

“If horses could talk, they would surely speak Spanish”: Representations of Latinos in U.S. Horse-Racing’s Racially Stratified Labor Hierarchy

Alisa Yamaguchi
Advisor: Andrea Otanez

University of Washington
Department of Communication
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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to assess Latino representation within Thoroughbred Horse-Racing’s division of labor. With the influx of Latin American immigrants beginning in 1946, the ethnic background of jockeys racing in the Kentucky Derby gradually shifted in the 1960s from white to predominantly Latino and is now apparent in today’s Grade I racing. Examination of this rapid racial change reveals its effects on horse-racing’s hierarchical division of power, which has evident disparate monetary repercussions for jockeys and backstretch workers. The relationship between Latino, income, and jockey has cultural and social significance because of barriers that prevent people of color from advancing to the top tier of “owner” in horse-racing.

Key Terms: Latino, Latin American, Race, Immigration, Labor, Thoroughbred Horse-Racing, Jockey, and Backstretch Worker

Introduction

As the horses were loaded into the gates for the 141st running of the Kentucky Derby in May 2015, the record crowd of 170,513 (WDRB, 2015) was focused on the morning-line 5-2 favorite (Wire, Sports Illustrated, 2015), American Pharoah, jockeyed by Victor Espinoza, a native of Tulancingo, Mexico. Cheers erupted throughout Churchill Downs in Louisville, Kentucky as the field of eighteen horses emerged from the track gates. Their bodies soon merged together into a mechanized unit that closely followed the entire 1.25-mile distance across the dirt track. American Pharoah and Espinoza were the

first to cross the finish line making it Espinoza's second consecutive Derby win. Espinoza's heightened emotions following the race were undeniable with his fist raised in the air and excitement seen across his face.

Horseback riding reporter Donna Brothers met with Espinoza for a post-race interview as he circled the track: "Victor, you've just won your third Kentucky Derby two years in a row, are you feeling pretty lucky right now?" Espinoza responded, "Yes I am. I feel like the luckiest Mexican on Earth" (Duckworth, ESPN, 2015) during a time when U.S.-Mexico immigration remains a debated area. The statement resonated a sense of cultural identity and citizenship. However, Espinoza's racial identity, and those of all jockeys, is nearly invisible during the race. The jockeys' bodies are covered in brightly patterned racing silks to make horse and rider identifiable to onlookers. But, the silks, combined with jockey goggles, helmet, and boots limits racial visibility. As a result, the uniform collectively eliminates specific racial identification by flattening jockeys into perceived racial categories with no distinction between Latinos.

In the early part of the twentieth century, racing was predominantly composed of white jockeys born in the United States. By the 1960s, a shift in the cultural composition of jockeys began to occur as "the world of horse-racing began to notice the presence of Latins in their sport" (Iber et al, 2011)--from European ethnic background to Latino. Although still small in size, 25 percent of jockeys in the 1964 Kentucky Derby were from South and Central America (Horse Racing Nation). Transition to 2015, when the prevalence of Latino jockeys in the Kentucky Derby more than doubled to 61 percent (Horse Racing Nation) and is continuing to grow. As of 2014, the United States has a 77.4 percent white population (U.S. Census Bureau) compared to the 17.4 percent Hispanic or Latino population (U.S. Census Bureau). Jockeys who race in the Kentucky Derby arrive from racetracks across the United States and abroad. The significant population contrast between white and Latino, not only within Kentucky, combined with

the increasing number of Latino backstretch workers¹ and jockeys, who are primarily male, illustrate U.S. horse-racing's evolving demographic structure.

Previous scholars, including Gabriela Nuñez and John Rosecrance, have acknowledged the emergence of Latinos in the horse-racing industry, in their common position as backside worker; however, little information exists regarding the recent eminence of Latinos, such as Espinoza, as jockeys. According to Equibase, which tracks the North American Thoroughbred Racing Starters for the 2015-racing season, the top ten jockeys, by earnings, were all Latino (2015). Of the past five Kentucky Derby (jockey) winners all were Latin-American immigrants from either Mexico², the Dominican Republic, or Puerto Rico (Churchill Downs Incorporated, 2016). So, what about the horse-racing industry appeals to Latinos or “pulls” them into the occupations of backstretch worker or jockey? And do narratives that construct Latinos as more effective in the horse-racing industry have a positive or negative impact on perceptions of Latinos?

The study examines the inequities within an industry that can be both beneficial and disadvantageous to Latino backstretch workers and jockeys, as well as the perceived critical role of Latino jockeys in the United States horse-racing industry (Iber, 2011, 274). Many Latino jockeys arrive from areas throughout Latin America; however, Mexico will largely be of focus due to its close proximity to the United States. I will explore the placement of Latinos among the racially stratified labor hierarchy in horse-racing, where the owners and trainers are predominantly white. In addition, I use Kentucky, commonly referred to as the “horse capital of the world,” as a site of analysis because of its heavy equine-based culture and setting for the coveted Kentucky Derby. Beginning with Latino immigration and labor within Kentucky, the study progresses to Nuñez's “latino pastoral narrative,” Latino jockey portrayal in popular media, the industry's hierarchical income,

¹ The backstretch is the area in a horse racetrack where horses are stabled. The training and daily care of the horses occurs here. Backstretch workers refers to individuals, such as grooms and horse handlers who work on the “backside” caring for the horses and perform barn maintenance. A majority are Latino.

² Victor Espinoza won the Kentucky Derby in both 2014 and 2015. Mario Gutierrez , who was also born in Mexico, won the Kentucky Derby in 2012.

and concludes with an overview of language barriers and discrimination Latino jockeys and backstretch workers face.

Because of travel limitations, some research for the study was performed through one-day of trackside observations at Emerald Downs racetrack located in Auburn, Washington on April 30, 2016. In 2014, Washington's population was composed of an 80.7 percent white population while Hispanic or Latino composed 12.2 percent (U.S. Census Bureau) of the population. The disparity between demographic percentages highlights the disproportionate number of Latinos in the U.S. horse-racing industry. Observations at Emerald Downs assessed interpersonal communication among labor positions within the hierarchy and the relationship between Latino³ and horse. Emerald Downs' racing season begins early April and continues through mid-September. The grounds consist primarily of a track, grandstand, barn area, and equine hospital. The goal of my observations was to assess the dynamic relationships between backstretch worker or horse handler⁴, jockey, trainer, and owner to determine whether this racialized hierarchy was visually apparent at the racetrack. In particular, my observations focus on the racial and ethnic identity of the jockeys to infer whether the increasing growth and visibility of Latino jockeys in recent Kentucky Derby's is apparent at local racetracks similar to Emerald Downs. My observations examined the track, paddock, and grandstand regions because entrance to the barns requires supervision by an industry worker.

In addition, I conducted a total of seven interviews with jockeys, jockey agents, and trainers in order to further distinguish the experiences and persisting ideologies surrounding Latino jockeys and backstretch workers from individuals employed in the industry. Participants of the study included individuals from a multitude of current and past professions in the horse-racing industry. All participants currently or previously raced, trained, or were employed at Emerald Downs. The high proportion of Latino

³ I use "Latino" because of its usage in both Nuñez and Schultz's research, although it is not how all individuals from Latin America self-identify.

⁴ Horse handlers often work along the backstretch; however, unlike many grooms, they will also lead the horse from the barn to the paddock and facilitate the process prior to the start of the race. Once the race finishes, horse handlers return with the horse to the barn.

jockey and backstretch workers across racetracks in the United States was confirmed when respondents were asked to provide an estimated percentage of Latinos at Emerald Downs. The average response settled at 89 percent. Though Emerald Downs is a single racetrack, all respondents had worked at other well-known racetracks across the United States and accounted for variances. Respondents who had been in the industry for over 30 years, such as Jockey Agent 1, Trainer 1, Trainer 2, and Jockey 2 often lamented the shift toward a Latino demographic, in particularly among backstretch workers, but also jockeys. Two respondents noticed the shift occurred between the late 1960s and early 1980s, as confirmed by my research that recognizes the emergence of Braulio Baeza⁵ in U.S. horse-racing. As remarked by Jockey Agent 1 following his response of 85-90 percent, “[the industry has] changed so much, but it’s really, really high now” highlighting the evident increase in Latino backstretch workers and jockeys.

Because of the lack of scholarly research pertaining to horse-racing culture, some of my assessment relies on sports articles published by entertainment and sports programming network, ESPN and American sports media franchise, Sports Illustrated. The study ultimately examines whether the shifting nature of horse-racing’s racial and ethnic background provides a community for Latinos to be embraced or if (pre)existing xenophobic discourses directed towards Mexicans and Mexican-Americans carry over into horse-racing, ultimately limiting riders’ agency.

Latino Immigration and Labor Within Kentucky

The Thoroughbred horse-racing industry is segmented into what scholar John Rosencrance refers to as “subworlds.” These subworlds, which I will refer to as hierarchies, have evident racialized segments that place people of color at lower-tiered, physically strenuous occupation levels of backstretch worker and jockey, while dominant, white populations are at the “peak” of trainer and ownership. The culture of horse-racing in Kentucky has a significant Latino community that is situated among the positions of backstretch worker and jockey. Whereas the jockey is often the more affluent economically in comparison to the backstretch worker, both comprise a vulnerable

⁵ Braulio Baeza was born in Panama. Baeza was among the first Latino jockeys to win the Kentucky Derby. He won in 1963. (Kocher, 2013)

identity, of Latino, that spans a history of xenophobic discourses throughout the United States.

Among the Latino population, a majority of jockeys across racetracks in the United States are from Mexico. Mexico was also a common response from interview participants; however, Trainer 2, Jockey Agent 2, and Jockey 2 recognized the prominence of jockeys traveling from Puerto Rico. Others mentioned Panama, Brazil, Venezuela, and Guatemala. Many of these countries have well-established jockey schools that provide a gateway into the racing industry. Panama and Puerto Rico, in particular, have fostered several well-known jockeys, such as Laffit Pincay Jr who won the Kentucky Derby in 1984 (Daily Racing Form, 2014).

Kentucky in particular has a fascinating immigration history, becoming the tenth-fastest growing state for immigrants during the 1990s (Nuñez, 2012). Between 1990 and 2006, a significant shift occurred in the cultural composition of Kentucky as the Latino population grew by 300 percent (Shultz, 2008). In a 2010 Census Brief published by the U.S. Census Bureau, Kentucky's Latino population continued to grow from 59,939 in 2000 to 132,836 in 2010, a 121.6 percent increase (May 2011). This rapid demographic shift in Kentucky's population was unusual for the South East, as typical destinations for Latinos are Border States, such as California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas (Schultz, 2008). Scholar Benjamin Schultz attributes these new Latino settlement patterns as a result of a sequence of political and economic events that occurred in the United States and abroad (Schultz, 2008).

The government has a common history of using specific labor groups for temporary agricultural labor (Cravey, 2003). As a result, they often exploit a specific racial group, typically immigrant workers, some of whom are Latina/o. Beginning in 1942 and continuing until 1964, the United States federal government enacted the Bracero Program, which allowed millions of Mexican males to enter the U.S. for temporary, short-term agricultural work (Bracero History Archive). The Bracero History Archive estimates that nearly 4.6 million Mexican nationals came to work in the U.S. as braceros (Bracero History Archive).

With the arrival of the 1980s, federally sponsored agriculture labor shifted to the federally sponsored H-2A “guest worker” program that stretched rapidly across North Carolina (Shultz, 2008). The H-2A program established means for agricultural employers in the Southeast who anticipated a shortage of domestic workers to bring nonimmigrant foreign workers into the United States to perform temporary agricultural labor. Most of these foreign workers were from Mexico and began to occupy “the undesirable, low-paying jobs characteristic of the South’s lax business climate” (Schultz, 2008). This steady reliance on people of color for the fulfillment of hazardous “dirty work” (Rosecrance, 1985) illustrates a problematic positioning of vulnerable populations in a form of labor, or niche, with little economic or social benefit.

Traditional gateway immigration states for Latinos, such as California and Texas, were becoming overly populated for individuals seeking employment opportunities. These areas were also developing rising nativist hostility (Shultz, 2008) among presiding residents towards people of color. Due to this, Latinos began to seek out non-traditional destinations with a high demand for labor. The South became this destination in the 1980s and early 1990s with Kentucky being the chief location for the tobacco industry. Kentucky experienced exceptional out-migration of young people causing the tobacco business to need new individuals to harvest the crops. Schultz highlights the increased mobility of Latino agricultural workers following the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA)—“one of the boldest changes in U.S. immigration policy to date” that increased immigration enforcement in border states (Schultz, 2008). Migrant workers quickly took advantage of employment opportunities in Kentucky’s tobacco industry once tobacco producers recognized undocumented and documented Latino immigrants for cheap labor. Employment opportunities in Kentucky’s tobacco industry became a significant initial pull factor for Latinos (Shultz, 2008).

Immigration was s briefly acknowledged by several interview participants; however, not all respondents explicitly addressed it. Jockey Agent 1 did shift the conversation towards immigration, referring to the emergence of Latino jockeys in U.S. horse-racing as a “pipeline.” He added: “I don’t know immigration laws, so I don't know about that part. But, I think there’s just the transition going from Panama to the United

States is much easier for those guys. I mean, for one they've had so much success, they're gonna be accepted, plus, there's just more Latinos on the backside." His statement presupposes Latino acceptance by the racing industry and that a majority of Latino jockeys attend jockey schools in Latin America prior to coming to the United States, thus making them prime for success in U.S. horse-racing.

Jockey Agent 1 eventually revisited immigration in his concluding statements referencing the diverse, but accumulated experiences of many Latino jockeys and backstretch workers:

"I've heard and talked to some people, ya know, just about their lives in Mexico, who grew up in some pretty impoverished areas. I—one of my good friends who actually told me his story about coming across the border also, for a while, lived in one of the big narco towns."

Although Jockey Agent 1's associate is only a single individual that cannot account for the experiences of all Latino's in the U.S. horse racing industry, his anecdote illustrates the hazardous trek some Latinos take in order to arrive to the United States—in this scenario, to Emerald Downs. Because of the jockey agent's close interaction and relationship with his jockeys, his conversations with Latino jockeys may be more personal in comparison to trainer and jockey.

Trainer 2 also referenced immigration, along with work visas. His certainty that work visas have assisted Latino employment acknowledges the documentation status of Latino industry workers. However, Trainer 1 was the single participant to comment on lack of documentation or "illegal" status stating, "They don't probably put it in the deal, but they're not legal." His statement collectively fixes and questions the status of Latinos in a way that does not commonly occur for dominant, white members of society. He later subtly recognized the exploitation of the undocumented that can occur. However, the "exploitation" he discussed was designated towards alternate labor industries outside of horse-racing. For example, he specifically referenced landscaping and positions within food services.

Narrative Construction of Latinos

Many participants either unconsciously or consciously constructed persisting narratives surrounding Latinos--narratives that have historical and contemporary linked ideologies to race and class. Several respondents described Latinos as “hardworking.” Such hypervisible imagery persists in past stereotypical representations of Latinos and often references the underlying concept of the American Dream:

“Well, I, I, I think that the work ethic. Ya know, they came over here and, ya know, where they’ve come from, when they get here they’re working for obviously more money and trying to improve their lifestyle...So, ya know, their work ethic’s really good.” -Trainer 2

The hesitant response from Trainer 2 contradicts former stereotyped notions of Latinos, or people of color as lazy, instead, conceptualizing them as meticulous workers with an exceptional work ethic. As noted by Trainer 1, they are performing the labor that white people will not do. Yet, such a response negatively correlates Latinos exclusively with labor or agricultural work. His response seems to predominantly refer to backstretch workers rather than jockeys, however, the consistent narrative throughout his responses followed similar ideology. In similar context, Jockey Agent 1 masculinized his belief responding, “I’m generalizing, but your typical on Facebook, texting, videotape, video-game, local white guy—he doesn’t want to do that job...so the pool of potential riders, on the backside, in our racing, is much more Latino.”

In addition, several other respondents professed that U.S. horse-racing presented greater opportunities for Latinos and supplemented the desire to “improve their life” (Trainer 2). Trainer 1, Trainer 2, Jockey Agent 2, Jockey 1, and Jockey 3 had similar viewpoints in regards to this perception.

The Latino Pastoral Narrative

Chicano studies scholar Gabriela Nuñez introduces the “latino pastoral narrative” as a discourse to humanize and embrace the growing Latino population in Kentucky and other southeast states. Her research explores preexisting discourses of nature, from an ecocritical perspective, that argues for the cultural acceptance and incorporation of Latina/o immigrant and migrant workers in Kentucky by situating them and their contributions as integral to the horse-racing industry’s success (Nuñez, 2012). The latino

pastoral narrative links both Latinos with non-human animals, horses, into a singular identity. Nuñez articulates:

“Race-horses in Kentucky are experiencing a process of Latinization, becoming bilingual through the influence of their Latino caretakers with whom they have regular contact [providing] the otherwise invisible Latino workers who comprise and sustain the low-skill level work that is vital to the horse-racing industry, thus creating a relationship between Latino workers and horses in which the two reflect one another” (2012).

The argument generates an emotional audience response for workers near the bottom of the racially stratified labor hierarchy while articulating their linguistic influence on the racetrack. Nuñez states, “[the pastoral narrative] constructs Latino immigrants as adaptable to the U.S. South through their relationship to animals and proximity to nature vis-à-vis their labor” (2012) illustrating the vitality of the Latino-horse relationship in horse-racing of both jockey and backstretch worker. The assimilated construction between horse and Latino was further connected by Jockey Agent 2’s response:

“...basically the working with horses cause a lot of them [Latinos] just like working with horses, cause many of them have worked at barns or what not...and if you’re living—in America, if you’re here and a successful jockey, you’re, you’re living pretty well.” -Jockey Agent 2

Jockey Agent 2, who is a Mexican-American, closely defines the relationship between either Latino backstretch worker and horse or Latino jockey and horse. He eventually references the potential dangers associated with the job, but unconsciously justifies the risks with the supposed lack of academic education of many Latino jockeys. Thus, he believes horse-racing provides an opportunity for Latinos who did not complete formal schooling.

The adaptability of Latino immigrants is not only applicable to the South, but across the nation as a whole. Still, Nuñez explains that racial and class barriers remain in order to “pigeonhole Latino workers into low-level service work [and these narratives] sometimes fall short of addressing larger structural problems that are detrimental to the lives of, especially, undocumented workers” (Nuñez, 2012). Nuñez is hesitant to fully accept the pastoral narrative for fear of it marginalizing Latinos as adaptable only for their labor on the racetrack and with horses. Latinos need not only be embraced for their

labor in the horse-racing industry, but also viewed as human and deserving of cultural citizenship⁶, the simultaneous claiming to one's cultural difference and to first-class citizenship (Rosaldo, 402, 1994).

Nuñez heavily focuses on the “invisible” population of backstretch workers (2012), but the prominence of the Latino community is also reflected in the jockey population. This lack of visibility ties in with the invisibility of jockey during the race. But, unlike the position of backstretch worker, the racial and ethnic transformation of jockeys provides a place where some Latinos are able to flourish both economically and via industry recognition. Still, it begs the question that if Latinos are accepted in their role(s) within the horse-racing industry as backstretch worker and jockey, does this (cultural) acceptance also persist outside of horse-racing and off-the-track?

Latino Jockey Portrayal in Popular Media

42-year old jockey Victor Espinoza, a native of Mexico, won the 2015 Kentucky Derby, Preakness Stakes, Belmont Stakes (the three races together are referred to as the coveted Triple Crown that had not been accomplished in 37 years) and Breeders Cup aboard American Pharoah. Espinoza is currently regarded as the highest-profile rider in America and became the first Latino jockey to win the Triple Crown (Rivera, 2015). His 2015 earnings rank him sixth among all jockeys in the United States, totaling \$15,893,524 (Equibase). Espinoza has prominently acknowledged his racial identity in previous interviews and on live television. However, the success of Espinoza and his arrival into mainstream networks, such as his casting in season 21 of *Dancing with the Stars*, is not typical of most jockeys competing at local racetracks. His story is often framed with underlying elements of the American Dream. Espinoza recognizes his start from what he refers to as the “bottom” (Duckworth, 2015), growing up on an animal farm in Mexico, driving a bus in Mexico City to help pay for jockey school, to becoming a renowned jockey racing in America's biggest races. Jockey Agent 2's father's⁷ childhood

⁶ Claims that, in a democracy, social justice calls for equity among all citizens, even when such differences as race, religion, class, gender, or sexual orientation potentially could be used to make certain people less equal (Rosaldo, 1994)

⁷ Jockey Agent 2 refers to his step-father as his father whom he has known since birth.

as a Mexican-American immigrant jockey is nearly analogous to Espinoza's. His father emigrated from a low-income farm near Mexico City and Jockey Agent 2 professed the difficulties his father has experienced in the horse-racing industry, but often assimilated his father's adversities into a collective experience for jockeys of all ethnic backgrounds. His reasoning for why Latinos entered the racing industry often appeared more sensible and understanding than others interviewed possibly due to his own experiences growing up in the United States as a bilingual Mexican-American.

Journalist William Leggett's 1962 article "The Latin Invasion" published by *Sports Illustrated* became one of the first pieces of writing that recognized Latino dominance in horse-racing. The article highlighted the career of Panama-born jockey, Braulio Baeza, while exploring the shift towards employing Latino jockeys. The author used narratives that situated Latinos as "natural horsemen," which links Latinos with the physical environment of nature, similar to Nuñez's ecocritical pastoral narrative. In a 1962 article published in *Sports Illustrated*, horse-racing trainer Sunny Jim Fitzsimmons stated, "The Latins are going to take it all over in five or 10 years. They're natural horsemen...Mark my words, there'll be more Latin riders around here than Americans before too long" (Leggett, 1962). Fitzsimmons' statement both generalizes the Latino population and reinstates a trope of "natural" among Latinos and their labor in horse-racing. At the same time, his lack of cross-cultural understanding--Latinos from where, for example--flattens the identity of Latino by erasing difference.

In a similar regard, Terence Meyocks, national manager for Jockeys' Guild, a Lexington-based union that represents riders, (NBC, Harun, 2014), believes the Latinos' purported smaller physical size is a factor for their success as jockeys given, for example, specific regulations for a weight less than approximately 110 pounds (Associated Press, 2008).

The two examples of physical size and "nature" used as justification for Latino jockey success highlights stereotypes associated with Latinos that transpired from ethnocentrism and symbolic annihilation. The supporting rhetoric or justification for the success and increase of Latino jockeys (from white to brown) used by interview participants often followed a progression similar to comments made more than 60 years

ago by industry workers Leggett and Meyocks. Without hesitation, Trainer 1 stated, “Well, the white people can’t make weight.” Analogously, Jockey 2 asserted, “[They’re] just *perfect*-sized guys.” They’re “*naturally* smaller people” responded Trainer 2. Jockey Agent 2’s response resonated similarly as he contended that if a sport involves horses, it is an automatic perception for a Latino to be considered a jockey due to their lighter weight.

Once respondents identified the size of Latinos, they often complemented their response with the size of white jockeys. Interestingly, Trainer 2’s word choice often categorized white as American: “Americans are a lot bigger nowadays than they were back in the day.” However, Jockey Agent 1⁸ was careful to specify his labeling of American stating, “When you start talking about 110, 112 pounds fully grown, you’re taking out a huge percentage of Americans—white Americans. Latinos are going to be more of that size.” Although this form of quick reasoning develops interesting theory, it doesn’t satisfy the notion of what in particular draws Latinos to horse-racing.

Jockey Agent 1, who has seen and experienced the industry from various roles--as a groom, agent, and trainer--proposed one additional theory following his assertion that weight does play a substantial role in horse-racing:

“When I first came around the racetrack, Mexico, South America, horse-racing was huge. It was a big, big deal. And I think that the top jockeys were celebrities—athletes making really good livings. And I think that the young up and comers at that time—the guys they idolized—were, ya know, if you were in Mexico, whoever the leading, big name Mexican riders were. Or if you were in Panama, ya know, Laffit Pincay...but you idolize the locals. Everybody I talk to now, horse-racing is really on a decline in Mexico, South America and so I think that one, there’s been some of those jockeys come to the United States and really hit it big. So now, the up and comers in Mexico aren’t idolizing the leading [jockey] in Mexico in 1974, they’re idolizing the jockeys that have gone from Mexico to the United States before them and hit it big.” -Jockey Agent 1

Jockey Agent 1 provides an inquiring argument that brushes over the global horse-racing industry outside of the United States. His proposal concludes that because

⁸ Jockey Agent 1 was critical of his own responses and often appeared hesitant to misidentify or interpret Latinos.

horse-racing is diminishing in Latin America, Latinos feel an inclined pull towards U.S. horse-racing. The jockey's decision factors in the potential for success or celebrity status—hitting the “bigtime” (Jockey Agent 1). Instead of Latino jockeys racing in native countries, Jockey Agent 1 hypothesizes that local Latino jockeys are hoping to emulate the success of Latino jockeys, such as Victor Espinoza, Javier Castellano, and John Velazquez, who have garnered accolades in the industry. Jockey 2 answered with similar reasoning affirming, “You see a couple of guys do good. They see a couple of guys doing good and they want to be here too.” Because many Latinos have attended formal jockey school prior to attending U.S. racetracks, their experience and knowledge in the disposition makes them appropriate candidates as jockeys.

Progress fifty-three years in the media and similar narratives between Latino and horse persist. Prominent horse-racing trainer, Bob Baffert, who helped train American Pharoah, recently stated in an article from ESPN, “If horses could talk, they would surely speak Spanish...I don't know what I'd do without them because they get along really well with the horses...They are very dedicated workers who love their job” (Cervantez, 2015). This comment signals the influence of Latinos on the racing industry and identifies the significance of their work and contributions on the track, which are often ignored. Baffert's general attitude frames the narrative in positive acknowledgement towards Latino horse work. Still, Baffert's statement that the workers “love their job” ignores the challenges many Latinos face in the United States. In the case of horse-racing, their hard work and long hours do not always result in large economic rewards.

Similar to Baffert's comments on the presence of Spanish in horseracing, Nuñez's incorporation of linguistics into her studies articulates the bilingualism, or “Latinization,” that Baffert encapsulates (Nuñez, 2012). Horses understanding Spanish is a result of the intimate relationship between Latino backstretch worker, Latino jockey, and horse through regular contact. Nuñez provides anecdotal evidence of a discriminatory trainer who disapproved of speaking to the horses in Spanish and favoring English.

Hierarchical Income

Even though Latinos and their labor is embraced in the horse-racing industry, the tendency for white America to elicit xenophobic discourses around immigrants from Latin America in particular undermines the acceptance of Latinos as jockeys. The Sports Illustrated article imposes negative rhetoric towards Latin-American-origin workers through use of the word “invasion” and by referencing that “American” (white) jockeys, such as Bill Hartack, “know all too well who is coming up behind them.” Latinos are seen as a threat to the career of white jockeys. Whether that threat refers to racial fear or financial uncertainty remains ambiguous.

In its entirety, horse-racing is a sport that is extremely circumstantial, non-stationary or seasonal, and has low economic stability, especially for an apprentice jockey⁹. Unlike sports, such as football and basketball, jockeys lack a formal, yearly contract with an annual salary. Instead, a majority of their income is earned by winning races, increasing both the sport’s level of competitiveness and vulnerability of its players. Thus, there are barriers for success if jockeys are not finishing in the top three spots in races. According to Jockey Agent 1, “We’re notorious for not being good business people, as far as you know; all the time there’s disputes about money, and, ya know, you don’t have anything in writing.” The lack of confirmed income reveals the potential for exploitation that could occur to Latino jockeys, in particular, undocumented Latinos.

In 2013, the top five earning jockeys were all Latino. 2013’s highest earning jockey, Javier Castellano, grossed an annual total of \$1,834,945 followed by Joel Rosario with \$1,511,016, John Velasquez with \$1,355,540, Rafael Bejarano with \$1,092,032, and Irad Ortiz Jr. with \$997,717 (Martin, *The Richest*, 2014). Yet, the average annual jockey income in the United States is a mere \$20,000 (Arsehad, 2014). A 2013 study indicated that trainers average slightly more at \$34,000 per year (Suttle, 2013) that fluctuates to \$54,000 in the District of Columbia. Unlike basketball players or American football players, jockeys don’t obtain a contract that designates them a specified annual income for their partnership with a team. No matter their placing in the race, jockeys are paid between \$30 and \$100 depending on their mount; however, jockeys receive only 10

⁹ A jockey who has ridden less than 40 winners or less than two years since first received a license in any racing jurisdiction

percent of the race winnings, if he/she wins. So, while Castellano's total race earnings for 2013 totaled \$26,219,907 (Equibase, 2013), he only received \$1,834,945, or 6.99 percent of this total.

If we examine the purse for the 2015 Kentucky Derby, which totaled \$2,000,000, the owner of the winning horse received \$1,240,000 (Conway, Bleacher Report, 2015). Victor Espinoza, the winning jockey, garnered 10 percent of the race winnings, or \$124,000. But, jockeys must also pay their agents 25 percent, who pick and negotiate their rides, and 5 percent goes towards their valet, who prepares their racing gear. At most, a jockey who wins the Kentucky Derby can make \$86,800 before taxes (Rovell, CNBC, 2010). The second and third place finishers receive 5 percent of their owner's take—\$400,000 and \$200,000. A jockey who finishes second will receive a check for \$20,000 while a third place jockey will receive \$10,000. After fees, their totals fall to \$14,000 and \$7,000. Jockeys who place lower will only receive a few hundred dollars for their participation. Because a jockey's income is exceptionally inconsistent, losing races has large financial implications. Their income is based heavily on race-by-race performance, experience, and networks. Their income stands in stark contrast to the Kentucky Derby crowd, which is composed of predominantly wealthy individuals. According to a 2011 Performance Research Study, 51 percent of attendees had an annual household income over \$100,000, which differs from the more diverse, local tracks where middle-class individuals are often in attendance.

The income of backstretch workers significantly drops from that of most jockeys. Hotwalkers, who hand-walk horses to cool them down following a race, generally earn \$250 to \$350 per week (Nessen, WNYC News, 2012). Grooms who tend to the horse's physical care and clean the stalls and barn for six to twelve hours a day earn approximately \$400 per week (Nessen, WNYC News, 2012). If backstretch workers are called the "backbone of the industry" (Nessen, WNYC News, 2012) and vital to its success, why is their income not reflective of this?

Discrimination, Language Barriers, and Concerns

A key concern of this study is to understand the treatment of Latino jockeys and backstretch workers in the industry. Nuñez and several media outlets addressed their

“vitality” to the industry. Both Jockey Agent 1 and Jockey Agent 2 noted the strenuous physical labor performed by jockey and backstretch worker. Jockey Agent 1 negotiated between the physicality of the job and its rewards stating, “Now, I loved being a groom. I thought it was the greatest job in the world. But, it’s a hard job six to seven days a week.” A job, as mentioned by several participants, in which white people do not wish to partake. Jockey Agent 2 recognized the dangers of the horse-racing industry while also describing the long workdays for jockeys and backstretch workers—many arriving to the racetrack at five in the morning. He used his father, a Mexican-American immigrant who is currently a jockey at Emerald Downs, as a model to illustrate the difficulties:

“He wakes up seven days a week, ya know, six, five in the morning to come in and work the horses, goes home, and then, when there’s races in the afternoon he has to go back and ride them...he’s had ups and downs...but I think mostly he’s been, ya know, steady, consistent with his ups.”

The 24/7 aspect of this low-paid, high-stress job is worthy of study in additional research.

Similar to horse-racing trainer Bob Baffert, Trainer 1 attempted to justify the intensity of backstretch labor and proclaimed, “They like their job. They like their money.” The sensationalism of Trainer 1’s response delves into setting Latinos as aberrant from dominant, white populations. Additionally, job appreciation couples with the idea of Latinos as “ideal” workers. This stereotype is commonly positioned on people of color employed in agricultural work.

When participants were asked about discrimination and language barriers for Latinos in the U.S. horse-racing industry, almost immediately their responses invoked towards language barriers and ignored the potential for discrimination or underlying racial tensions. Several participants, such as Trainer 1 and Trainer 2, seemed to imply that Latinos should speak English. Trainer 1 resisted studying Spanish for fear that “If I learn Spanish, they won’t learn English.” His response positions and assumes Latinos as the individuals who must assimilate into dominant culture. His comment also espouses an assimilation theory, the process by which people of color (minoritized group) adopt the “cultural patterns” of the

host society (Alba et al, 1997). However, Jockey Agent 1 diverted from Trainer 1's belief. Instead, he spoke of a desire to learn Spanish and guiltily professed, "I should know a lot more Spanish than I do," eventually noting that the "red-neck, kind of older generation" prefer jockeys and backstretch workers to speak "our language." Again, asserting the power dynamic of trainers and owners.

Predominantly, responses concluded that language is rarely a significant obstacle for jockey performance. Jockey Agent 2, who is fluent in both English and Spanish, noted that trainers typically choose a jockey strictly based on their knowledge, experience, attitude, and expertise in the industry, but are often willing to take "a shot" on new jockeys that know limited English. Yet, language remains a barrier for Latinos in other circumstances. Jockey Agent 2 referred to the difference in language as a "struggle," but reflected his response by stating, "They [Latinos] learn quick" often utilizing "racetrack language" and "horse-racing terminology." His bilingualism allows him to speak and interact with Latinos differently than white industry workers who only speak English. Several respondents referenced the ability for other Latinos in the barn or an interpreter to assist with translation. However, some trainers might shy away from a jockey who speaks no English (Jockey Agent 1) because of the necessity for trainers to communicate instructions to jockeys prior to the race.

Jockey 1 appeared less inclined to respond towards questions surrounding Latino jockeys and associated with race, often expressing uncertainty. When asked what about the sport she believed attracted Latinos, she responded, "I, I don't know if I can really answer that because I don't know." Her response illustrates either an avoidance mechanism or initial disregard for Latino jockey prominence, a theme that persisted throughout her interview.

Others, such as Jockey 2 became somewhat defensive when his perceptions of Latinos were questioned. Eventually he stated, "I judge a person by a person." An almost identical response was made by Trainer 2 apprehending, "I don't think of them as Latinos. I just think of them as, ya know, everybody's equal." Although this sentiment is a general positive response, it brings up notions of colorblind racism that persist in

contemporary society, and it ignores the potential racial and economic inequalities of the sport.

Overall, participants generally overlooked the racialized hierarchical division of the sport, despite the high percentage of Latinos in the position of jockey and backstretch worker, which highlights the sport's racially tiered classification. If it is acknowledged that U.S. horse-racing's cultural shift consists of a large Latino workforce, it begs the question of whether the continuation of the sport will allow *more* Latinos to reach the position of trainer and owner. Several interview participants mentioned the emergence and increase of Latino's into the position of trainer, however; only one Latino trainer was identified among a group of predominantly older, white trainers stationed in the paddock. Overall, my trackside observations revealed that structural inequalities persist at the racetrack.

Still, the collective community aspect of the racetrack, referenced as a "small town... like one family" by Trainer 2, could potentially provide Latinos with a safe space for continued usage of Spanish without limitation. Participants often noted that Latinos might have felt a draw towards the U.S. horse-racing industry because of former Latinos who gained success within the sport. However, the inclusivity and acceptance of Latinos and difference the racetrack needs further examination.

Methods

I arrived at Emerald Downs as race three of nine was about to begin. The audience consisted of a largely white, hyper-masculine, older crowd that, from inference, appeared middle-class. Audience members' conversations typically oriented around handicapping¹⁰ and miscellaneous topics outside of the horse-racing field. Most onlookers seemed concerned with the horses solely for betting purposes often shouting the horse's name as horse and jockey approached the finish line. Little descriptive analysis of jockeys or horses was overheard. Several families ventured to the track, typically stationed near the picnic areas further from the centrally located grandstand.

¹⁰ To handicap a race, individuals predict which horse has the greatest chance of winning a race and profit from these predictions at the horse races.

Overall, Emerald Downs was not packed to capacity; however, there was a sizeable audience perhaps due to the day's sublime weather conditions.

There was a cyclical nature to the race "system" as races three through nine were performed repetitiously in a nearly identical format. In each circumstance, approximately fifteen minutes before the next race, horse handler and horse would arrive to the virtually immaculate, wooden paddock ready to saddle. The racial identity of the backstretch workers was more visible in comparison to jockeys. Wearing the horses' number, the faces of the horse handlers remained uncovered, yet this notion of their bodies being incorporated with that of the horses could potentially assimilate all Latinos into a singular identity or number. An intermixing of Spanish and English was predominantly spoken between horse handlers. Similar to the jockeys, many appeared familiar with one another and the environment often reciprocated that of community. Jockeys, however, were more difficult to racially identify. Their stainless silks covered their bodies along with their helmets, wiping them of racial visibility. Several jockeys had their last name monogrammed on the outside of their riding pants—the only apparent form of identification. It was clear that all jockeys on this racing day were male. Most jockeys raced multiple times throughout the day, often back-to-back continually exiting and reemerging from the jockey's room near the paddock. Several jockeys appeared in an animated demeanor following their return to the jockey's room, their faces and silks often covered in dirt from the track, with their celebrity status of athlete more noted by young children.

The general attitudes towards and interactions between jockeys, trainers, and horse handlers appeared nonchalant, calm, and positive in reception towards one another. Yet, the far distance between the jockeys and myself poses a potential limitation in my ability to hear. The walk for the jockey, horse, and horse handler from the paddock to the track gates is uncovered territory that creates a heightened mode of exhilaration for a collection of individuals.

Interview Structure

Responses were gathered from two trainers (Trainer 1 and Trainer 2), two jockey agents (Jockey Agent 1 and Jockey Agent 2), and three jockeys (Jockey 1, Jockey 2, and

Jockey 3) with interviews lasting between ten to thirty-five minutes. Two of the seven interviews were conducted in-person while the remainder were performed over-the-phone due to travel limitations. The interviews consisted of a series of fifteen to twenty-two questions and were controlled among industry positions.

The interview questions initiated with a simplistic format that inquired about their birthplace, time in the industry, previous experience in horse-racing, number of jockeys they interact with, and what factors navigated them towards their current employment or “hierarchical position.” Following these initial questions developed in order to establish a comfortable relationship with participants, questions shifted towards Latino jockey presence at U.S. racetracks before delving further into discussion about race and Latino identity. Responses were typically quick during the initial stages of the interview and eventually became more apprehensive. There was an overwhelming masculine tone to responses, with pronouns, such as “him” and “he” used by nearly all respondents with the exception of Trainer 2 and Jockey 1.

Participant Demographics

The identities of participants remained anonymous in order to promote response, but handles were given in order to prevent confusion and ease identification among participants. Trainer 1, a white male, age 71, stated that he had been in the industry for approximately 55 years. Those fifty-years were spent traveling and working at a number of racetracks across the United States. He was careful to profess the evident competitiveness of the sport and the increase of purse money. Trainer 2, a 42-year old white male, currently trains in the Southern California Circuit. He previously raced as a jockey from November 1989 until November 1996; however, his career as a jockey ended because he physically outgrew the position.

Jockey Agent 1 was a 42-year old white male. His career in the U.S. horse-racing industry initiated as a groom. He eventually trained for ten years prior to becoming an agent in 2000. One limitation of the study was the number of Latino/a voices in interviews. Only one participant, Jockey Agent 2, age twenty-two, identified as a Mexican-American. The lack of Latino response potentially biases the study towards a

white male perspective—the predominant demographic background of four of the seven participants.

Jockey 1 was the sole white female participant in the study. Currently age 44, she has been a jockey for sixteen years and previously worked as an exercise rider for ten years. Jockey 2 was a 51-year old white male who formerly worked as a groom at Longacres¹¹ racetrack from age seven to fifteen years of age before becoming a jockey in 1981. Jockey 3 was a 26-year old Barbadian jockey who has raced for nearly ten years. He attended a jockey school in Barbados for nine months and attained a galloping license for three years before becoming a jockey in Canada. A second prospective biasing factor to the study exists from Jockey 3’s misunderstanding of the word “Latino.” His responses reflected a confusion with Latino jockeys for Black jockeys given his outlying responses that indicated a continual draw towards Black jockey experiences. Still, the data he provided conceptualized the experience for jockeys of color in the U.S. horse-racing industry.

Conclusion

Author of *Latinos in U.S. Sport*, Iber et al, argues, “Sports are also cultural sites where people formulate or change ideas and beliefs about skin color and ethnic heritage ... sports are more than mere reflections of racial and ethnic relations in society; they’re sites where ... relations occur and change” (2011). The sport of horse-racing has become a cultural site for Latinos, and in some way, facilitates their assimilation into the United States. The rapid increase in Latino jockey and backstretch demographics is difficult to ignore. Latino participation within the industry and positioning in the hierarchy can still mount them towards a career of fame, as seen through Espinoza. But, for many jockeys and backstretch workers the time and physical exertion to become well-known in the industry may not be worth the financial and physical risks.

An overall trend acknowledged by both interview participants, prior and current industry workers, and media associations is that Latinos are well-equipped jockeys because of their small physical size and desire for success in the United States. Although

¹¹ Longacres was a racetrack in Renton, Washington from 1933-1992. The land was sold to the Boeing Company and the track closed in September 1992.

such an argument is not necessarily foundationally accurate, it further illuminates the portrayal and stereotype of Latinos as “ideal,” meticulous workers, and quick learners in certain occupations. However, their acceptance in regards to labor at the racetrack does not always reciprocate culturally. Participants often unconsciously flattened Latino into an assimilated, coherent cultural identity or attempted to strip race and ethnicity from their responses.

The maintenance of jockey schools in South and Central America countries, such as Panama, facilitates Latinos interested in pursuing a career as a jockey. The larger purses and paths paved by prior Latino jockeys like Baeza, Pincay Jr, and currently, Espinoza could function as inspiration for those interested in or currently attending a jockey school in Latin America. Though interview participants did not directly recognize the influence of previous migrational lines paved by family members and friends, family lineage and linkage to horse-racing, it could provoke future generations to pursue a career in the U.S. horse-racing industry. As a result, labor pools develop and grow, which would lead to an increase of Latinos in certain industries. This was apparent from Jockey Agent 2 who was born in Mexico and essentially grew up in the sport because his father was a jockey.

Further research could examine the complications of injury with the Latino body. Interdisciplinary scholar Jennifer Swanberg performed a cross-sectional study examining the high demands and environmental health impacts on Latinos employed on tobacco crop and horse breeding farms in Kentucky (Swanberg, 2012), yet few studies have investigated Latino jockey physical and psychological vulnerability in U.S. horse-racing.

One shortcoming of this study is the lack of available racial and ethnic demographics for the U.S. horse-racing industry--for specific racetracks, and for racing commissions in the United States. Such data would be essential to understand the cultural transformation of this industry among jockeys (and backstretch workers). Several associations, such as the Jockeys’ Guild, Equibase, and The Jockey Club, were contacted; however, none collect this information. The Jockeys’ Guild specifically stated that they do not ask for that information on membership applications and does not believe any other horse-racing or jockey organization keeps demographic information on file.

The interchangeability of jockeys often complicates the nature of their importance. Their repetitious cycling from various races and racetracks throughout the racing season poses extreme risks to their bodies. Because of the United States' history of employing and exploiting people of color in labor groups, it is worth continued examination of the U.S. horse-racing industry, on both the backstretch and racetrack. As noted by Nuñez, service work performed by Latinos is sometimes ignored as well as larger structural issues, such as social and economic disparities, that can have adverse impacts for Latinos employed in the racing industry.

Several interview participants continually acknowledged common stereotypes associated with Latinos, for example, diligent work-ethic, yet these interviewees lacked a significant response on attitudes towards immigration. This raises the question about whether Latino acceptance is more conclusively granted on the racetrack when labor is being performed for an industry's benefit. However, off-the-track, a Latino's citizenship is frequently questioned and connected with discriminatory stereotypes that perpetuate a view of them as having an undocumented ("illegal") status. With ongoing discussions on immigration between the United States and Mexico, it is important to understand whether the acceptance of Latinos in the sport of horse-racing translates in other areas, regions, industries, positions, and labor markets of American society.

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