



Home Schooling

BY JASON SHANDLER

It wasn't quite as dramatic as Michael Jordan retiring after nailing the final shot of his career to capture the 1998 NBA finals, but James "J.J." Crupi had pulled off his own theatrical exit from Thoroughbred racing one year earlier. On Aug. 30, 1997, Crupi saddled Loyal Groom to victory in the Bob Harding Stakes at Monmouth Park and then promptly walked away from the only job he had known for the previous 30 years.

In retiring from training, Crupi left behind more than 1,000 wins, five New Jersey training titles, and his lifelong passion—not to mention his 40-horse stable. Yet, looking back 12 years later, Crupi said he has no regrets. When asked if he ever misses training, he answered as if it were a silly question.

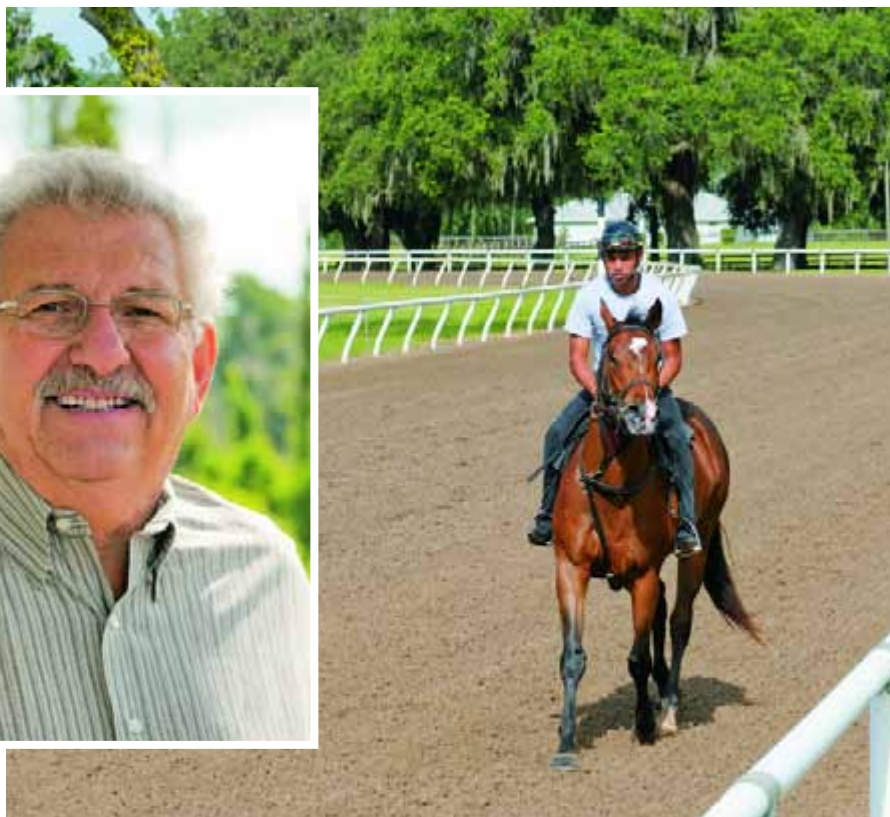
"No. I don't miss training at all," Crupi

said emphatically. "When I go to the race-track now, I don't even watch the races. I usually stay on the backside and talk to friends."

Of course, it's not difficult to understand why Crupi no longer craves life as a trainer, not when you hear him talk about his current businesses: breaking yearlings and pinhooking 2-year-olds. With three decades of experience to draw upon and a keen eye for equine talent, Crupi has taken his game to Central Florida, where he owns and operates 150-acre New Castle Farm near Fellowship, seven miles north of Ocala.

The state-of-the-art training facility is well respected throughout the Thoroughbred industry as one of the best places to break yearlings. Together with his successful pinhooking business, the 68-year-

Former trainer J.J. Crupi is developing young horses into athletes at his New Castle Farm



LOUISE E. REINAGEL PHOTOS

J.J. Crupi's three-quarter-mile training surface has an eight-inch clay base and a cushion of topsoil and sand

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"He [Webb] does a great job . . . He's going to have the horses ready for the races. . . There are no egos involved. . . He has the horses prepared, and they're at the right stage at the right time. That's the biggest key for me." Larry Jones, Thoroughbred Times, June 13, 2009

"We're trying to buy big, two-turn horses. We know we need somebody that's not going to push them. I have just been very happy with how the horses came to Larry. They all had plenty of weight on them, they were well gate-trained, and they were all very professional. He had done a great job in training their minds as well as their bodies." Rick Porter, The Blood-Horse, Nov. 1, 2008

"He [Webb] came with a very good reputation, and I continued to support him. . . It has always worked well. . . Webb is just a really good, honest guy. He's a guy you can talk to." Graham Motion, The Blood-Horse, Nov. 1, 2008



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old Crupi has found a new passion.

"I want to do this for the rest of my life. I love it," Crupi said. "This isn't a job to me. I love developing young horses."

BACK IN JERSEY

Growing up as a youngster in Bergen County, N.J., Crupi knew in his early teens he wanted to be a trainer. Of course, at that time he had no idea what he was in for.

"I used to go to Monmouth Park with my uncle, and I fell in love with it," Crupi said. "I saw all these people dressed up in suits; they looked like movie stars. Once I got into it, I realized it was much more than that. It's seven days a week, long hours every day. I learned quickly that training is like being a movie star, but with a pitchfork."

Crupi learned the sport in the late 1960s while working under Canadian trainer Ron Gibson. It wasn't long before he took out his trainer's license and set up a small stable at Monmouth Park. It took a couple of years before he tasted success, but by the late 1970s Crupi had become one of the leading trainers in New Jersey. He won his first trainer's title in 1977 at Meadowlands and four Monmouth Park titles followed over the next 15 years.

"I got to know Jimmy in the late 1970s,



Horses need plenty of time to learn how to enter, and break from, the starting gate

and I always thought of him as a very good horseman," said Ben Perkins Sr., a leading New Jersey trainer himself for several decades. "He ran a different type of stable than me though, so we didn't compete against each other too often. Jimmy dealt mostly with claimers, which is hard to make a living at. But he always put his horses in the right spots, and they won.

"He's a smart fellow. He knew the right horses to buy and did well with them. He was always a likeable guy too, which probably helps him even more now."

Crupi saddled numerous stakes winners during his time in New Jersey, many of them with horses he claimed himself. Some of his biggest wins were the 1986 Lafayette Stakes at Keeneland with Numero Uno Pass, the 1991 Princeton Stakes and Just Smashing Stakes at Meadowlands with Windundermywings and Darling Danzig, respectively, and the 1994 Princess Rooney Stakes at Meadowlands with Why Be Normal.

Still, with all of his skill with claimers, Crupi only reached a certain level of success.

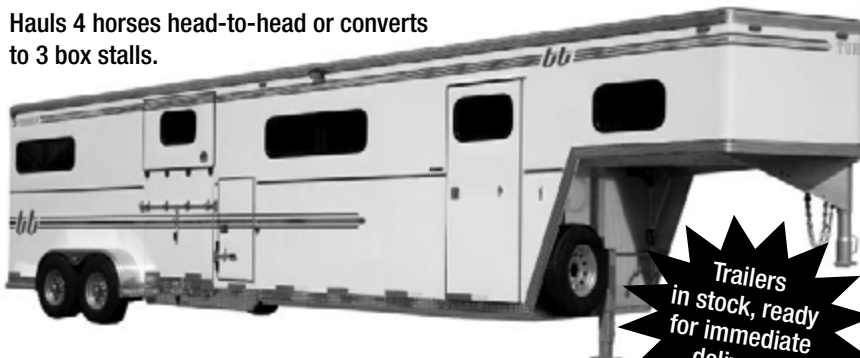
"I worked really hard at it. I was a fanatic, working seven days a week," Crupi said. "But you can only go so far with claimers. I never came up with that one big horse. You need to get lucky or have a big-money owner backing you. I usually had the owners who ran a gas station and

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J.J. Crupi's Five Keys to Breaking Yearlings

- Don't fight the horse at the beginning. The horse will win every time. Let a yearling learn at its own pace.
- Create a calm atmosphere in the stall. No screaming or loud noises. You always want yearlings in a relaxed state.
- "Miles make manners"—A tired horse pays attention better. Work a yearling a little harder to calm them down.
- The best horse doesn't always win. Often times, the best-broke horse wins.
- When all is said and done, you need a talented horse to win races.

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owned one horse.

"I did OK with what I had. I held my own and learned something every day. But I was spinning my wheels near the end. I'd had enough. I turned my stable over to Mary Hartmann and moved on."

ON TO FLORIDA

By the early 1990s Crupi was spending what free time he had in Ocala, especially in the winter. He rented a barn at Classic Mile Park and kept busy by working with yearlings on a small scale. But after a few

years he realized he needed something bigger.

"When I first came to Ocala, I was more interested in pinhooking," Crupi said. "But people kept calling me to break their babies and before you knew it I was doing about 150 a year. I realized how much I liked it. You can move as slow as you want or as fast as you want. I fell in love with it."

In 1995, Sunrise Stable South's owner, Eddie Coletti, tipped off Crupi that the former Happy Valley Farm, previously owned by Louis and Patrice Wolfson, owners of 1978 Triple Crown winner Affirmed, was for sale. Deciding it was the perfect fit for him, Crupi purchased the facility and renamed it New Castle Farm.

Though Crupi described the property as beautiful, he felt it needed work to become the kind of facility that would attract new clients. The first thing he did was build new barns.

"The place had only one barn at the time and it was falling down. We have nine barns and about 40 paddocks now. The barns are all refurbished every single year," Crupi said. "They all have fans, skylights, full mats, and varnished wood for kick plates. There is nothing out of place. When (owner) Dan Borislow first saw the



One key to a winning 2-year-old is how well they have been gate-trained

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barn, he said, 'if you take care of horses as well as you take care of your barns, we'll be in good shape.' That was a major reason he became one of my first big clients."

The other major project Crupi undertook was to overhaul the three-quarter-mile, 60-foot-wide training track—the same one Affirmed did his early training over.

"We put in a new eight-inch clay base and cushion made of a topsoil and sand mix," Crupi said. "We used the same equipment they do at Saratoga, Belmont, and Aqueduct. To keep it up, we hired one guy and that's all he does. He puts hours and hours of labor into it every week. We keep it very uniform and concise.

"People say it's one of the best racetracks in Ocala. It's very kind on horses. Trainers will tell you, when their horses come off my track, there are no problems. Keeping horses sound is our biggest concern."

The training track, which is complete with an irrigation system, starting gate, and gate crew, is recognized as an official training track by *Daily Racing Form* and the state of Florida, according to Crupi. The facility calls in all of its workouts.

"I really like the surface," said New York-based trainer Bruce Levine, who has sent his horses to New Castle for five years and currently has about 25 weanlings and yearlings there. "There are very few injuries on there. It's one of the best around.

"The entire facility is first-class. I send my horses down there and don't have to worry about anything. I let Jimmy do his thing. He was a dominant force as a trainer and is still well respected."

Levine trainees Bustin Stones and Buddy's Humor are just a couple of the many stakes winners that have been broken at New Castle. Others include the graded stakes-winning Tocet, Ten Most Wanted, Macho Again, Vineyard Haven, and Awesome Gem. Many of the nation's top trainers send their yearlings to be broken at the farm, which also includes a lay-up and rehab area.

Crupi said New Castle will break about 75 horses this year. There are four full-time trainers at the facility, including his son, Robert. The trainers supervise their own barns so that each horse gets individual attention. The entire breaking process lasts about six to eight months with Crupi

overseeing the entire process. In all, there are about 30 employees who work at the farm.

Trainer Allen Iwinski has been sending his yearlings to New Castle for more than a decade and said it is among the best in the business.

Breaking Yearlings: Step by Step

According to James "J.J." Crupi, who has been breaking yearlings at his New Castle Farm near Ocala, Fla., for more than 14 years, the breaking process can take anywhere from six to eight months. Because every trainer has specific requests on how he or she wants a horse to be broken, Crupi says each individual horse must be treated differently. Below, Crupi takes us step-by-step on how he breaks a horse:



When young horses first go to the track, they walk and jog for about the first 10 days

- The first thing I do when I get the horse is evaluate it. I watch it in the stall to see if it has any bad habits. Horses are creatures of habit. If you don't correct those habits early on, they will stay with them for their whole career.
- After the evaluation process I will begin to handle the horse. I'll put the bridle on, turn the horse both ways, walk the shedrow with it, have the grooms handle it. If the horses are ready for more after a week, I'll give a boy a leg up on it in the stall. Each horse has its own timetable, so it will tell you how fast it wants to go.
- Then I take the yearlings to the round pen. The round pen is where I'll put a "mouth" on the horse and teach it to steer. It's about 60 feet in diameter, 12-13 feet high, and they can't see out of it. This teaches the yearlings manners. A boy will be on their back. They will turn the horses and break them to the bit. They walk around the shed and ride in the paddock. At this point, we have done about a month of work. If the horses are ready, we will move on. If not, we'll work a little longer.
- Now the yearlings are ready to go to the track. I'll walk them around with a boy in the saddle in a set of six horses, just to show them what it is like to be on the track. We'll walk and jog, walk and jog, keep doing it. This lasts about 10 days.
- When they are ready, I'll start working them in company. I'll show them every different situation they will be in during a race. Have them in front, on the inside, on the outside, behind horses, whatever it may be.
- During this period I will introduce them to a stable pony. This way, when they go to the race-track, they will be prepared. You don't want the horse to rear and act crazy because it hasn't been next to a pony.
- Now it's time to take the yearling to the starting gate. You don't want the horse real fit yet; that's what the trainer will do later. We'll walk the yearlings through the gate, stand them in there, close the door, have someone sit on them while they're in there. Show them there is nothing to be afraid of.
- The last step is to start breezing them. About 180 days have gone by. By this point everything should start coming together. They should be ready to go to the track with the trainer.

By Jason Shandler

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"I send all of my babies down there and recommend it to all of my owners," said Iwinski. "He trains them every day, whereas some places will train every other day to try to save money, which just winds up costing more money in the long run. When my babies come back from his farm, they are always very well broken and pretty far along. They have all been gate-trained, so when I get them back, all I have to do is get them acclimated to the track and they are ready to go. He does a wonderful job."

While many of the horses broken at New Castle are for his clients, many are owned by Crupi, who preps them for his pinhooking business. Crupi buys about 25 horses per year from numerous sales all over the country and has attracted a strong client base of buyers. Among them is West Point Thoroughbreds' Terry Finley.

In 2005 Finley bought Awesome Gem from Crupi at the Barretts March 2-year-olds in training sale for \$150,000. The son of Awesome Again has gone on to earn more than \$1.2 million. In 2007 Finley purchased Macho Again from Crupi for \$150,000 at the Ocala Breeders' Sale Co.'s select sale of 2-year-olds. The 2008 Preakness Stakes (gr. I) runner-up is now a three-time graded stakes winner, including the grade I Stephen Foster Handicap, with more than \$1.4 million in earnings.

"When Jimmy tells you something, you can have strong confidence that he is telling you the truth," Finley said. "Some pinhookers misrepresent what they have. Jimmy doesn't do that. If he doesn't like a horse, he'll tell you. I respect that."

The most recent horse Crupi has had major success with is Zayat Stables' Zensational. A son of Unbridled's Song, Zensational was purchased by Crupi in partner-



Crupi honors his stars...the latest being Triple Bend winner Zensational

ship at the 2007 Keeneland September yearling sale for \$20,000. After breaking him at New Castle, Crupi sold Zensational to Zayat for \$700,000 as a 2-year-old. The colt has gone on to win three of his first five starts, including the \$300,000 Triple Bend Handicap (gr. I) July 5 at Hollywood Park.

Between his pinhooking ventures and preparing horses for the races, Crupi stays plenty busy. Though his days of training are long since gone and he just underwent reconstructive hip surgery, the confessed workaholic still gets up at the crack of dawn. He doesn't know any other way.

"I'm a fanatic," said Crupi, who lives on the farm with his wife, Edith. "I like to do things right. I just believe in being up front with people and giving them what they pay for. I wouldn't want to be cheated, so I don't cheat them. Plus, I don't want any hassle at the castle." 🐾

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