

A Jockey's Journey From Virginia to Hollywood... And Back Again

By David Gignilliat

In technical terms, a racetrack is an oval, elliptical in shape, and mostly standard in length. Filled with dirt, guarded by rails, and surrounded by cheering spectators, it the arena of competition for horses and jockeys since the American first track was laid out by settlers in Long Island, N.Y. in 1665.

The story of Robert Howard, now 71, begins in Richmond where he grew up. A curious and congenial young man, he approached his neighbor's son (who was a jockey and also happened to date his sister) and asked him to take him to the local racetracks. He was smitten from day one. He also spent time at Meadow Farm, in nearby Caroline County, the birthplace of the acclaimed thoroughbred Secretariat. It was there, at the genesis of racing's most dominant horse, Howard started racing.

"That started getting my blood going wanting to be a jockey," Howard recalls. "I made up my mind at a very young age that I wanted to become a jockey, and I was fortunate enough that I did become one."

Howard eventually left Richmond when he was 14 and looped around the east coast from South Carolina to New York,

Virginia and Maryland. He got a job walking horses at Belmont Park, site of the famed Belmont Stakes, part of horse racing's acclaimed Triple Crown.

"I had always been very athletic, and when I realized that I could ride a horse really well, I realized I could do a lot of things on horses that other jockeys couldn't do," he said.

Eventually he ended up back in Virginia, at the Middleburg Training Center, a proving ground at the time for young jockeys. Brimming with youth and confidence, Howard left Middleburg to begin his professional jockey career. "When I left, I didn't think there was any horse I couldn't ride."

Howard won his first race at Churchill Downs in 1964. "You never forget that moment. I remember it like it was yesterday," he reflects. "It was totally thrilling."

Howard quickly became a regular on the racing circuit, competing at tracks in Delaware, Maryland and New York. In his first race competing against Willie Shoemaker ("one of the greatest jockeys to ever sit on a race horse," he said), he beat him. He competed in the 1969

Kentucky Derby, and raced against Secretariat at Belmont in 1972, finishing 12th. The circuitous nature of a jockey's journey eventually took him to the sun-splashed elliptical ovals of Southern California, where he continued to find success on the tracks, winning the Del Mar Stakes (in San Diego County) in 1972, 1974 and 1975.

While there, Howard found another calling – film and television – transitioning from his jockey career to more than a decade of work in Hollywood, both as an equine technical advisor and a location manager for television shows and made-for-TV movies.

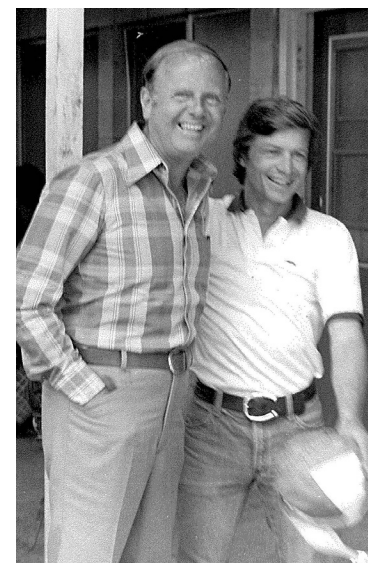
Howard's credit list reads like a Who's Who list of late 1970s and 80s television and film luminaries. If they were in *People* magazine during that era, he probably worked with them: Farrah Fawcett, Orson Welles, Muhammad Ali, Bruce Willis, Kate Jackson, Michael Landon, Aaron Spelling, among many others. Howard worked primarily on scripted television series including *Werewolf*, *The Greatest American Hero*, *The Chisolms*, *Benji*, and as a location manager and equine technical advisor on several made-for-TV movies.

Howard is particularly fond of the time he spent on *Moonlighting*, a wildly popular mid-80s dramedy starring Cybil Shepherd and Bruce Willis as an ersatz private investigative duo, and on-again-off-again lovers.

"Most of the actors on screen, they create a character, and it becomes magical. Like Bruce Willis, he creates himself each time he goes on the screen," he remembers fondly. "If you notice him, he's never different. He's always the same guy. That's his charm, in the film business, is that he's the same guy in every *Die Hard* movie. Yippee Ki Yay."

Like an actor preparing for a scene, Howard also found a similar emotional resonance in the different 'roles' he has played over the years -- jockey, trainer, location scout, horse farm owner.

"Looking back, all of my careers have been similar. In some ways, they're similar because I stayed the same person. I was very competitive as a jockey. I



Bobby with Dick Van Patten, who came to visit the race track one morning, along with his wife and friend Farrah Fawcett.

was very competitive trying to become a jockey," he said. "When I became a location manager, I was very competitive there, because I felt like I wanted to be the best location manager there is out there."

After his Hollywood journey wound down, Howard transitioned to Foxcroft Farm in 1992, his business in Chino, Ca., where he taught young riders through a variety of lessons, camps and events. From stirrup to saddle, he taught young riders the same way he was taught.

In 2018 Howard returned to Fredericksburg and did not waste any time starting to train young riders again.

"When I came back to Virginia, I had no [riding] customers. But I feel like I can recreate what I have done in my lifetime before, that I can make this horse win or this rider better," said Howard, who trains in a hunt seat approach. "I think I can make that magic again. I don't think there's any [rider] out there that I can't make better. And as I make them ride better, I learn more about myself. Always."

Spread over many years and career paths, horse racing tends to teach a man a thing or two about humility, he suggests.

"It's the horse that wins. Jockeys are pretty humble people, because they know better or worse days are always around the corner from you," he said. "You can be on the very top one day, and the very bottom the next day."



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Muhammad Ali and his wife presented Bobby with the first place prize at an "A" show at Santa Anita Park. About ten jockeys (all wore silks) competed. Bobby said that his ability to do a turn on the haunches was the reason he won the Hunter Hack. He beat Willie Shoemaker.