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Shining Light On The Horse Industry

A Horsewoman Through And Through: Bellocq's Courage Reflects Her Devotion To The Sport

by [Natalie Voss](#) | 10.31.2018 | 11:11pm



Martine Bellocq hard at work

On Wednesday evening, longtime horsewoman Martine Bellocq received the National Turf Writers and Broadcasters' Bill Mooney Award for “displaying courage in the face of tremendous adversity” – a salute to her well-documented bravery during the wildfire which ripped through San Luis Rey Downs in Bonsall, Calif., last December. As has been detailed extensively in newspaper and trade publication accounts, Bellocq suffered burns over 60 percent of her body when she tried to coax trainee Wild Bill Hickory (“Billy”) out of his stall at the training center. High winds drew the flames into the palm trees around San Luis Rey, and a branch fell on the back of Bellocq's barn, setting the roof on fire. Bellocq, unable to see the blaze starting on the back of the building, doused herself with the hose and ran into the stall, trying to save her horse.

It wasn't the flames that got her, she said. There was no smoke, no fire inside Billy's stall when she went in. It was pure heat which melted her skin and caused massive damage to her internal organs. The heat was so

extreme it melted a car sitting outside the barn. Her lower left leg was amputated, and she has endured numerous operations and skin grafts in the 11 months since the blaze. She faces more procedures and months of rehabilitation.

Bellocq received the Pincay Award for her courage earlier this year. Understandably, many people now know her for her brave actions on what was probably the worst day of her life. But before the Lilac Fire, Bellocq had some wonderful stories to tell.

She grew up horse crazy in her native France. Her parents separated, and she spent weekends with her father, renting horses from the local riding stable and teaching herself to ride by hacking over the open fields, falling off and getting back on. She got on any horses she could, learning dressage and show jumping, even learning to drive a sulky so she could work at the mixed meets at Cagnes-sur-Mer.

The year after she took her baccalauréat, the test French students must complete after high school, Bellocq's mother moved to the south of France with Bellocq's younger sister. Times were tough, she remembered.

“I told her I said, 'Mom you don't need to feed me. You need to take care of my little sister. I'll go to work,’” she remembered. “What I can do is ride horses. I thought that would be the best work.”

Bellocq called her brother, who had grown up aboard a rented horse beside her and asked if he knew of anyone who could offer her a job. Sure, he said, he knew someone at a stable in Chantilly.

“Chantilly – is that where the racehorses are?” Bellocq asked him.

She showed up at the yard of John Cunningham, an English trainer based at the idyllic training center outside Paris. If she returned at 4:30 the next morning, his assistant said, she could have a riding job. Although she was a brave rider, Bellocq had never galloped a racehorse before. And there was another challenge.

“There were no women at all. Fifty men and me,” she remembered, chuckling. “All the guys would whistle at me. They'd ride behind me and say things I won't repeat, silly stuff. They'd come next to me and lift me off my horse and put me on the ground. I learned how to ride those horses quick.”

Bellocq earned her stripes as an intuitive, caring rider, and found allies in fellow horsewomen who were breaking the gender barrier in French racing stables. One of her friends moved to the United States and wrote Bellocq letters talking about how plentiful the jobs were. At the age of 20, she sold her car, bought a one-way air ticket to Washington D.C. on a discount Russian airline and hopped a train to Belmont Park.



Bellocq, left, at her first job in America, working as a pony girl for John Gaver

Those early days in America were fraught with a few linguistical challenges. To start with, Bellocq's friend had told her she could easily get a job as a groom. 'Groom' is a word in French, but it translates in English to 'bellhop.'

“I said, 'What's a groom do?' and she said, 'You're going to see, it's ok.' A groom, a groom, that's the people who open the door at the hotel. I'm going to get a little hat,” Bellocq remembered thinking.

Once she arrived at Belmont, she quickly understood what she was meant to do, and it wasn't hard to find a job. It was a little hard to understand her colleagues. She was offered a marijuana cigarette and not knowing what it was, stomped it out, much to the horror of the people who gave it to her. She found American greetings more than a little unsettling. The French often use the exclamation, 'hi' instead of 'ouch' when they've stubbed a toe.

“Every time somebody say hi to me I think, 'What's happened to him?’” she said. “All day people say 'Hi, hi, hi.' It was an education.”

After a year learning English on the fly, Bellocq spent a winter in South Carolina, where she met a fellow Frenchman and aspiring trainer named Pierre.

“I did not speak good English and I said, 'Oh good, a guy who speaks French and English, he can translate for me,’” she chuckled. “Then two years later, we got married and had two kids and have been married 42 years now.”



Martine and Pierre Bellocq with daughters Stefanie and Natacha

Bellocq started her career in the States as a pony girl for John Gaver. He'd promised to let her gallop but quickly realized her skills managing a nervous horse from the back of a pony were exceptional. She ponied his top stars of the late 1960s and early 1970s – Hatchet Man, Stop The Music, Stage Door Johnny. She picked up gallop work from Buddy Hirsch, who was then the trainer for King Ranch, took on a few babies for Billy Turner, and got on Gaver's Greentree Stable horses. Trainers were fascinated by her ability to voice-train horses to switch their leads in the stretch, a trick combining her dressage skills and basic animal behavior.

Bellocq recalled one unnamed 2-year-old she got on for Turner – a sweetheart, but she didn't think much of him at first.

“He was a nice little horse, but fat and lazy. I did not know the name, but I told Pierre the breeding of the horse,” she said. “After a little bit of time, he got good and began breezing. Jean Cruget came and breezed him. I quit work for the trainer; we were probably going on to another track, I don't know. Then one day Pierre said, 'Your little black horse is running.' And I said, 'You're kidding.' And he said, 'Yeah, he's running today. His name is Seattle Slew.’”

The Bellocqs based out of New York for much of the 1970s and early 1980s, with Pierre transitioning between assisting and keeping his own string when times were good. For a while, the couple split their time between Belmont and Monmouth. Pierre would drive to New Jersey, while Martine would drop off the children with his parents and ride her bicycle half a mile to Belmont, with her saddle and bridle in the front basket. She trained one horse of her own in the 1980 meet and borrowed Turner's pony stall.

“Every morning I would train my horse. Pierre told me what to do a little bit. I was galloping horses, I wasn't a trainer,” she said. “I ran the horse five times, and he finished two times second, two times third, and he win. And Mr. Turner, with 40 horses, the best he did was fifth! He comes to me and says, 'Martine, what are you doing? Why are you finishing in the money and I cannot?’”

Bellocq's magic touch was also a source of fascination for Patrick Biancone, who employed the couple for several years. Bellocq remembers a time when she was based at Monmouth with Biancone's stable and was asked to saddle a maiden at Belmont. The horse won by ten lengths, and Biancone sent her with another the next day. When that horse won, he sent her with another. By now, other trainers were eyeing her in the paddock, wary of her lucky streak. She saddled four in a row and Biancone was beside himself. He prepared a fifth horse to go into a \$100,000 stake and insisted Bellocq take the horse.

“I said, 'Patrick I cannot. I got a toothache. I've got to the dentist. Send Pierre if you want, but I'll not go,’” she said. “He said, 'No, no, no, we have to win.' I said, 'You know what, listen Patrick. Pierre, shake my hand. I give him my good hand, the hand I use to saddle the horse.' He said 'I don't know if that works.'”

“Pierre takes the horse and he wins.”



Bellocq had the chance to ride a couple of races as an amateur jockey via the Amateur Riders Club of America

Like many horsemen, Bellocq tried to retire, but “something was missing” once she hung up her tack. She started a small string in California, where the couple had moved to be near their children and grandchildren. Someone gave her a free broodmare, she bred a few horses with a friend.

The racing game has changed in the time since Bellocq hopped a Russian plane to Washington D.C. She remembers a time when the backstretch was a family, with barbeques on Saturday after the races, and a sense of sporting camaraderie. When the couple moved to California, Bellocq had one horse in her name. It was claimed away, in a race he won by ten lengths. That never would have happened 20 years ago.

On the day of the fire, Wild Bill Hickory was the most promising colt she'd had in some time – out of her free broodmare.



Billy in training at San Luis Rey

“He was exceptional, a little bit. For two years old he was so big,” she remembered. “He got broke at the farm of Monty Roberts and he loved the horse. They would send me video every day and wanted to buy the horse. I said no, I'm not selling the horse. We thought he would become, maybe not a stake horse, but a useful horse and he could pay for himself and make a little money.

“[When I woke up], I knew the horse was dead. No one needed to tell me. I knew it.”

The fire took everyone at San Luis Rey by surprise. By the time they realized they needed to evacuate, roads were closed and vans were impossible to get. People let horses loose, hoping they could save themselves.

While Pierre went to get help, Martine began freeing their horses and dashed into Billy's stall. She braved the heat as long as she could before coming out and collapsing outside the barn. She looked up and saw 20 loose horses galloping through the yard. Some of them ran into stalls she had just emptied, desperately looking for someplace to feel safe. Many would never come out.

Forty-six horses would die that day. Remarkably, one of the horses she had freed escaped the flames, but another ran into the stall and was later found, unidentifiable for some time. It was a surprise to receive notification one of their horses was alive in a borrowed stall at Del Mar a few days later.

Bellocq is ambitious about her rehabilitation. A lifetime of falling off horses has taught her to get back on and get on with things.

She said she's not sure why her act of courage has been singled out for award recognition.

“You do everything for the horse, or you aren't a horse person. Lots of people at the track tried to save those horses. They were all horse people,” she said. “I was not the only hero that day.”

The sport of racing may have become more business-like in the past few years, but those awful minutes at San Luis Rey did prove one thing – the sense of community on the backstretch, the outstretched hands, the love of the horse which drew Bellocq to make her life there, hasn't faded away altogether. The heart is still there.

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