



## Nan Mooney

**My Racing Heart**  
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**Q: In *My Racing Heart*, you characterize your feelings about Thoroughbreds and the racetrack as a seduction. Can you isolate a single element of this world that remains especially alluring to you?**

**A:** It's difficult to isolate just one element. The allure of racing stems from such a combination of factors — the personalities, the races, the intensity, even the silences. If you remove even one element the whole thing falls off balance. What really continues to seduce me is the entire, interwoven, complex and beguiling world. Every visit to every racetrack reveals something new, something unexpected. It's rare to find such places these days. That said, if I had to choose one element, I'd pick the thing that first drew me to the horses. No matter how frustrated or jaded I might get about other elements of the sport, Thoroughbreds serve as the magnets to pull me back. They never cease to be anything less than exquisite. The sculpted muscles, long legs, arched necks, flamboyant energy — one glance and I'm a goner.

**Q: You detail your grandmother's efforts to penetrate the boys club of the racetrack. Does gender discrimination exist in today's world of horse racing?**

**A:** It's certainly better than things were in May-Mays time. There are female jockeys, female trainers, female breeders and veterinarians, not to mention loads of women working on the backstretch. But there's still a long way to go. Over ten years later, Julie Krone is still the only female jockey to have won a Triple Crown race. She's also the only woman riding in Southern California, which is one of the country's top circuits. And New York only has one woman jockey as well, Diane Nelson. Female trainers are slowly gaining ground. In 2002, for the first time a horse trained by a woman won the Eclipse award for Horse of the Year, Azeri trained by Laura de Seroux. But it's a struggle. Racing is very traditional and that can spill over into traditional ideas about where women do and don't belong. Women still have to prove themselves better than the men just to have equal opportunities. I'd love to see more women in positions of power in the industry, holding influential posts on the board of the National Thoroughbred Racing Association, regularly training Triple Crown contenders. Since *My Racing Heart* came out I've heard from a number of young women who want to be jockeys, and who are pursuing their dreams in a very serious way. I'm hoping they represent a whole new wave of women who'll find their way past the rail and onto the track.

**Q: Did you learn anything that shocked or surprised you in the course of your many interviews with key players in the thoroughbred racing world?**

**A:** The most troubling thing I came across as I spent more and more time at the track were the rumors about drug use in horses. It's difficult to pin down exactly what's truth and what's hyperbole; understandably the information in this area tends to be highly subjective and unsubstantiated. I firmly believe that the vast majority of people who work with Thoroughbreds love and pamper them like they would their children. But I also think all this smoke can be traced back to at least some fire. Wherever there's big money at stake, you'll find people ready to sidestep ethics in order to get a hand in that jackpot. I really feel strongly that racing has to crack down on this issue. The industry is taking steps in the right direction, but I think it should be their top priority. As I mention in the book, I lean towards the European policy of having all horses race medication-free. I'm not against muscle relaxants, antibiotics, and other therapeutic drugs during down time obviously horses are living creatures and they will get sick or injured just like any athlete. But come race day, if they're not healthy enough to run without the help of artificial substances, they shouldn't be running at all.

**Q: Throughout your book, you alternate between relating personal experiences at the racetrack and incorporating historical information on the industry. When you started to write the book, was this the format that you intended, or did it evolve over time?**

**A:** In writing the book, I really wanted to unveil the magical universe of the track to readers much the same way May-May unveiled it to me. For me as a writer, delving into the history and the personalities was far more exciting than recounting my story. My own life wasn't anything particularly new to me. I wrote several drafts in which I tinkered with the balance between memoir and racing. Ultimately, I realized that the history of the sport has very much impacted my own relationship to it. Racings checkered past is largely responsible for the sports sense of risk and possibility. The original British Jockey Club, eccentric breeders like Frederico Tesio, all those wise guy gamblers from the thirties and forties they all form the roots of what we watch unfold today.

**Q: You recently competed as an amateur boxer in the Golden Gloves tournament. Is competitive boxing similar to horse racing in any way? How does it differ?**

**A:** I just compete as an amateur, which for boxing in particular is very different from the professional arena: But there's a huge amount of crossover between the two sports. Both stem from a culture of risk-taking, both are laced with tales of little guys made good, both harbor their share of contraband and corruption. And both are filled with people who love the visceral immediacy of life. I train at an old-fashioned boxing gym, Gleasons in New York, which is full of characters — the same sort of characters you might find at the track on a Wednesday afternoon. In fact, a few of the gym regulars have started tipping me on their favorite horses. Of course, there are also differences. As a spectator, I'm actually not a huge fan of boxing. It can be strategic and beautifully executed, but it can also be workmanlike and bloody. It doesn't lift me off the earth in the way racing does. Overall, I most definitely consider myself a sports fan. I love the drama, the suspense, the grace and athleticism. But racing goes beyond that. It possesses a combination of dark and light, of innocence and worldliness that's unique. I hate to sound like a broken record, but I think that's due to the horses. They're pure. They are running to run, and for no other reason.

**Q: How was your book received in the Thoroughbred racing community? What's your next project?**

**A:** The racing community has been very supportive of the book, both while I was writing and after it was published. One of the most exciting aspects has been hearing from so many racing fans through the books website ([www.myracingheart.com](http://www.myracingheart.com)). People have so many rich memories associated with the sport. Many were introduced to the track by a parent or grandparent, aunt or uncle, and many are passing that love on to their kids. It's encouraging to see the intergenerational lines forming. When I have children, you better believe I'll be toting them off to the races. I'm working on a new book, but not about racing. Though writing *My Racing Heart* was incredibly

rewarding, I feel strongly that I want the track to remain my passion and not my job. At least for now. The new book is about competition and conflict among women in the workplace, a subject that interests me and that hasn't been explored all that much. So that spirit of adventure May-May bestowed in me continues to take me onto new ground. Incidentally, I'm looking for women to interview for this new project, so anyone who thinks they may have a story to share please feel free to e-mail me via [www.racingheart.com](http://www.racingheart.com).