbreds are considered much more fragile now than their predecessors were 50 years ago. For instance, in 1935, the famous

Seabiscuit raced 35 times just as a 2-year-old. By comparison, this next race would be Winning Colors' second and final start as a 2-year-old. Trainers in the 1920s and 1930s believed running 2-year-olds hard and often made them stronger and better able to handle the rigorous demands of racing when they became mature racehorses. Horses of that era were no doubt sounder and sturdier than the ones that run today. If a trainer were to do that in modern racing, they would be chastised and called cruel.

A horse with a five-month layoff between races is usually considered one of the worst wagers at the track, but Winning Colors' handlers who were with her every day knew she was unusual—so big, fast, and physical for a young horse. She could cruise easily at such a high speed that the daily exercise riders would find their hands worn to the point of bloody and raw by trying to control her in the morning workouts. Now four-and-a-half months since her sparkling race debut she was ready for her second start.

Lukas was becoming known as a "ladies' man" due to his incredible recent stakes race winning successes with the female horses in his care. Now to close out her 2-year-old season this cool and crisp late December day in California, Winning Colors was racing against five other promising fillies, including several that had shown to be extremely fast in their morning workouts. Winning Colors had drawn the most undesirable post position possible in the number one post, located down next to the inner fence, and this fact worried Lukas. The rail post position can especially bother precocious, young, unseasoned horses that often shy away from being squeezed down inside by horses charging alongside them on their right flank. If the rail horse breaks even a half-step slow, the other horses can come over and squeeze it against the fence, forcing the horse to run around outside the field to have any chance of prevailing.

Lukas told Stevens before the race, "She is like a storm...she can seem peaceful and relaxed...but anything can set her off and she becomes a maniac. Keep her away from noise and commotion or you will be sitting on a tornado. She is big and tough but also very fragile."

Winning Colors was staying focused as she calmly entered the gate, just as in New York, like a more seasoned veteran racehorse with years

of experience. The other horses were jostling and banging against their gates as their Hispanic jockeys yelled to the starter to wait: “Espere! Espere!” as they worked to get their wild fillies settled and straight in the gate for the break.

The track announcer’s voice came over the public address system, “The flag is up!” The horses were fully loaded and ready for the start when the starting bell clanged and the gates popped open.

Winning Colors exploded out of the gate with powerful long strides into the short three-quarter mile, one-turn race. The other fillies could not keep up with the big gray rockets early speed and she was in front by two-and-a-half lengths in under five seconds, increasing her margin every second. Gary Stevens was along for the ride she gave, sitting still on her back, never pushing her for more run. She was setting a fast pace—a pace only before seen in the top older, seasoned male sprinters in the nation. There was a problem with her 21-and-four-fifths-of-a-second as well as her 44-and-four-fifths-of-a-second opening fractions for the first quarter and half-mile. She was running too fast, too soon. A racehorse cannot sustain a flat-out pace like that for an entire race without tiring down the stretch. She was not conserving her energy—something that’s often called “rating.” She was running in a crazy exhibition of speed.

Stevens was trying his best to ration her energy. He explained later, “I didn’t know she was going so insanely fast. She was doing it easily, not running off with me.”

Winning Colors was able to run at a pace not seen by young fillies, and she was doing it effortlessly. She lengthened her body and led the field of six horses down the long Santa Anita backstretch with her long strides and gray mane flying in the wind while the other jockeys were desperate in urging their mounts to make a charge and cut into her lead. Winning Colors must have sensed she had no competition from the other young fillies.

As Stevens was trying to get her to slow her pace down and reserve energy for the stretch challenges, she did relax without pouring on her full energy and slowed to a still quick, but more sensible pace. She cruised into the sweeping left-hand turn leading by three-and-a-half lengths.

When they straightened for home, Stevens let the reins out a notch, chirped to her, and she responded by digging into the ground with her

front hooves and pulling forward in long strides. The other fillies were way behind. The finish line approached, and she drifted to her left, nearly touching the inner rail. Stevens looked back and could see no closing threat. As she cruised to the wire, Stevens grabbed the reins 100 yards out to slow her down and save more energy.

Winning Colors won by four lengths. Easy.

Her groom Luis was again standing at the rail, hands held high with a thick stack of winning mutual tickets yelling, “Si!...Si!...Si!...Si! Esa es mi chical!”

Trainers, grooms, and backstretch workers will tell you horses know when they win a race. They carry themselves differently after a win, or a loss. Winning Colors was fully in her element as she cantered down the backstretch while being cooled out. She refused to be pulled up for her jockey. She was in such a state of joy after being allowed to release her stored energy that she did not want to stop running. Stevens later told Lukas, “She could’ve run another race that day. She was not even breathing hard after the race and could not blow out a candle if placed under her nose.”

The Kleins’s preferred turf club table was located above the finish line, and they erupted in screams of joy as their expensive filly charged to victory. All six of them marched triumphantly down the three flights of stairs to the winner’s circle, to get their pictures taken with the happy, shining, tall gray filly.

After dismounting, Stevens told his fellow jockey Jacinto Vasquez, “That horse has attitude. I’m going to win the Kentucky Derby on that filly.”

Vasquez raised an eyebrow. Stevens had never spoken like that about any horse to him. He told Stevens, “You don’t know what it takes to win a Derby.”

Stevens loved her fiery, precocious attitude, and her amazing athleticism, even if she was high-strung and difficult to control. The two were a good match together, fearless, with a will to win and take chances. They didn’t run for second money, but gunned to the front, defying any equine or human athlete to keep pace with them.

Eugene and Joyce Klein and a boisterous group of champagne-drinking friends celebrated Winning Colors' win at an elegant candlelit French dinner. Joyce smiled, noticing her husband was as happy as she had seen him in years.

He was telling one of his favorite stories: "After the games, Howard Cosell bugged me all the damn time to ride in my jet. That's the last thing I needed is Cosell in my plane for five damn hours. Joyce was always scolding me for the way I talked to the media, telling me, 'Honey, you need to think more before you talk to the press.' But one week later he asks me again...and I tell Howard that it's only a small plane and we've got a limited supply of oxygen to get us all the way back to California. It worked...he didn't ask again!"

His companions asked him why he sold the football team.

Klein's eyes met his wife's, and they both looked away. Then Klein explained: "Did I tell you about my Chargers' players after the '82 Miami playoff game? I gave the players my goddamn beautiful airplane to fly home from the game. How did they repay my generosity? One of them brought a kilo of cocaine back on my plane to sell. My plane! After that, the FBI was investigating me for drug trafficking. They could have confiscated and kept my jet! The players didn't even try to hide the drugs. No, the stupid asses started to cut it up and began putting the coke up their noses on the plane, in front of the stewardesses! I said, 'To hell with football players! Let's go buy some horses. Horses don't deal coke!'"

Joyce Klein knew her 65-year-old husband was not the retiring type, and after selling the San Diego Chargers, she encouraged him to relax at the racetrack. In typical Eugene Klein fashion, he immediately told her to find him the best horse trainer in the world. D. Wayne Lukas had come to Klein's house the same week Joyce called, and maneuvered his new Rolls Royce up the long impressive estate driveway to the Klein's Rancho Santa Fe home, located just north of San Diego. Lukas was wearing a \$3,000 David Rickey navy blue pinstripe suit and as always looked like he should be playing James Bond in the movies, not training horses in dusty stables. Lukas had over 200 custom sports jackets and suits in his

## THE GREATEST GAMBLING STORY

closet and dressed better working in the barn than other trainers did in the turf club dining room.

Upon meeting Lukas, Klein had been at first put off by the slick clothes and fancy car, but quickly found him fascinating because of his fast-talking but brutally honest persona, with enough energy to run the Sun.

Klein said to him, "I didn't know horse trainers drove such fancy rigs."

Lukas replied, "I said I wasn't going to cheat you. I didn't say I was going to work for nothing."

"Why should I give you my horses to train?"

Lukas told him a story. "During a race another trainer had a horse get squeezed on the inside rail. The horse got bumped so bad he flipped over the inside rail, landing in a deep puddle of water. The horse drowned. When the horse owner called the trainer to ask how his horse ran that day, he had to say, 'Not so good, he drowned.'" Lukas laughed and then said, "Mr. Klein I may not be the best trainer in the world...but not one of my horses has ever drowned. I already have more horses in training than any other trainer in the country, and I don't need more owners. I need the right owners. I mean serious owners that are not afraid to spend real money and try to win the country's biggest races, like the Derby, and the Breeders' Cup. I need big boys to think and play big, and I know we can do it, because I'm the leading trainer in the country already. I am a winner, and I will make you money by racing champions, and breeding champions."

After surviving two coronary bypass operations in his sixties, and after spending millions of dollars on a pro football team with players he couldn't understand or relate to, Klein was now playing in the thoroughbred fast lane, with the gutsiest trainer in the world. As a former bomber navigator in World War II, he had faced live action from enemy anti-aircraft guns, and fighter pilots. Klein was a gambler at heart. He had gambled his money to buy a pro football team, and he was now investing in the fastest thoroughbreds that could be bought.

He also knew he was running out of time.

That same Sunday, December 27, 1987, during the night, Luis and two of his other backside racetrack buddies from the Lukas barn, Rafael

and Ruben, took their two days off and headed their beat up, old, red pick-up truck onto a long road into the desert for their first trip to Las Vegas. They believed in Luis's undefeated Mamacita after her two stunning victories and were committed to bet on her to win the 1988 Kentucky Derby at the Caesars Palace future book venue.

The race was still five months away, held as always on the first Saturday in May, and Louisville, Kentucky, was 2,000 miles away from Mamacita's current California stall. But, the odds in future book wagering are affected by how early a wager is made. For instance, you can bet on the possible outcome of a future US Presidential election four years, three years, or even one month before it happens. But if you bet early, when there is more uncertainty as to the eventual result, the odds offered are fixed dramatically higher than they are just before the event. For Luis and friends, Winning Colors still was an unlikely long shot to even run in the Derby against the best males in the country, and if she didn't run in, and win the Derby, their future bet money would not be refunded. Luis didn't care, and he told his buddies, "Amigos, I will take care of her like she belongs to me. Do not worry."

They thought he was perhaps just a little loco, but he was so passionate in his belief in her ability, they couldn't say no. Luis watched her every day train alongside other top racehorses, and she always passed them when she pleased, even against the older males.

The friends stayed outside of the Las Vegas Strip at an inexpensive, \$39-per-night motel room, sharing one room with two queen beds. Their average day's pay at the barn was less than \$50 each, but Klein had handed Luis a \$500 tip after her race that day and told him to share it with the other stablehands who'd worked with Winning Colors. That \$500 and all the other money they could scrape together was stuck in Luis's boot. That night they ate at an inexpensive Mexican restaurant and took two six-packs of beer to the small pool outside their room, where they sat up until two a.m. listening to Latin music and getting buzzed. They could see the glimmering lights of the Strip a mile away in the cold, windy, desert winter night but could not afford to get involved with the gambling, girls, and other attractions.

"We are a long way from home, my friends," Luis said to his work buddies.

## THE GREATEST GAMBLING STORY

Rafael asked, "Where is home? Are you glad you left Mexico, amigo?"

Luis replied, "Home is here...and there too. Of course, I am glad... and thankful. Tonight my children are safe...and fed...and warm, with their mother."

Rafael said, "You have to get up every day at three a.m. and work. Lukas is a ball buster. He sent me home because I was dressed too dirty. Then I clean up after his horses."

"Remember when we didn't have work? I'm happy to work. Lukas is a pain in the ass sometimes...but he works hard, too. Like he never sleeps. Let's get my filly home in the Derby, amigos...then I will buy a house for my niños and Mariana...with a pool!"

"A groom with a pool...you think you are a rich man?"

"Maybe...maybe."

The next day they slept until 7:30 a.m., which seemed like a late morning to them after working at the Lukas barn. They pulled themselves together, cleaned up, and put on their best jeans, brass belt buckles, plaid shirts, boots, and large cowboy hats. Then they feasted on platters of the huevos rancheros breakfast special and drank two pitchers of black coffee at a Denny's restaurant near the Las Vegas Strip.

"Let's go make some dinero," Luis said to his track buddies as they packed up their pick-up truck and headed straight to valet parking at the lobby of the Caesars Palace casino. The sign above advertised "Tom Jones Live" and they asked each other, "Quien es Tom Jones?"

The three men were focused on their gambling mission, avoiding the slot machines, craps, and blackjack tables on their way straight to the sprawling Sports and Race Book at the back of the casino's floor. The walls of the betting mecca were covered with banks of television monitors the size of king beds, but there was not much activity on a Monday morning before noon. Luis asked the bartender how much for a beer. When he heard it was \$2.75, he gave up being thirsty for one. They found the printed sheets for the 1988 Kentucky Derby in a far corner of the race book and located her name and odds toward the end of the sheet: "Winning Colors: 100-1."

Rafael said, "These gringos are estúpido. Let's take their money!"

The three found the one open betting window. After working to communicate in English with the bookmaker, Luis handed over the Derby

printed odds sheet while pointing to their circled choice. Then he reached down into his cowboy boot for their shared bankroll. “Two-thousand dolares, por favor.”

The ticket writer at the window had to call for a supervisor because although \$2,000 wasn't a huge bet for one of the largest casinos in Nevada, the casino's exposure was still \$200,000 if Winning Colors were to win the Derby; significant to even the Caesars Palace Race and Sports Book. The bookmaker printed the ticket and handed it to the men saying, “Good luck.”

They retrieved their old but clean pick-up truck from the valet parking attendant, tipped the kid one dollar, and headed back to Santa Anita racetrack, five hours away, going right to the barn that evening to see their girl, Luis's Mamacita, Winning Colors.

Winning Colors' growing racing fan base didn't have long to wait to get excited, as Lukas was now ready to ramp up his big plans for her 1988 campaign. All racehorses have the same birthday, turning one year older, every January first. If a horse is born in December, it still turns a year old on January first. Winning Colors, born March 14, 1985, was now a 3-year old and ready to be tested in her first stakes race at Santa Anita. This would be her first longer race, around two turns. Many professional gamblers were still somewhat skeptical that any horse with that much blazing early speed could ration (rate) her energy over a longer distance with two turns, and still hold off the closers in the stretch run. Winning Colors had shown unbelievable sprinting speed but had yet to show she could be controlled by a jockey over a longer race.

Every year there are dozens of horses that get Derby hype because they win short sprint races, in fast times, and by large margins. As these horses mature, the stakes races are run at longer and more demanding distances, and their breeding comes into play. Most cheaply bred horses cannot stretch their speed to win at even a one-mile distance, yet alone the demanding one-and-one-quarter-mile classic distance of the Kentucky Derby.

As Kentucky Derby race contenders attempt to advance toward the world's most famous race each May, they are challenged to race longer

distances, against tougher stakes, and quality competition. Most will fall short, and be dropped down into lower class races, offering smaller purse money, while racing against horses of similar speed, not of Triple Crown stature. It is a process of elimination done every spring, starting with over 40,000 thoroughbred horses foaled. Only the best 20 or less horses qualify to make it into the Kentucky Derby starting gate for just one to emerge victorious.

The racing season is always changing because of the beautiful and constant unveiling of new equine talent. At the start of each year, the newly turned 3-year-olds strive to qualify for the Triple Crown races. Handicappers look to catch lightning in a bottle by ferreting out the possible Derby entrants, at long odds, before the horses become well-known stars, and then they are bet down to low odds in the many Derby prep races.

“Who is your Derby horse?” is a constant question on the backstretch, months before the race is run. After the Triple Crown races, consisting of the Kentucky Derby, Preakness, and Belmont are completed, the summer action shifts to the baby races, consisting of the new 2-year-olds that are just making their initial career starts. As the late spring days lengthen into summer, the big handicap stakes races are run for older horses, for massive purses.

In the fall, the action shifts to the Breeders' Cup championship races with total purses exceeding \$10,000,000. These races determine the Eclipse Awards for the best horses in each division, 2-year-old, sprinters, 3-year-old, turf (grass) racing, and older champions. The races and awards are broken down between the sexes, with females seldom asked to run against the males. Now, the now maturing 3-year-olds must step up and face the older horses to win the stakes money offered. The horses change track circuits for variety. It is a yearly cycle of life that horse players enjoy, and they watch it play out in the magnificent racing venues.

Winning Colors was no longer a racetrack secret, and the fans bet on her so heavily she was the 3-5 odds on favorite in the one-mile La Centinela Stakes for newly turned 3-year-olds. The race came up with less competition than she had previously faced, as it was run as the

Wednesday feature race against seven other fillies. As Gary Stevens loaded her into the gate, he knew his job was to win the race, and to school the young filly. He had to teach her to rate and ration her brilliant speed to hold some in reserve for the late challenges that would be coming from horses that had conserved their energy for decisive late bids, in the longer races to come. Klein and Lukas now had over 100 horses in training together, and only a few would likely become champions. These horses first must be tested and culled out to see which had the heart, talent, and ability to run fast over the longer distances required of the top-stakes caliber horses.

Winning Colors was deemed one of the brightest prospects in the barn, and Lukas had his son Jeff take over the day-to-day training plans of the rising star. Jeff personally checked on her throughout the day, and made sure Luis had everything she could possibly need. Jeff told Luis, “We both know she’s special. Just focus on the gray, Luis. Full time...all the time. If anyone complains, tell them to see me.”

“Si, señor. I will...like she is mine!”

Luis had his work cut out for him. Winning Colors was becoming feistier all the time. It was around this time that Gary Stevens told a reporter, “The safest place to be around Winning Colors was on her back.”

She was like a young male stud—so powerful that she required a high level of training and racing to deploy her energy, or she was dangerous to be around.

### ***January 20, 1988, Santa Anita Racetrack, California***

At Santa Anita on January 20, 1988, the fillies loaded into their gates for the stakes event, and Winning Colors broke in scintillating style at the bell, quickly establishing a one-and-a-half length lead, blasting into the first left-hand turn. She started the long run down the backstretch, and Stevens tried to rate her energy, but she continued to pour on her early speed, again running sprinter-like quarter-mile and half-mile fractions of 22 seconds flat, and 45-and-four-fifths seconds.

Lukas was staring with concern at the track’s tote board to see these early fraction times posted. He was not happy with what they saw for

her first half-mile pace. What he saw was that she was not rating for her jockey!

Stevens was trying to get her to relax, trying to teach her through his hands on the reins, to reserve her extraordinary energy and speed. He was amazed the moment she seemed to understand what he was trying to teach her; the change was fast as she suddenly showed a new sensibility, and relaxed. For the first time in her racing career, she was obeying him, and not running off.

Winning Colors entered the second turn two lengths in front. Still she was cruising at such a high rate of speed that the other fillies were overmatched early. As she exited the final turn, she was four lengths in front! Stevens noted that she always seemed to run faster in the turns. For the first time that day, her jockey asked her to run by letting his reins out a notch and chirping to her, "Let's go girl...let's go girl... now.... Hah.... Hah.... Hah." She was happy to be set free and use her bundled power and energy as she jettted away from the field, winning easily, without ever being asked for her best, winning by six-and-a-half lengths over the other 3-year-old fillies.

Under his helmet, Stevens was smiling because she had just shown him the one thing he was hoping to see—that she was intelligent and was learning to be rated. She was not just a one-dimensional, speed crazy horse. The morning training sessions designed by Jeff Lukas, with Stevens riding her at dawn, were paying off. Champion racehorses are not just born, they are taught, coached, and developed. The Lukas team had patiently waited for this moment, and they now understood she was maturing into a potential champion racehorse. Winning Colors was showing the sense and intelligence to go with her natural brilliant athletic ability.