

## HEY SIS

Mother always said no news is good news. The only thing I would send was a money order wrapped up in a clean sheet of paper with nothing written on it. That meant everything was good.

Even though we talk three or four times a week, I am writing you today. There is still no bad news, just something different to let you know that I love you, and explain to you about the life Ronald and I have lived on the track.

I am reaching the age of retirement, but where do I draw the line? I love the horses, and although you keep telling me about retirement, I keep saying, "Winners never quit, and quitters never win." I don't know how to say, "I quit."

I think God is with me. I've had a lot of broken bones in the last six years, but I keep getting up, dusting off, and getting back on. And when I get back on, I remember that rush, and the challenge. The battle feeling that warriors get. The adrenaline blocks out everything, the dirt clods on your face, the wind in your ears. You are waiting for the right moment, your horse is waiting for the command, and your heart is as big as a beach ball.

I remember how skeptical you were when I decided to get back out there as a jockey. At age 62, your fear was that I wouldn't be able to compete with those young riders, 40 years younger, and I would hurt myself trying. I felt like I was fit enough, and I was wiser. God gives you youth and he gives you wisdom, but he doesn't give them to you at the same time.

When it comes to retirement, you are pretty much like I am. You've been wanting to retire for two years, but you go on being a doctor at Howard University. We're both doing the work we love.

With our mother and father out of the picture, I think we both grew up a little financially insecure. We never got a chance to have a lot of things that our cousins had, and we took that as a pain. The pain made us stronger, but it also has kept us more devoted to our jobs, because we took them as a measure of how far we've come.

I followed Ronald into the racing world. I first got up on quarter horses in match races when I was eight-years-old and 54 pounds. For eight years, I dominated the circuit. Lafayette, Lake Charles, Ville Platte, New Iberia—anywhere in the state of Louisiana they had a race track, I was there. Tracks at the end of dirt roads, way in the country. Cars parked on one end, one horse on each side of the ditch. No gates. Turn and burn.

You were always at home, you and Dorothy, and I would come back with what felt like big money—two or three dollars. I was winning 90 percent of the races, at least in my mind.

In 1962, when I was 17, I was getting up to 95 pounds and started to be too heavy for the quarter horses. The younger, lighter, 55-pound jockeys were pushing me out the way just as I had pushed out Ronald, Paul Darjean, and Larry Freeman when I was 10-years-old. I wasn't getting many mounts, so I thought I could get my thoroughbred jockey's license in New Orleans. I caught a ride back with Ronald after he visited, and went to work galloping and rubbing four for Larry Robideaux for 40 dollars a week.

I had ridden for Larry's father in Opelousas, and I had it in mind to become the famous jockey that I

had been, but I needed a contract holder. A jockey needed a trainer with three or more horses to take his contract to get a license. Ronald and Paul had been before the stewards to see about a license, but they were told, "Forget about it. Those white riders are not going to let you in. You're just looking for trouble."

When the Fair Grounds ended in 1963, I went to work with Clifford Scott, the famous black trainer, as he pulled out for Chicago. I was a hotwalker and an exercise rider for him, and still hoped to be a jockey. But when I got to Chicago, it was the same story—no black jockeys.

When I came back to the Fair Grounds, I went to work exercising horses for trainer Jere R. Smith. In 1967, I was the exercise rider for Ask the Fare. He was easy, well-mannered, and had a lot of sense. In the Louisiana Derby, he laid back and came running down the lane, beating Diplomat Way by a head.

With a win in the Louisiana Derby, we were on our way to Louisville. One morning, I was exercising him when the reporter came by. He saw how well we worked together, and wanted to know why I wasn't a jockey. I told him I had tried, but there was no chance of me being a black jockey. So then he got to telling me about Isaac Murphy, the greatest jockey of all time in the long history of black jockeys. I had the Kentucky Derby looming, and Ask for Fare finished fifth, but that conversation inspired research, and I was back dreaming of being a jockey again.

In 1968, I got Jere Smith to take my contract, and I had my first mount, Lady Quillette, at the Detroit Race Course. I finished back fifth or sixth, but I was a jockey. I could have stayed on as an apprentice, five pounds lighter, but I waived the bug (the five pounds) so I could ride for anyone, and I started making the circuit through Detroit, Chicago, New Orleans.

It took me a while to get steady business. In Chicago, there was still some resistance to black jockeys, and it took my Louisiana connections to break through. In May of 1971, trainer Spanky Broussard named me on Doorstep Waif, and the stewards called him into their office, asking him, "Are you sure you want to name Martin Brown for this horse?" After the third asking, he replied, "I believe Mr. Lincoln ended slavery days," and walked out of their office. I rode, and Doorstep Waif won. It was my first victory in Chicago.

Through the 70s, some years were better than others, some tracks better for my style. I had yet to be scraped up off the track, and had no fear. I took advantage of the sharp turns at Sportsman's Park in Chicago to help my horses home quicker.

I found a bit of fear in 1976 when I hit the ground face first when my mount broke both front legs. Then, in 1980, I was working a horse for our brother Wilbert at Delta when my saddle turned. I was hanging on the horse's neck for a few strides before I was under his feet. He stepped on my chest and injured my collarbone.

You know the rest—the 25 years of pony riding at Evangeline, and then teaching and training Cherell how to ride while training myself back into jockey condition. When we split up, I found I was light enough. I guess God's going to tell us when to get out. I don't know why we are hanging on to our jobs. I have my place in Opelousas, 18 acres, six horses, and the rent man can never put me out. And I know the same is true for you—a home in Houston, and a condo in Washington.

When you live to be this old, been all-around the country, and seen the things I've seen, it makes you believe in an almighty power. This last year, I've been more focused on my relationship with God, and all he has given me. I've been trying to give back, making rosaries and trying to promote the word of God. I am sending another 30 rosaries with this letter.

I said there wasn't any bad news, so in closing I'll go light with news about Ronald. You know what's going on in his life. There is no light news. It is what it is. He's had the triple bypass, lung cancer, blockage, but he's a fighter, and he's not a quitter. If he were, he would have quit drinking. He feeds my horses when I am in New Orleans. He's not as fast as he used to be, but then again, neither am I. We get there. We've made it this far, and that feels like a win.

*LOVE LEON*