

Solidly Succeeding as a Woman in a Man's World

September 30, 2018



By ML Ball

Photographed by Barbara D. Livingston

HUMANS DON'T HAVE HORSE problems, horses have human problems. This is an oft-repeated saying in the horse world, and something thoroughbred racehorse trainer Jena Antonucci has dedicated her life to try to remedy. And one by one, horse by horse, she's doing it, at Saratoga, Aqueduct and Belmont race tracks in New York, as well as several tracks in Florida. Not only that, but she's doing it in an industry largely dominated by men who don't always take kindly to women pushing their way into the sport.

No small feat.

But then, Jena is no stranger to the world of men, or of horses. She first started riding at the age of three, then was introduced to thoroughbred racing at ten, as her grandfather owned and raced thoroughbreds on the New York racing circuit for many years, and she would join him at the track. As a result, while most people's childhood memories are of summers spent at sleepaway camp or on family road trips, most of Jena's are of Saratoga Race Track and the barns along the back side.

Soon, Jena was competing with hunter/jumpers in her home state of Florida, but in a decidedly do-it-yourself fashion. "I didn't grow up with fancy show horses," she said recently. "I had to make them, which I am hugely grateful for now. A lot of my horses were retired thoroughbreds right off the track, so I had to learn how to feel a horse, read a horse and listen."

Once Jena became an adult, it would have made sense for her to turn her aptitude for training thoroughbreds into a profession, but at the time, she had "zero desire" to train racehorses for a living. "My parents always insisted that I was supposed to have a real job, which I did for many years, in the building and kitchen-cabinet industries," she said.

But as any horse person will tell you, horses are like the mob. Just when you think you're out, they pull you back in.

SO IT WAS WITH Jena. Severing ties with the building industry, she made her way back to the horse world, managing a show barn and teaching adults and children how to ride.

This went well, she said, but something was missing. She felt that she needed to get firsthand knowledge of how racehorses received their initial training, so she went to work for the Florida division of one of the top racing stables in the country.

"I wanted to understand how these horses were being trained because I was retraining them to be show horses, and so much of what they knew didn't make sense," she said. "Left was right and right was left. There was a disconnect that I was eager to figure out and learn what they had been taught."

Working for the racing stable turned out to be a great experience for her but a very frustrating one, primarily because the operation was so large, with a set number of horses to get through each day. "In those bigger programs, you can't always take your time with a horse," she explained. "There are schedules to be met, and horses don't care about human schedules. We were forcing them to fit into our time tables instead of the other way around."

Next, Jena was an equine veterinary assistant for four years, then built a successful business taking care of mares and foals and "rehabbing" racehorses—getting them over their injuries and sending them back to their trainers.

Again, she was frustrated, watching great horses not receive the time, patience or listening that they deserved. "I would get them going again, get them sound and healthy, and then watch them go back to racing and get reinjured," she said. That's when she decided to take matters into her own hands and become a full-time licensed thoroughbred trainer.



GEMONTEER AND ASSISTANT TRAINER FIONA GOODWIN.

horse racing is still very much a man's world. (It's no accident that it's referred to as the sport of *kings*.) Yes, there are female trainers, jockeys and exercise riders, but in comparison to their male counterparts, not many.

Nevertheless, Jena has been steadily making a name for herself. But it hasn't come easy.

"Whatever I accomplish, I have to do it twice as well for twice as long to get half the credit," she said. "But that's the part that I have to be careful not to focus on because it doesn't allow you to grow. You just do. I'm a doer; you just do."

As a result of all this "doing," as she's become more successful and has had some noteworthy wins, has she gotten pushback?

"Absolutely," she said. "I think in any industry that's historically been male dominated, women are going to do the job well, but we're going to do it differently than men have been accustomed to. Coming from the building industry, I've always been very aware of stepping back and seeing the glass ceiling."

Not surprisingly, racing is one of those industries where gender lines very much exist. "I can't go to the bar with a bunch of men and throw back a beer and drum up business," she stated. "It would be viewed horribly, it wouldn't be accepted, and it's just not a way a woman can grow a business in this industry, or many industries. Also, it's just not who I am. I've learned that, for me, it's about creating opportunities in unique ways."

One of those unique ways, she has discovered, is to ask questions and then really listen to the answers. As she described it, "If I can get the opportunity to talk to a horse owner and understand what their business plan is with their horse and help them get there, we have a great working relationship. If they are married, I make sure everyone is included, especially their spouse, so that everyone is on the same page. Having a trainer who happens to be female presents a new dynamic, and dealing with that head-on really works best for everyone. That's one thing that I think women actually do a little better than men—taking the time to understand what an owner's goals are. And, for me personally, also getting them to understand the full racing cycle of a horse's career so that together, we can plan a suitable transition for the horse after it has finished racing."

WITHOUT A DOUBT, AS passionate as Jena is about training horses for the track, what happens after their racing days are over is equally important to her.

That's why in 2016, she became Vice President of Florida TRAC (Thoroughbred Retirement and Adoptive Care), a nonprofit retirement and retraining facility in Indiantown, FL, which helps give retired racehorses meaningful second careers and an excellent quality of life.

For most people, being part of a small team overseeing the rehabilitation and placement of 180-plus retired racehorses would be a daunting task on top of a demanding career as a trainer, but really, it's what Jena has been doing all her life.

"I've made a career out of throw-aways, horses that other trainers thought weren't going to be anything," she said. "Time and time again, my team and I have

been able to turn them around and find successful athletes in them. And that's hugely rewarding."

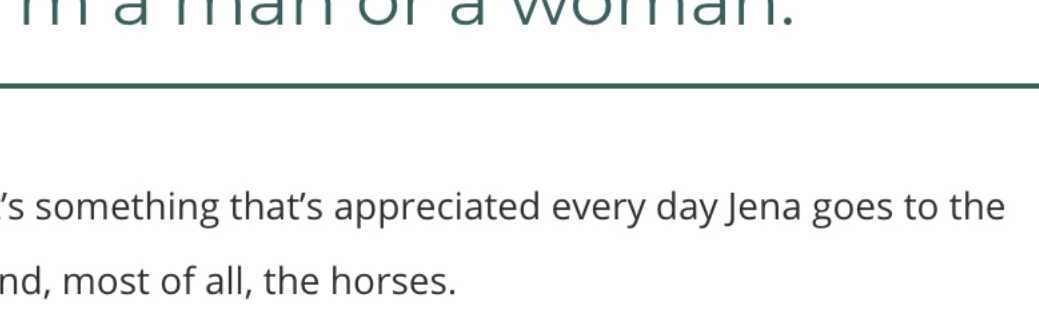
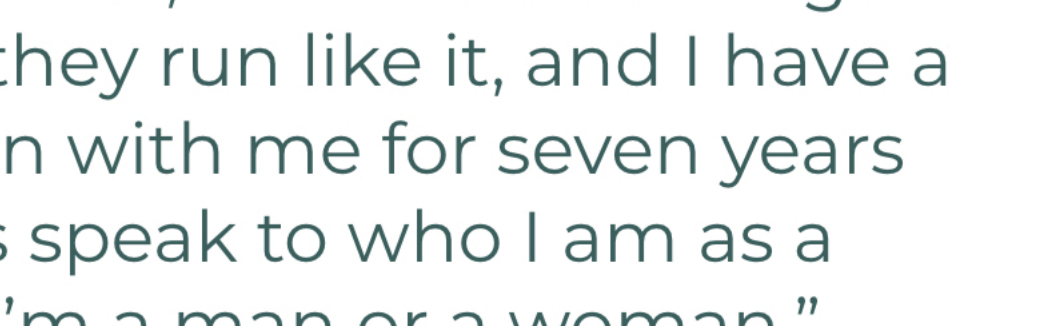
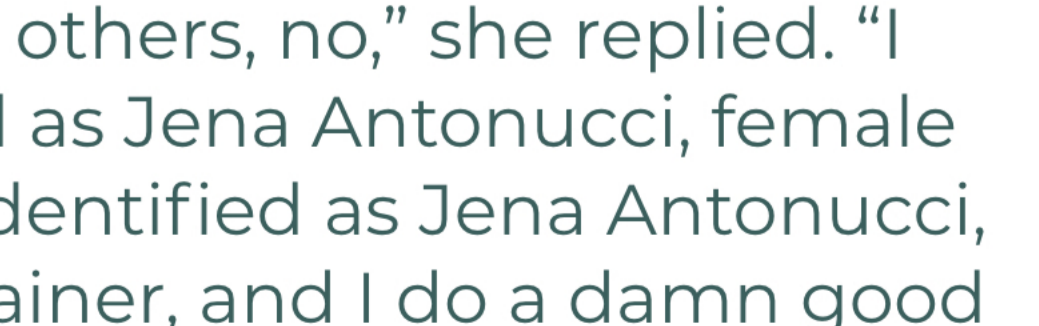
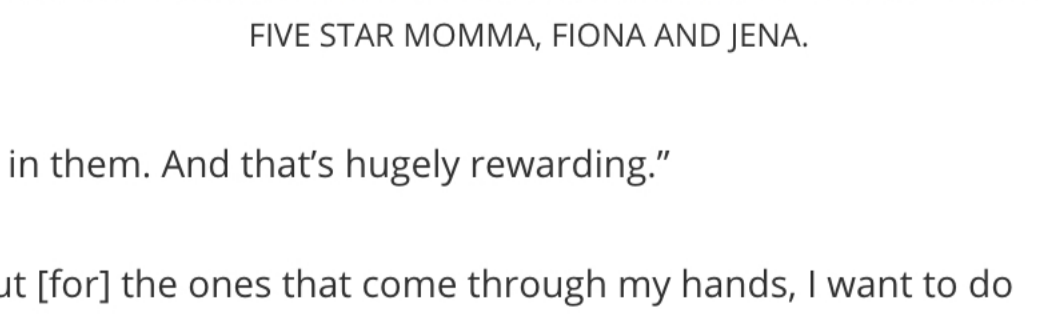
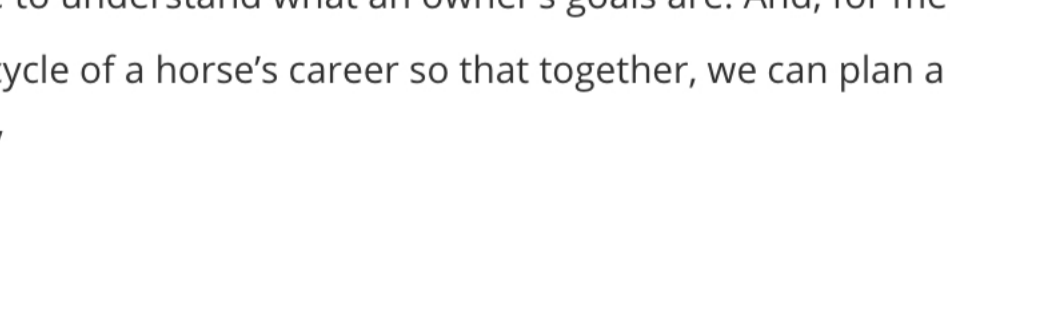
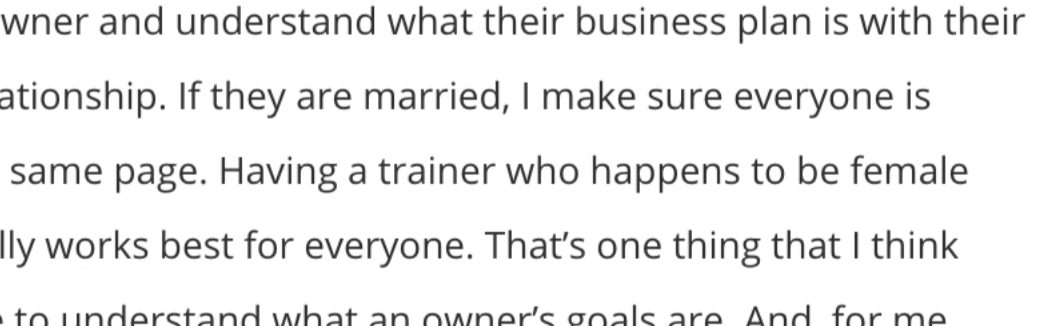
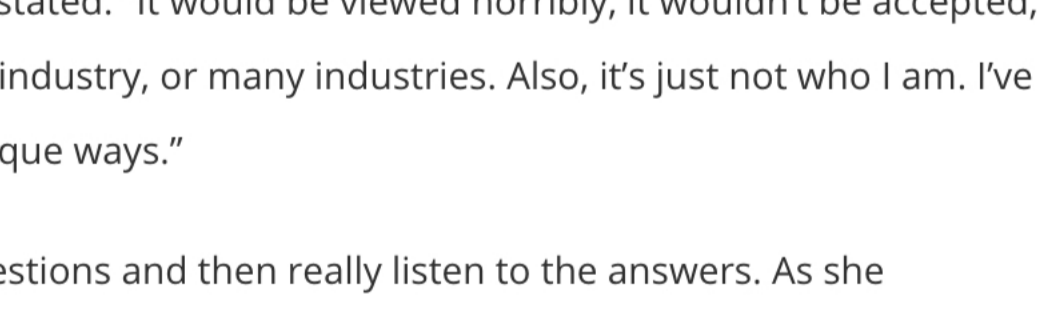
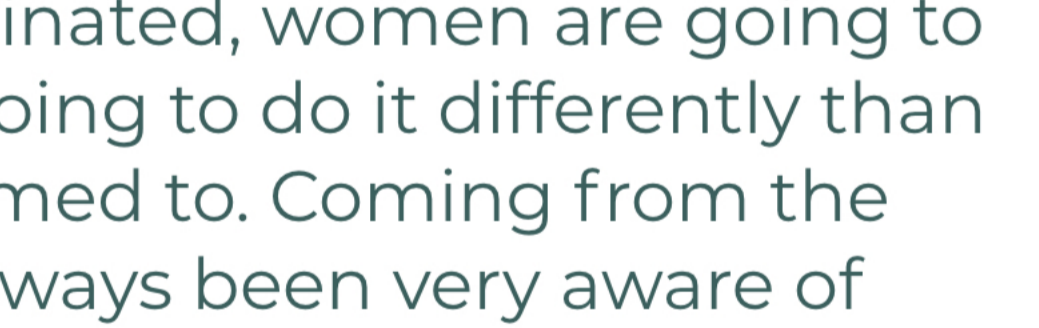
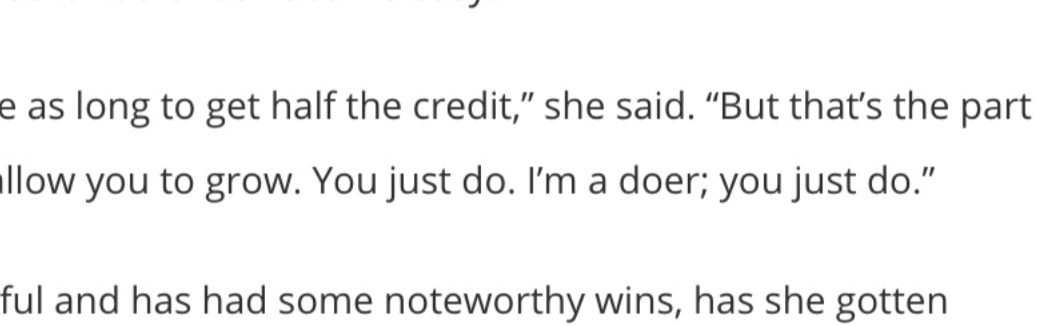
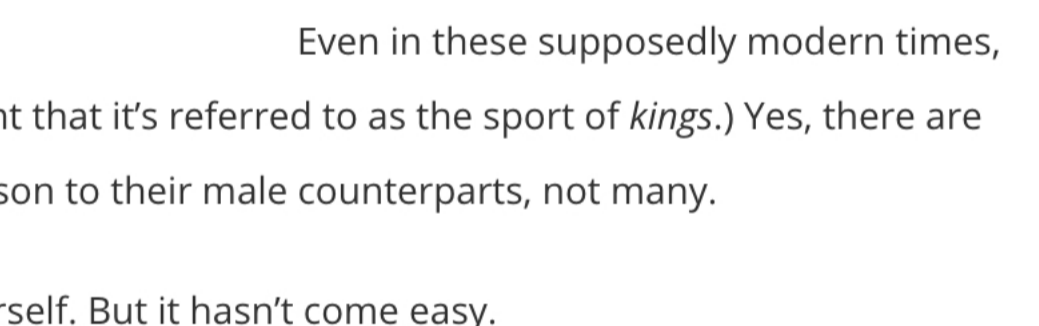
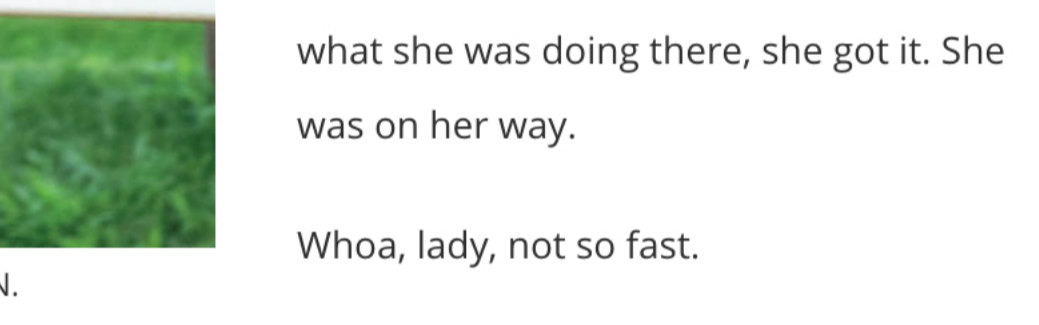
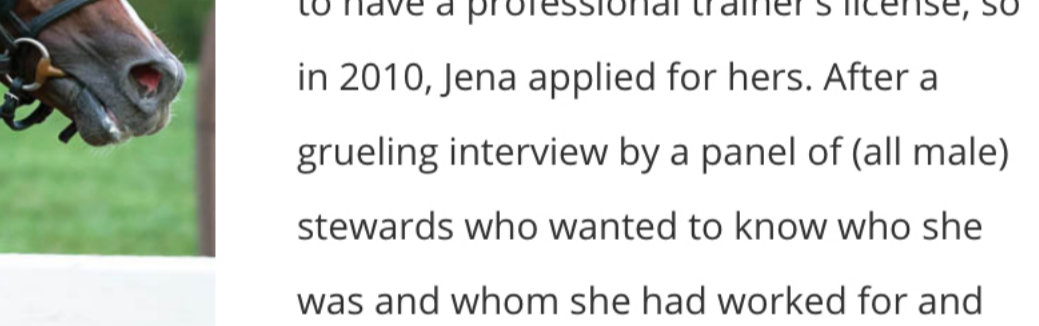
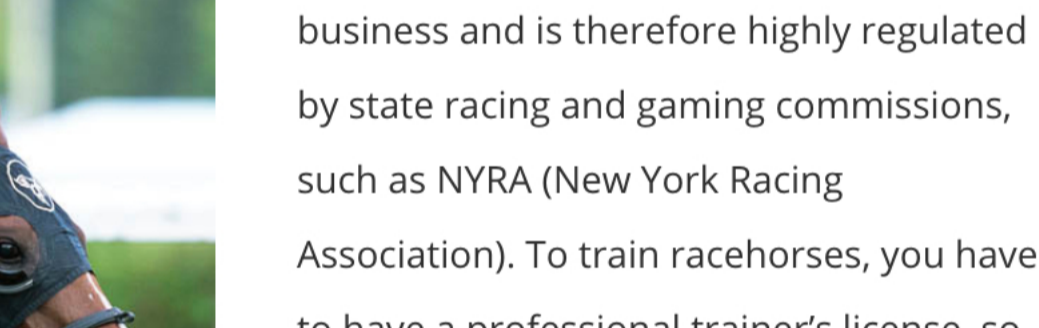
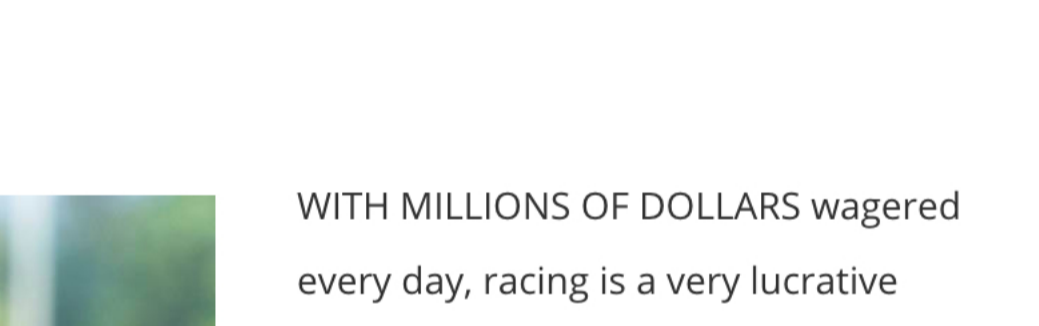
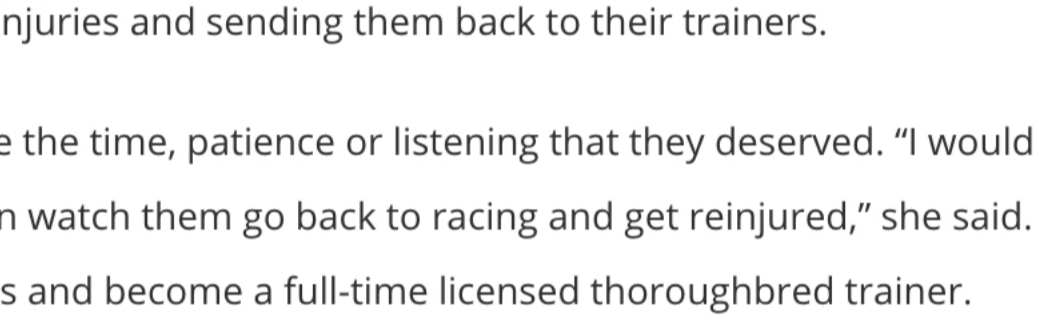
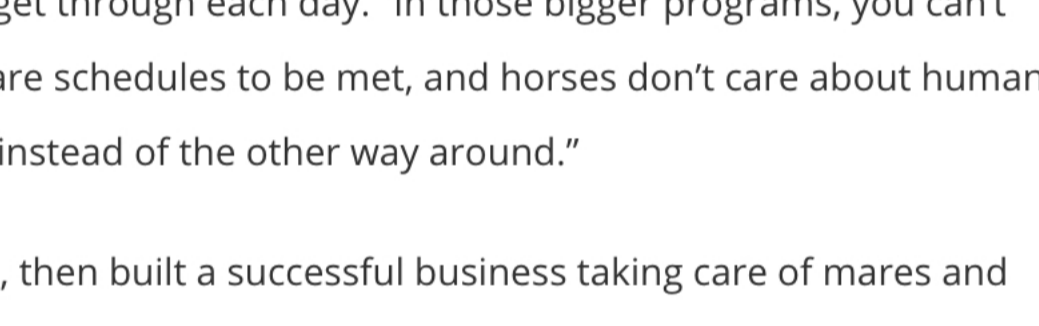
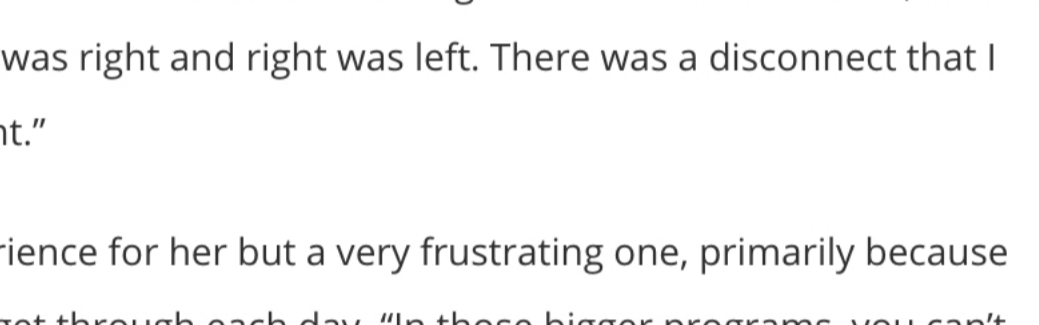
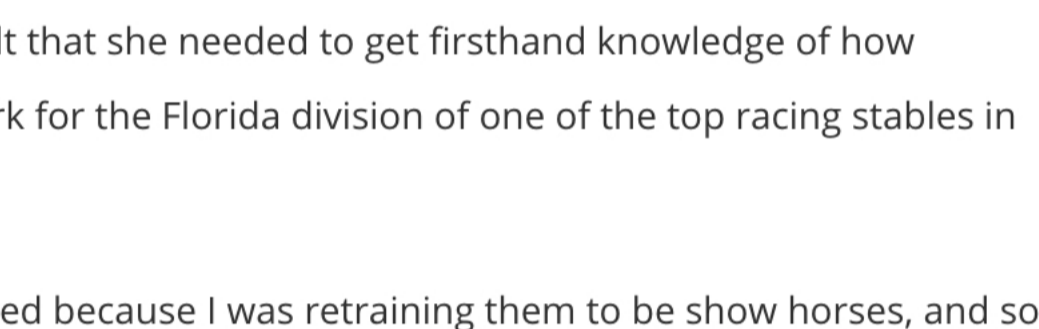
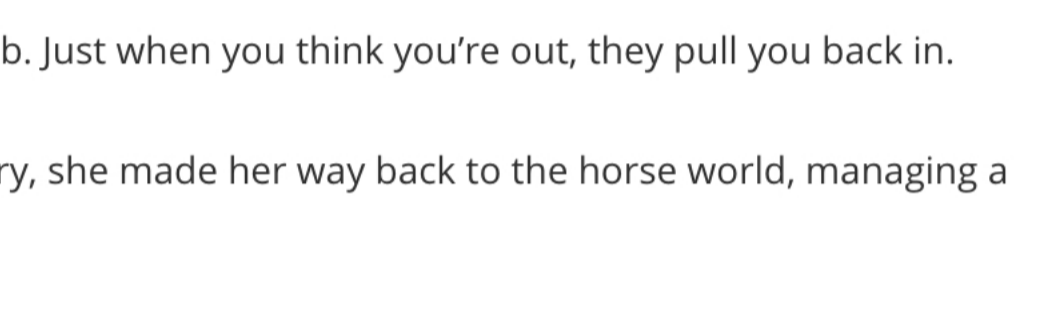
As she described it, "I'm not going to get to train them all, but [for] the ones that come through my hands, I want to do the best possible job I can and give them the best opportunity to excel."

Does being a woman play a part in her ability to do the best possible job?

"In some respects, yes, in others, no," she replied. "I don't want to be identified as Jena Antonucci, female horse trainer. I want to be identified as Jena Antonucci, horse trainer. I'm a horse trainer, and I do a damn good job. My horses look like it, they run like it, and I have a very loyal crew that's been with me for seven years now. All of those things speak to who I am as a professional, whether I'm a man or a woman."

That's not due to racing luck; that's due to hard work. And it's something that's appreciated every day Jena goes to the barn by the ones that really matter—the owners, the fans and, most of all, the horses.

To learn more about Jena and her racing stable, Bella Inizio Farm, visit www.jenaantonucci.com. For more information about Florida TRAC, go to www.fltrac.org.



FIVE STAR MOMMA, FIONA AND JENA.