

OFF TO THE RACES



*HORSE TRAINER,
AMIRA CHICHAKLY '09
NOTCHES WINS
OUT OF THE GATE.*

“EVERY HORSE IS A PUZZLE. I WANT TO FIGURE OUT WHAT CLICKS FOR THEM SO THEY’RE HAPPY AND ENJOYING RACING.”

—AMIRA CHICHAKLY

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID DUTILL

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It’s easy to spot Amira Chichakly ’09 during predawn workouts at New York’s Belmont Park. One of only a few female racehorse trainers in New York state, she stands out in a crowd of mostly male trainers, jockeys, and grooms.

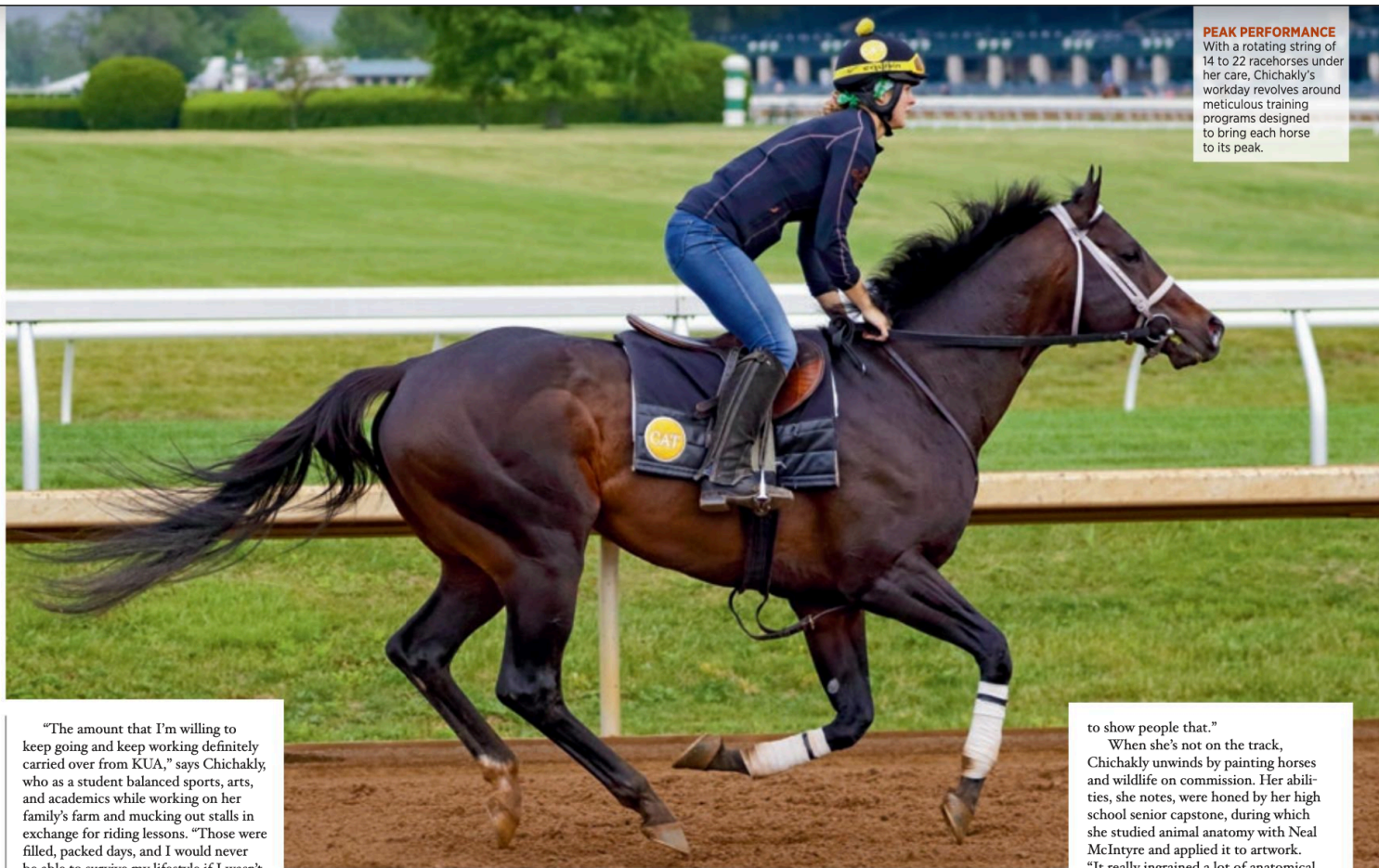
The newly minted trainer from Cornish, New Hampshire, is also turning heads for her impressive inaugural racing season. While Chichakly is enjoying the success, she’s quick to admit the path to the winner’s circle has been a “rocky journey.”

Though she grew up riding dressage and caring for her family’s horses, Chichakly didn’t discover the world of racing until a stint at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, home of the Saratoga Race Course. Working at the track, she explains, felt like a natural fit.

“I started from the ground up,” she says. “I walked around to every barn at the Saratoga Race Course telling them that I could do anything with horses.” From her first job as a “hot walker”—charged with cooling down racehorses—she quickly moved up the ranks from exercise rider to assistant trainer. Eager to get the full racing experience, Chichakly spent a year training and selling horses at Keeneland race course in Kentucky before returning to New York. She found her place as an assistant trainer at a Belmont stable, traveling from New York to racetracks in Florida and New Jersey for nearly a decade.

That loyalty paid off. When the trainer she worked for retired in March, he handed over his barn—and a whole new set of responsibilities—to Chichakly.

With a rotating string of 14 to 22 racehorses under her care, Chichakly’s grueling workday starts at 5 a.m. and revolves around meticulous training programs designed to bring each horse to its peak. And despite a staff of a dozen, Chichakly also oversees all horse care to ensure that each animal receives individualized attention. In the evenings she shifts her focus to managing the stable’s business operations.



PEAK PERFORMANCE

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“The amount that I’m willing to keep going and keep working definitely carried over from KUA,” says Chichakly, who as a student balanced sports, arts, and academics while working on her family’s farm and mucking out stalls in exchange for riding lessons. “Those were filled, packed days, and I would never be able to survive my lifestyle if I wasn’t already used to that.”

Just as Chichakly took over as head trainer, COVID-19 sent horse racing into hibernation. “It was not the best timing,” she says. “It’s one thing to start a business on a tight budget, and it’s another to not have your main way to earn money even exist.”

But when the tracks reopened in June, Chichakly was ready. She quickly claimed her first wins at Belmont and Saratoga Springs, a feat for a new trainer. “I took a string of horses that was pretty lackluster and I’ve gotten three of them

to win in places where they were not even competitive before,” she says. “Being able to develop them and get to that point was exciting.” Winning an allowance race at Saratoga—a track known among trainers as the “graveyard of champions”—was a moment of particular pride. “From day one a lot of people underestimated this horse,” Chichakly says, “but I had a strong sense that she and I could go somewhere together. On the day we won, our odds were 12-1. The win meant that every-

thing I’d done up until that point with her was right.”

As an up-and-coming trainer, Chichakly has also become an ambassador for the sport. “A lot of people have negative opinions about racing with very little information,” she says. “Anytime I hear those concerns I like to bring those people into the conversation and invite them to my barn to see how my horses are treated. Most people in the industry love their horses and know them inside and out, and I want

to show people that.”

When she’s not on the track, Chichakly unwinds by painting horses and wildlife on commission. Her abilities, she notes, were honed by her high school senior capstone, during which she studied animal anatomy with Neal McIntyre and applied it to artwork.

“It really ingrained a lot of anatomical knowledge that I use to this day in both painting and training,” says Chichakly. She also moonlights as a race photographer and shoots the Belmont Stakes, the final leg of the Triple Crown, each year.

Chichakly has no immediate plans to expand her stable, but is instead focused on making sure every horse that comes through her barn becomes as competitive as possible. “I’m not necessarily Derby dreaming, but every horse is a puzzle. I want to figure out what clicks for them so they’re happy and enjoying racing.”