

My AQHYA Racing Experience

By Barbara Scheiding

What a trip this was. When I was first asked to attend this trip in Lafayette, Louisiana, I wasn't sure what I should expect. I knew enough that it would deal with quarter horse racing and the famous Challenge races, but that was it. I knew little of how it would impact my life.

About a month before the trip we were given a huge workbook that we were asked to complete and we were allowed to use any resources. It wasn't just the basics either, but I did it anyways because with it came a letter informing me about the scholarship opportunities. There were six categories: workbook, written test, oral test, barn test, and two mystery bonus tests that we were to complete. Each individual category had \$500 and \$250 for first and second place winners and there were overall scholarships with the top prize being \$5,000.

The trip itself started with the plane ride down there. Here is the neat part about this trip: *everything* (except souvenirs of course) is paid for by AQHA. This includes transportation, food, and hotel. Anyways, back to the plane ride. This was the first time I had ever traveled without my parents or anyone I knew for that matter, and it was exciting and scary at the same time. I was going to have to spend the next few days with complete strangers.

I arrived in Louisiana that afternoon and met the representatives and a group of other participants. We then were taken to our hotel where another group of participants were waiting. There was another group yet to come so all of us people who were there decided to play some beach volleyball which turned out to be an ice breaker and a rather interesting one at that. We actually got the ball stuck up in a tree!

When everyone had arrived we learned of our workbook results where I was surprised because I actually won that category. I was so excited. We were then assigned rooms and roommates.

The next morning we awoke at 5 AM and headed out to the old Evangeline Downs (now a training track) where we watched the workouts and training of the very young horses. Next we got to see a couple of breeding farms. A small one that specialized more in mare care and foaling and my favorite Robicheaux Ranch where we were able to see stallions like Heza Fast Dash, Game Patriot, Oak Tree Special, and Panther Mountain among others. The hospitality of the Robicheaux people was amazing. We were even fed crawfish and rice. That evening we attended a pig roast at Evangeline Downs and mingled among the people as we watched the races. We also were able to see the stewards in action and even got a chance to do some pre-race announcing. Not only that, we were able to stand right next to the starting gate during one of the races.

The next day is when the real fun began. We got up even earlier than the day before and headed to the track to be assigned trainers. I was extremely lucky to be placed with the incredible Alvin Brossette who holds the record for the most wins as a jockey in AQHA history! He was a very nice person who let us do a lot with the horses. We fed them, wrapped legs, watched workouts and so much more. My favorite horse This Flights For You was entered in one of the Challenge races. He was a beautiful liver chestnut colt and an amazing runner. Oh, there was one more catch to this fun; we had to pick a horse from our trainer's barn and ask a bunch of questions about that horse. These were questions from training schedules to speed indexes to where the horse has raced. Naturally I picked This Flights For You.

Afterwards, we headed back to the motel where a luncheon was held for the executives and officers of the racing commission. We all were notified that we were to give a brief speech on the fun we were having and our experience so far. That was probably one of the most tense parts of the entire trip. Although it wasn't bad at all, and we all got huge compliments from these important people when we were finished.

Once more we were off to the track to watch some more live races. This time however, we were to have dinner up in the clubhouse. That too was amazing. There were unbelievable amounts of food from steak to crawfish to cheesecake and everything in between. There was even an ice sculpture adorned with roses and the view of the track was magnificent. That night I also witnessed one of my trainer's horses set a new track record for the 870 yard distance. That was amazing to watch, and the next morning, both him and his staff were grinning from ear to ear.

It was that day, Saturday that we were to take our tests. First up was the barn test. I was really nervous, but Bubba (Alvin) helped me by giving me tips for wrapping legs and saddling. When it was my time, he told me that I would be the best, and it really meant a lot to me. Especially when I considered who the best wishes were actually coming from. When my time came, all my nervousness left me and I just did it. I know I made a couple of mistakes but I did very well according to my judge.

When we were finished, we headed back to the clubhouse for a southern style award brunch for the owners, trainers, breeders, etc. We were the ones who got to hand out all the brochures which was actually kind of fun. Then the real fun started; we returned to the hotel to finish with our written exam. When we got the test, I wasn't sure what to expect, but as I started answering questions I realized that most of them came right from the workbook which made it very nice. Other parts included identifying equipment which was more difficult but fun nonetheless. It wasn't your average test to put it plainly.

After we finished, we were given a few hours to clean up for the big night. It was the night of the challenge races...and our own awards. Oh how excited and tense we all were. Those few hours felt like days.

When we arrived at the clubhouse, the meal was even more extravagant than the night before. We had tons of seafood and I even got to taste alligator which was very good; much better than any of us expected it to be. We were told we were going down to the winner's circle to receive our awards after the 3rd race. However, the announcer began to read the script after the 2nd race. We all realized what was happening, and so we raced down the stairs (which is not advisable in heels). Of course they started with 5th place to increase the drama and slowly worked their way to 1st. My hopes started to dwindle after about 3rd place; after all I've never really won anything big. Then they announced 2nd place and when they finally announced 1st place, my mouth hit the floor as I heard my own name. I had just won the \$5,000 grand prize. We all got our picture taken in the winner's circle and slowly made our way back to the clubhouse to finish our dinner. It was there that we were given our smaller prizes. I was surprised that in addition to the grand prize and the \$500 from the workbook, I also won the written test and 2nd in the oral test. All in all I walked away that night with \$6,250 in scholarships.

That night my trainer's horses never won anything, but nevertheless we had the time of our lives.

We made so many memories on that trip that will never be duplicated in a million years. We came from all over the country; from Minnesota (obviously) to Nevada to Texas and even Canada, and we all walked off our planes with 13 new friends.

If you are ever given the chance to travel to the AQHYA Racing Experience, I would highly recommend that you jump on the chance. It'll never happen again and it is the best thing you can do to meet people and see how things are run. You get to meet amazing athletes, and who knows? You might even come out of there a champion yourself: I know I did.