



I n the midst of the hectic holiday season, actor Joe Pesci took time to do something he rarely does. He granted an interview... to the *Owners' Circle*. That's just one small indication of the passion the man has for racing!

Speaking by cell phone from Las Vegas, Pesci joked, "I'm eating popcorn and drinking a martini – I can't think of a better time to talk!" The consummate character actor – well known for his roles in *Goodfellas*, *Casino*, *Raging Bull*, *Home Alone*, *My Cousin Vinny* and a score of other blockbuster films – doesn't normally do magazine interviews. But he agreed to this one because, as he put it, "I don't mind doing it for horse racing, because I love it! Since I was a kid, I was coming to the racetrack. I'm having such fun!"

Joe GETZ it!

A rare interview with actor-owner Joe Pesci

A native of New Jersey, the 61-year-old Pesci still maintains a part-time residence there – heading for California when the weather gets too cold. He owns several horses in partnerships, in training with Wesley Ward in California and Florida. With Ward and his long-time friends Mark and Daryle Ann Giardino, he owns the filly PESCI and two-year-old colt LEO GETZ (named for Pesci's character in *Lethal Weapon 2, 3 and 4*).

“Mark and Joe have been friends for years, and Joe is our daughter Meghann's godfather” said Daryle Ann, who is no stranger to the Hollywood film industry. Her father was Louis B. Lindley – also known as Slim Pickens. She recalls riding and breaking horses as a child for her father, who had racehorses in training at Santa Anita with Farrell Jones. A lifelong devotee of racing, she now enjoys spending afternoons at Santa Anita in a box the Giardinos share with Pesci.

Joe Pesci would love to see horseracing make a comeback. In that way, he's like most other horse owners. But there's something special about him – an almost childlike joy and excitement for the game, coupled with a deep love for horses. It's just the kind of spirit that could help bring about a resurgence of the sport.

Pesci's introduction to the world of horse ownership reads like a Hollywood script. In the spring of 2002, trainer Wesley Ward purchased a bay filly by Stormy Atlantic out of



Joe Pesci with partners Daryle Ann and Mark Giardino (center) in the winners' circle with PESCI at Hollywood Park (P. Valenzuela up).

Tricky Sacrifice (by Pleasant Colony) from the Ocala Breeders' Sales Two-Year-Olds in Training Sale. He had been trying to interest a client, Roger King, in buying a part of the filly. In the meantime, King had been telling his friend Joe Pesci that some day he was going to name a horse after him.

One morning at the track, when the three men were watching the workouts, Pesci recalls, “I heard Wesley telling Roger, ‘I told you that you should get this filly, she can really run!’” Something in the way Ward spoke caught his attention.

“I saw something in Wesley's eyes,” said Pesci. “He was so proud of that filly – like he thought she should have a famous name or something.” The next day, upon learning that Roger King did not buy part of her, Pesci told Ward “Alright, I'll let you name the horse after me.” The day after that, he added, “I think if a horse has my name, I should own a piece.” So, he went in for half of the filly. And the rest, as they say, “is history.”

In her first start at Hollywood Park, Pesci won by 8-1/2 lengths. In her next start, she won by 5-1/2 lengths at Santa Anita. Her career was brief but exciting. It included a trip to Florida for the

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Sunshine Millions Distaff, and second- and third-place finishes in Hollywood Park's Hawthorne Handicap (Grade 3) and Maddy Breeders' Cup Handicap (Grade 1), respectively. In all, she started seven times, posting three wins, a second and two thirds, and earning over \$150,000.

Recalling the day last April that Patrick Valenzuela rode her to victory at Hollywood Park, Pesci said, "In the paddock, Patrick said, 'got any instructions?' and I said, 'I got instructions: I want you to win by

ten lengths. I want to find out what's under the hood. And don't hurt my horse!' Well, she won by like 10 lengths, she almost broke the track record, and Patrick eased up on her before the finish line so she wouldn't get hurt. After the race, Patrick said, 'Where do you put the oil in? – This ain't no horse, this is a machine!' Well, I was hooked."

Pesci the Thoroughbred owner hopes Pesci the filly – now retired to Florida – will bring him as much joy as a broodmare as she did when racing. He is definitely excited about

Joe Pesci and his filly Pesci.



“People – all they want to do is be part of a winner, feel like they are a winner for the day”

entering the world of Thoroughbred breeding. “I think she can really throw some good foals. She’s a big filly with lots of heart!”

In the meantime, Joe Pesci is doing what he can to bring new players to the game. The list of fellow celebrities he has brought to the track includes Damon Dash (of Roc-A-Fella Records, Roc-A-Fella Films, and urban fashion Roc-A-Wear), rapper Jay-Z, hip-hop performer Sean “Puffy” Combs (aka P. Diddy), and Jennifer Lopez (“J. Lo”). “They see what it’s all about,” Pesci said. “They’re eating and drinking and picking horses. There’s a whole generation that has never been to the track.”

When asked about what he can do to bring new people into the Thoroughbred business, he said: “What it takes is for them to come to the track and watch my horse WIN! They see the excitement, and feel it, when they are with you,” he continued, “and even if it’s not their horse, they feel like it is theirs.”

When someone like Joe Pesci has so much enthusiasm for the sport, it naturally begins to have an influence on people. And he admits that his racing experiences have changed him, as well – especially his perception of the average racing fan. “I used to think they were like slobs, but they’re not. They are really what horse racing is all about.” He explained further, “People used to always stop me on the street and say ‘Mr. Pesci, I loved you in *Goodfellas*,’ or ‘I loved you in *Lethal Weapon*,’ but after Pesci ran a few times, people would stop me and say ‘Mr. Pesci, I won on your horse, man!’”

“People – all they want to do is be part of a winner, feel like they are a winner for the day,” he continued. “It made me look at \$2 bettors so differently. They were betting my horse and winning; they felt part of something. That is what is great about the racetrack – not winning to get rich. When that horse goes across the finish line, that they bet, whatever problems they have in their life, for that moment they feel like such a winner. THAT is what I think horse racing is about!”

It is evident that Pesci feels a connection to the average racing fan. When it comes to autographs, he said, “I usually never sign autographs anywhere, but at the racetrack,

I sign a zillion. I take pictures with people. The first time Pesci won,” he continued, “I was taking everyone I passed into the winner’s circle. I would have had everyone who bet on her in that picture!”

His passion is also evident in his relationship with Wesley Ward – a relationship any trainer would envy. “I let Wesley do whatever he says with the horses; I try not to put any heat on him,” he said. “I trust him. He knows.”

There is obviously a warm friendship between the two men, as well. “I think he is such a great kid,” Pesci continued, “I love the fire in his eyes and his excitement – and how he gets so heartbroken when the horses lose.”

When asked about his other passions, Pesci was quick to respond, “I love acting, although I haven’t worked in about five years, because I haven’t found anything worth spending 16 to 18 hours a day on a movie set. But I still have a great passion for acting,” he continued, “It just has to be the right thing.”

Another passion is golf. “My mind gets cluttered with so many things,” he explained, “but for four hours it takes me away, and it’s great relaxation.”

When asked for some final thoughts, Pesci said, “I think owners should get a little closer to their horses – I don’t mean make pets out of them, but I think horses really need to run FOR somebody.” He has certainly done that with Pesci, who seems to enjoy being a celebrity as much as her owner. “Before a race, if I went to the barn and held up my cigar, she would move away,” he explained. “But in the paddock – in front of the cameras – she would chew on it!”

“I think most horses that run and win really belong to their grooms, and they run for them,” he concluded. “They know that when they get back to the barn, those guys are gonna be thrilled – and that THEY thrilled them.”

—Mary Forney

