

REGISTER WATCHDOG REPORT | BAD BETS

Fallen starlet

A once-productive horse started to fall apart after she got a boost from illegal drugs.

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The photographs are stored safely away. Marsha McRae kept most of them, digital images of a racehorse, her horse, a modest thoroughbred filly named L.B. Starlet.

The horse is nipping at a net stuffed with hay and poking her head out of her stall on the backstretch at Los Alamitos Race Course. She is posing, maybe. Some horses are like that. They have personality, like people -- temperamental, petulant, playful, flighty, smug.

L.B. Starlet was sweet. She also was leggy and athletic, a pretty horse for the most part. "She had a beautiful body," said Todd Rarick, a former trainer based at Turf Paradise in Phoenix, who worked with L.B. Starlet when she was a 2-year-old.

"But she also had a really odd head," Rarick added. "She had this huge forehead" He paused, contemplating the incongruity. "It was pretty big."

McRae loved to drop by the track to peek in on L.B. Starlet. "It made me feel good to see the horse," she said.

If she couldn't make it to the track, she would call trainer Eric Berman to get an update. Sometimes, she would call a couple of times a day. It was like that even as L.B. Starlet became a mystery, her winning form on the racetrack deteriorating.

McRae can pull out the photographs now and see no hint of trouble, just a dark, roan filly with a beautiful body and a great big forehead.

No scars, nothing but innocence.

But she knows better now.

The story of L.B. Starlet is that of a horse ruined by drugs and an aspiring owner who unwittingly bought her on the night that she went into the starting gate with methamphetamine in her system.

The state has no mechanism in place to notify new owners that their horse failed a drug test the day it was purchased, and under the rules there is no recourse for what can turn out to be a bad investment.

Some of those horses can no longer compete. Some end up in slaughterhouses. Some, like L.B. Starlet, are luckier in the end.

RACE NIGHT

It was a Thursday, the weekly kickoff day for racing at Los Alamitos. The weeknight crowds generally are sparse at the Orange County track, mostly die-hards who hang out, trading lies about life and horse racing. Paupers in the sport of kings.

The fourth race on the June 23, 2005, card measured 4 1/2 furlongs -- a little more than one-half mile -- a distance that suited L.B. Starlet. The race was long enough that she could use her natural speed to overcome habitual poor starts out of the gate, yet not so long that she would tire and fall apart coming down the stretch. She had won at the distance once before, and went to the starting gate as an even-money favorite.

McRae was there because L.B. Starlet was there. She had become enthralled by the sport and was eager to make a claim on a horse. Berman, the trainer, had been following L.B. Starlet for some time. McRae liked L.B. Starlet's breeding and the fact she had been productive on the track.

L.B. Starlet's father was a son of Jaklin Klugman, who had finished third in the 1980 Kentucky Derby and was owned by actor Jack Klugman. Her mother was a daughter of Nostalgia's Star, who had won more than \$2 million in her career.

L.B. Starlet showed some ability early, but never the talent to compete in the sport's richest races like the Breeders' Cup. Her place was in cheap claiming races -- up for sale every time she was entered in a race to any licensed owner with the desire to take a chance on her.

But L.B. Starlet cashed some checks and paid the bills. She was the type of horse that kept the races filled and the bettors betting. She also provided some thrills.

"She was fun to watch," said Becky Schock, who along with her husband, William, had bred and raced the horse early in her career when she had finished in the money -- first, second or third -- in four consecutive starts.

"She had a lot of heart," Schock said. "When she'd run, she'd pin her ears back and just go for it."

Twice before, McRae had filled out a claim slip to buy horses.

Most horse races are claiming races, meaning every horse running can be bought before the gates fly open.

Races have claiming prices for as little as \$2,500 at Los Alamitos or \$100,000 or more at the three major thoroughbred tracks in Southern California.

Owners enter their horses in races where they think they can win and the claiming price is high enough to discourage would-be owners from making a claim.

In both of McRae's earlier attempts to claim horses she had lost the "shake," horse racing's long-standing lottery system.

If multiple owners claim the same horse, they each are assigned a numbered ball that is put into a shaker. The owner whose numbered ball pops out first gets the horse.

McRae put those disappointments aside and prepared to claim L.B. Starlet. She had a sense of anticipation and excitement and remembers being too nervous to watch much of the race. L.B. Starlet, wearing No. 5, was beaten out of the starting gate, as was her habit. In her first career race, the gates cracked open and she broke sideways, bouncing off the side of the starting stall. She remained a poor starter.

A quarter-mile into the race, though, L.B. Starlet was second in the eight-horse field and charging forward. She grabbed the lead at the top of the stretch but began to tire. Jockey Maggie Carter went to work -- coaxing, prodding and pushing.

A filly named Jusred, who had lost ground and appeared beaten coming around the far turn, started to rally and caught L.B. Starlet. The two ran together through the final strides to the finish line.

The time it takes to post the results of a photo finish can seem interminable to someone holding a parimutuel ticket.

The numbers on the giant infield tote board flashed on and off -- No. 5 for L.B. Starlet, No. 8 for Jusred -- while race officials looked at the photo finish to determine the winner. When the result was posted, those who had bet on L.B. Starlet had reason to cheer. McRae had another cause to celebrate. She was the only owner to turn in a claim on L.B. Starlet. For the \$2,500 claiming price, McRae was now L.B. Starlet's owner.

McRae's problems with L.B. Starlet were only beginning.

DISQUALIFIED FOR DRUGS

L.B. Starlet had run a career-best speed rating while winning, but she had some help. When the post-race drug tests were released four months later, she tested positive for methamphetamine.

Methamphetamine is categorized as a Class 1 drug by the Association of Racing Commissioners International; it has no accepted medical use in the horse but a high potential for altering performance.

"I'm disgusted by it," McRae said. "That was so unfair. Never in my wildest dreams would I have ever thought someone would do that to a horse."

Drugs in horses, however, are common at California racetracks.

An Orange County Register investigation found that drug violations have doubled since 2000. More than \$268 million was wagered during that period on races in which one or more horses failed post-race drug tests.

The board of stewards at Los Alamitos took away L.B. Starlet's victory, and the winning purse of \$3,328 was returned and redistributed to the other horses in that race. Those who bet on L.B. Starlet benefited from her drug-tainted victory. Bettors who wagered on Jusred or any other horse to win in that race were out of luck.

L.B. Starlet's trainer, Jesus Nunez, was suspended for 90 days, a ruling he later appealed. The failed drug test wasn't Nunez's only problem. The veteran trainer was also cited for the possession of contraband (syringes and needles).

Schock, L.B. Starlet's former owner, doesn't believe that Nunez would knowingly have given the horse methamphetamine.

"I was just surprised because he had run her in several other races, and she was doing well," Schock said. "She never came up with anything before."

But Nunez does have a history of drug and medication violations in the state. He has been cited 13 times since 2001, including a \$10,000 fine from February 2003, when a horse in his care tested positive for mephentermine, another Class 1 drug.

The trainer is in Mexico and could not be reached for comment. Attempts to reach him through friends and clients were unsuccessful.

Nunez's appeal was rejected in August and his 90-day suspension began on Aug. 31. While under suspension, Nunez was not allowed to set foot on a racetrack in California.

NO LONGER COMPETITIVE

L.B. Starlet never came close to winning again.

She ran fourth in a six-horse field in her first race for McRae, another 4 ½-furlong sprint at Los Alamitos. Then she finished last in a six-horse field.

On Sept. 11, 2005, L.B. Starlet made her final trip to the starting gate. She finished last again.

Worse, she came out of her final race with a minor leg injury.

"I was pretty disappointed that her performance wasn't the same as she had shown before," McRae said.

She decided to retire the horse, and Berman was able to find L.B. Starlet a home on a ranch in Riverside. L.B. Starlet is docile as a pony now, and lucky.

According to the Equine Protection Network, nearly 4 million horses have been slaughtered in this country since 1980 -- former racehorses, show horses, pleasure horses. Horses that became more trouble than they were worth.

Twice a month, L.B. Starlet participates in programs with the South San Gabriel 4-H Club and spends the rest of her time on the ranch with 11 other horses owned by trainer Troy Mullen.

When Mullen got the horse, L.B. Starlet was rambunctious and skittish, still a racehorse. Now, Mullen puts 3-year-old kids on her back for rides.

"She's just an excellent horse," Mullen said. "She's the best horse I've got. If I could rescue more horses off the racetrack, I'd do it."

FINALLY, SOME ANSWERS

It wasn't until recently, when a Register reporter knocked on her door, that McRae learned that L.B. Starlet, the filly with the beautiful body and big forehead, had tested positive for methamphetamine the night she bought her.

McRae heard nothing from the racetrack or the California Horse Racing Board. Board officials say they have no procedures for contacting owners who claim a horse that fails a post-race drug test. State officials say they will revisit this policy.

But in the tangle of emotion that followed, questions were raised: Had the methamphetamine ruined the horse? Was it used to mask a pre-existing injury or caused the horse to overexert itself during the race? The answers might never be known.

"That's totally illegal and not fair to the horse," McRae said. "It's abuse. It's wrong, and I feel bad for the horse."

As she contemplated the implications, her anger grew. She had no recourse because the rules of the claim game state that "the successful claimant becomes the owner of the horse whether it is dead or alive, sound or unsound, or injured during the race or after it."

McRae stayed away from horse racing for more than a year before the sport lured her back. She claimed a colt named Marshal Lucky, only to lose him when another owner claimed the horse the first time McRae entered him in a race.

Such is life when it comes to the claiming game.

But Marshal Lucky did win that race, giving McRae another photo for her collection. This one was taken by the track photographer -- in the winner's circle.