

Unbridled Enthusiasm

The most celebrated female jockey in history, Carlsbad's Julie Krone has recharged her approach to horsemanship.

By Roy Robertson





Krone on the champion filly Halfbridled, winning the \$1,000,000 Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies at Santa Anita in October 2003

Julie Krone, the most accomplished woman in thoroughbred horse racing history, is the personification of unbridled enthusiasm. She is in perpetual motion. It's difficult to envision her sitting relatively still in a saddle, or anywhere else, for two minutes.

That's the time it took for Krone to set a record in winning Del Mar's prestigious Pacific Classic, one of her more than 3,700 career wins. Now, five years removed from her last trip to the winners' circle, she's consumed by a different equestrian endeavor. Krone has found new turf to conquer.

Today, at 44, having pushed and punished her body more than most professional athletes, Carlsbad's Krone still has all the energy and exuberance of a frisky foal.

Her ability to connect with a young, untamed horse may also be stronger now than during her illustrious racing career. She has become an avid disciple of the Parelli Horsemanship Program, saying it has opened up a new dimension in the way she relates to horses. She may be as passionate now about the program as she was when she became the first woman to ride to victory in a Triple Crown race. "It gave me back my wings!" she



Decked out in her fashionable jockey attire



Photo: Don Krone

Winning awards at an early age

says of the program that revitalized her approach to horsemanship.

Krone's conversational style parallels her riding style: She explodes out of the starting gate and lets loose the reins, charging hard into available space when she sees it. She is always two strides ahead, answering questions before they're asked, in a patchwork stream-of-consciousness style, never filtering her thoughts, weaving quickly to whatever's on her mind.

What's on her mind most these days is her training in the Parelli program. Sitting alongside a corral at Oceanside's Skydance Ranch as her palomino pony patiently looks on, Krone talks effusively about the effect the revolutionary horse-handling technique has had on her world. Asked if it's fair to say that Parelli Horsemanship was a catalyst that brought her back to horses, she fires back, "It

brought me back to life!" The woman who almost died after being trampled by charging thoroughbreds feels she's having a life-altering experience.

After 22 years of racing, Krone had accomplished more on a racetrack than any other woman, and most every other man. In The Sport of Kings, she was the undisputed queen, her position among racing royalty secured after becoming the first woman to win a Triple Crown race, the 1993 Belmont Stakes. In 2000, she became the first woman inducted into the horse racing Hall of Fame.

Of more than 21,000 mounts, 3,704 ended triumphantly, but a few ended abruptly and disastrously. Just days after her Triple Crown victory, she was thrown and then trampled. In the spill, her heart was badly bruised, but was protected by a vest which most likely saved her life. Several ribs were broken, and a shattered ankle required two steel plates and more than a dozen pins to repair.

After extensive rehabilitation and a brave return to the track, another spill resulted in fractures to both hands and another lengthy rehab stint. Despite the battering her body took, she continued to battle back. But cumulatively, the accidents were taking a tremendous psychological, as well as a physical toll. By the 1999 season, she began to ride increasingly fearfully, even as she continued to rack up wins.

"My heart was gone, and I can't ride like that," she recalled about her first thoughts of retirement. "Once someone wants to race, you can't talk them out of it; and once someone doesn't want to race, you can't talk them into it." Now, she reflects comfortably, even jovially, about the paralyzing thoughts that went through her mind on the last day she raced in 1999. "My last race I rode, I sat there the whole time going, 'I'm going to die, I'm going to die, I'm going to die.' I raced three times that day, and that was my mantra."

As she thinks back and talks openly about some of her fears and her falls, it's miraculous she can move so freely. She spends much of an hour-long conversation tightly crouched on a picnic bench in a jockey's riding position. She sporadically springs to her feet, talking animatedly, effortlessly moving in nimble pirouettes, occasionally leaning in to grab a hold of you to accentuate a point about horse handling. She speaks in the voice of an elfin wizard, but with



Photo: Jay Hovdey

Krone with her fabulous palomino pony, Miss Piggy

the openness of your best friend, forthcoming about any topic.

She was diagnosed as having post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of her accidents, and her PTSD was treated and managed through a combination of conversations with a sports psychologist and Zoloft, the medication prescribed for depression and anxiety disorders.

She stepped away from racing and came to California, taking a job as an analyst on the TVG Racing Network. But like an antsy armchair quarterback, she felt the pull of competition start to surge as the symptoms of PTSD subsided. Her competitive fire was fueled as she commented on riders she saw underachieving. "I sat there going, 'I can so ride better than that guy,' and 'I can't believe he just did that.'" Overcoming the anxiety and fear she felt, she decided it was time to do what came to her instinctively. Approaching age 40, she got right back on that horse, figuratively and literally. She went on to mount one of her most successful seasons ever.

Having spent most all of her career on East Coast tracks, Krone spent 2003 racing at California's meets, including a spectacular season at Del Mar. She led the jockey standings in money winnings and guided Candy Ride to victory in record time at the distance in Del Mar's Pacific Classic. At age 40, having already won thousands of races, she had the sensation of a kid at Christmas on the night before the race. "I just lay in bed that night waiting for the next day. I didn't even need to sleep." As the circuit moved up the freeway to Santa Anita Park, Krone raced to victory in the Breeders' Cup series, becoming the first woman ever to win another of racing's

premier events. Her comeback culminated one of her best seasons ever. "I had a pretty good eight months in California," she says with a hearty chuckle, taking pride in her accomplishments after coming out of retirement.

She was also now racing close to home, having married *Daily Racing Form* columnist Jay Hovdey in 2001 and moving to Hovdey's home in Carlsbad. Prior to the proposal, she thought they would have a commuter dating relationship. At the time, she lived near the Los Angeles Equestrian Center in Van Nuys. Her eyes still light up at the thought of leaving the smoggy San Fernando Valley for sunny North County coast. "Wow, I get to live in that beautiful house by the ocean in Carlsbad," she recalls thinking.

Leading in the standings at the 2003 Hollywood Park meet, she was again thrown by a horse, this time fracturing two ribs, and suffering a recurrence of the post-traumatic stress. This time, she decided it was time to walk away for good, and maybe for her own good. In her comeback, she had stared down her demons, won some of the biggest races of her career and solidified her stature as

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one of racing's greatest riders.

Besides, there was still much more to accomplish away from the world of horse racing. Jay and Julie welcomed their daughter, Lorelei, in September of 2005, not long after Mom's 42nd birthday.

In turning her attention to motherhood, Krone distanced herself from horses for a time after retirement, focusing on family. But after seeing a TV commercial for the Parelli Natural Horsemanship Program, she became intrigued by the premise: a program that uses psychology based on natural equine behaviors to achieve a trustful, respectful relationship between horses and humans. She hadn't heard of the program, or Pat Parelli, its founder, before ordering a DVD series promoted in the TV spot. "I knew nothing about Parelli, except they were tires," she jokes.

But as she learned more about the technique that emphasizes a "foundational relationship" between horse and rider, Krone quickly became an advocate of the Parelli Program, and a dedicated pupil of its principles. On a day she was prepared to work with her mentor, Parelli instructor Margit Deerman, the training was pushed back nearly an hour because Krone simply couldn't stop talking about the philosophies that build the bond between a horse and a rider. Informed that Krone was giving a dissertation on "Parelli 101," the trainer seemed resigned to her student's unstoppable exuberance, saying only, "OK, this could be a while."

"To step away from the racetrack, and the success that I had, and the relationship with so many good horses," Krone says, "nothing has ever motivated me or stimulated me like this program." The techniques emphasize mutual communication, which she says was fundamental to the success and longevity of her career. "That's something I was really good at and why I got to ride for 22 years. I have never been hurt in the paddock, I've never had a horse flip on me, and I've never had a horse run backwards and get me trapped. One year, I ran 2000 races and I never got hurt because of my ability to read a horse and keep myself safe on a thoroughbred."

In an interview with *The New York Times*, legendary thoroughbred trainer Bob Baffert put it more succinctly: "She can talk to them like few I've seen."

Krone says thoroughbred horse handlers and track operators are now starting to embrace some of the program's basic methodologies. "In the starting gate, so many things can go wrong," she says. "The horses would get so emotionally disrupted; they were frozen and could not get out of the gate."

But Krone sees the benefit of establishing a kinder, more intuitive relationship with a horse as transcending the world of thoroughbred racing. "That's the thing that's unique about the program, is that it's attainable for everyone," she says. The Parelli Web site describes the program as allowing "horse lovers at all levels and disciplines to achieve success without force, partnership without dominance, teamwork without fear, willingness without intimidation, and harmony without coercion."

Krone is immersed in the training, studying to become an



Photo: Jay Hovley

Krone raced horses for 22 years and finished with 3,704 victories.

instructor of the technique, and she's coming to a more significant understanding of the animals she loves through its teachings. "The deeper you get in the program, the more you find yourself being an advocate for the horse," she says.

When the flag goes up for the first race at Del Mar on July 16, Krone may be far too focused on her new passion to spend much time thinking about past successes, but she clearly has a great fondness for the seaside track. When it's suggested that she's the hypothetical commissioner of Del Mar for a day and asked what she would change as they get ready to open their meet, she says, "Del Mar? Nothing! You just open the gates and people just show up in flocks. You gave me an easy job!"

Krone effortlessly jumps off the picnic bench, as easily as she dismounted Colonial Affair after winning the Belmont 15 years ago, and turns her attention to her palomino pony. Her next ride just might be her greatest. •

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Photo: Jay Hovdey

Lorelei gets a ride from Mom at the Del Mar Race Track.



Photo: Jay Hovdey

At Ponto Beach in Carlsbad with daughter Lorelei



Photo: Coco

Krone with Pat Parelli, founder of the horsemanship program of which she is an avid disciple