

House Energy and Commerce Committee
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Hearing:
“Thoroughbred Horse Racing Jockeys and Workers: Examining On-Track Injury
Insurance and Other Health and Welfare Issues”

May 9, 2006

Testimony of John Velazquez, Chairman of the Board of Directors
The Jockeys’ Guild

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is John Velazquez and I am Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the Jockeys’ Guild.

I am pleased to testify before this Committee and update you on the condition of the Jockeys’ Guild.

We have been working very hard since the removal of Mr. Gertmenian to restore a respectful relationship of mutual respect and understanding between the Guild and the horseracing industry. While we may not always agree on issues, it is critical that we work together for the good of the sport and the welfare of our members.

We have been meeting frequently in the last several months with industry leaders to discuss how we can partner with them to insure that the needs of jockeys are met. As you know, for the past 60 years, the Jockeys’ Guild has shouldered the burden of providing health insurance to its members, taking care of the temporarily disabled, and trying to meet the needs of our permanently disabled riders—who must be taken care of for the rest of their lives. We have tried to show the industry that shouldering this responsibility alone is virtually impossible for an organization with a thousand members

to afford from its own resources. This is made even more difficult because we must also represent our members on many other important issues that jockeys face daily as professional athletes.

Today, I am pleased to report to you that we have reached an historic agreement with the industry to create a new jointly administered program to fund our program for permanently disabled riders. This new group has pledged to raise at least \$1 million annually to provide financial assistance and case management services to the 61 jockeys that are currently permanently disabled and for those jockeys that will receive crippling injuries in the future. We are grateful that the tracks and horsemen are willing to step up to the plate and accept that the care of those who have given everything to the horseracing industry is the responsibility of the entire industry, not just the jockeys themselves. It means a lot to us that the industry has taken this step, and I wish to publicly thank them today for their effort.

Mr. Chairman, just a few weeks ago, I was injured in a race at Keeneland. The horse broke down and I was thrown. The horse landed on top of me and broke my shoulder. I was lucky, very lucky that I only sustained a broken shoulder blade. The fact of the matter is that every time you leave that paddock, you really don't know if you're coming back. It can happen to any of us on any race day. We need to know, for the sake of ourselves and our families, and that if we are injured, we will receive the best medical care and--God forbid--if we suffer a devastating injury, we will be taken care of.

There is much work to be done to reach this goal. While many tracks have raised their coverage for on-track accidents to \$1 million, there are tracks around the country that have inadequate insurance coverage. Some tracks still provide no coverage at all.

There is workers' compensation coverage in only 5 racing states. Our members should be covered in all states. For many jockeys, health insurance is not affordable given their low incomes. We need to raise mount fees so that all jockeys who want health coverage can afford it. And some day, Mr. Chairman, we would like the industry to provide a retirement plan for its riders so that the jockeys who are too old or too sick to continue racing can live out their lives in dignity.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is critical that we have a real seat at the table in this industry. The Interstate Horseracing Act needs to be amended to give jockeys the legal right, along with trainers and owners, to a fair share of the revenue from the transmission of the horseracing signal. That way, Mr. Chairman, we will have the resources we need to help ourselves.

I am available to answer any questions you may have.