

Life Beyond Racing

BY BRENDAN O'MEARA / ANNE M. EBERHARDT PHOTOS

Rain cascaded from a blanket of clouds, smacking to the ground while the echo of hooves splashed down the track. Jockey Ramon Dominguez bounced back to his feet, his body caked in mud. Over his right shoulder, Dominguez watched his mount, Chelokee, hobble to the outside rail at Churchill Downs during the Alysheba Stakes (gr. III) May 2, 2008, Oaks day in Kentucky. Chelokee's head hung low as he continued to run on a right front leg that seemed to be broken. It swung loosely—like an eggbeater—before an outrider quickly galloped to his side.

This never has a happy ending.

Dominguez was alarmed at how fast Chelokee continued to run. Had he run more slowly, Dominguez would have caught the horse. But all he did, all he

could do, was watch Chelokee move farther away.

A minute before, Chelokee had seemed perfect. Dominguez thought he had so much horse and was ready to claw ahead and surge past the leaders.

Dominguez felt Chelokee take a bad step coming off the turn, switching from his left to his right lead, but nothing happened. After the second jump, Chelokee broke down. Dominguez lost his balance and rolled off into the mud. He was short of breath, having had the wind knocked out of him. He thought for sure that Chelokee had broken his leg.

The screens were brought out to shield the grandstand from the gruesome sight that is a broken horse. High up in the press box, a photographer steadied herself on the balcony, her eyes watering, before rais-

ing her camera to her face to snap a picture of this fallen athlete.

Chelokee's trainer, Michael Matz, had been through this before. He ran down to the track to be by the side of his horse. When Matz reached the scene on the track, veterinarians suggested they put the horse down on the spot, to save Chelokee from certain agony. With Barbaro, Matz had seen how strong a horse's courage could be, given a chance.

This horse deserved a chance at a life beyond racing.

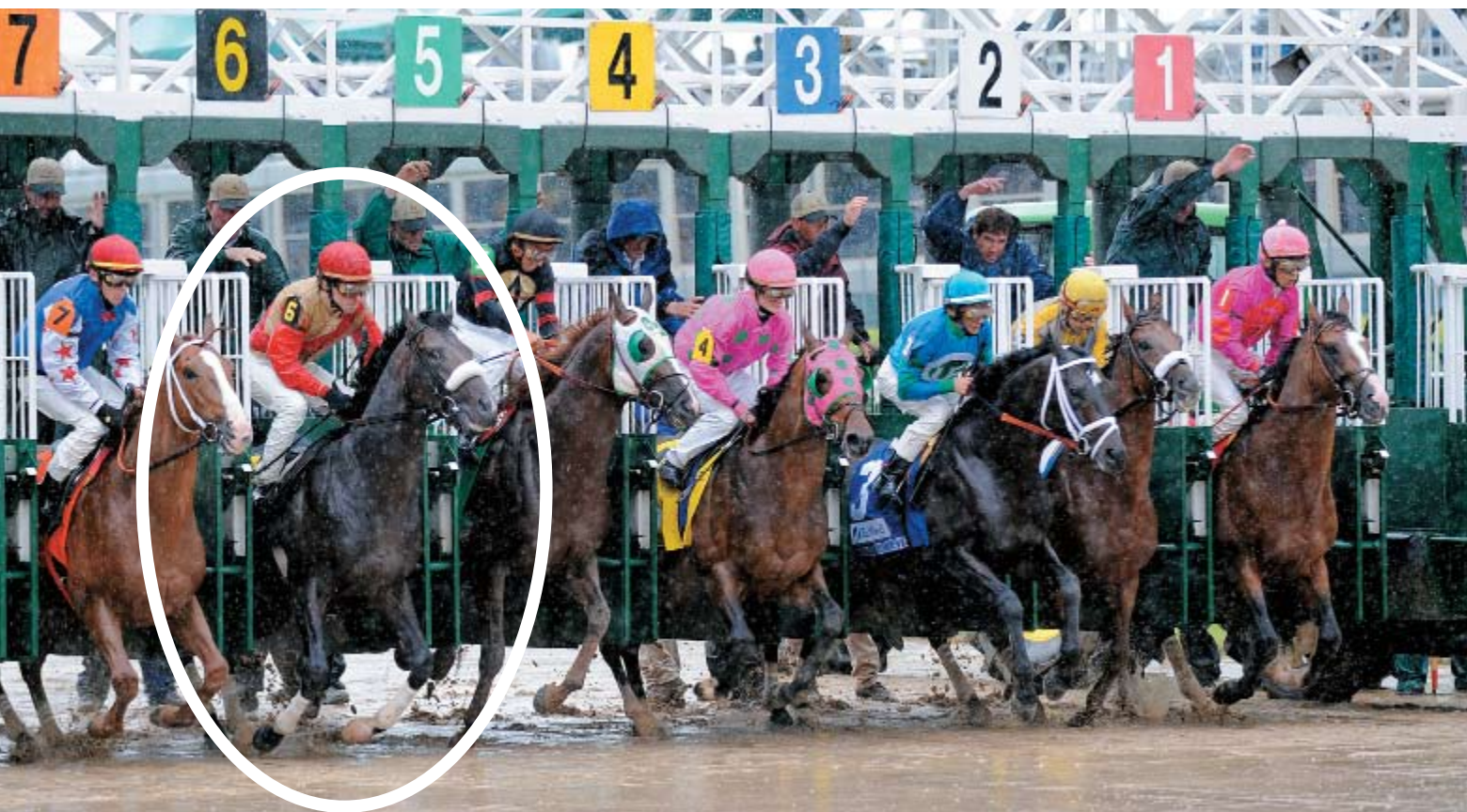
"I insist that you wait," Matz told them before they vanned Chelokee off the track.

Dr. Foster Northrop watched the Alysheba from the backside. When the horse broke down, he had received a phone call. He would later admit, "They told us they put the horse down." He even went so far as to trudge to that shaded tree, far from sight, where Churchill euthanizes its horses.

Northrop's job is to save horses. It's what he lives for, and having been told Chelokee was dead, the feeling of not having his chance to help this Thoroughbred stung. As he rode up to the horse ambulance, he saw what he considered a beautifully peculiar sight: Chelokee standing up. He hadn't been put down, but when he saw that dangling right front leg, he thought this could easily have been a "destruction case."

Not 20 minutes prior to Chelokee's misstep, Dr. Larry Bramlage, wearing a tan trench coat, shook beads of water off his body as he stood near Churchill's racing surface. This man, with a round, sympathetic face detailed with glasses and a silver

Chelokee, No. 6, breaks from the gate in the May 2 Alysheba Stakes at Churchill Downs



mustache, would soon be the person to repair Chelokee's leg and save this racehorse.

Chelokee—a son of Cherokee Run out of the Silver Ghost mare Dixie Ghost—hadn't felt much pain. The shock of the incident left the circulatory tissue and nerve tissue frayed and useless, tossed like angel hair within his skin. Northrop stared at Chelokee's lower limb, which had been braced with a Kimzey splint. He was intent on seeing how bad this break was, but as he looked at the bandage, he saw no blood. Most horses, when they break down like this, have their skin breached. The wound then gets contaminated, and infection sets in. By now, word had reached the press box that Chelokee had suffered a condylar fracture to his lower right leg—similar to what splitting a log looks like.

Northrop cut the bandages off—still no blood. He thought that maybe this wasn't a break at all, but merely a dislocation. Either way, he said, "It was horrible."

If there were any fractures, there may be just subtle hairline damage. He ran his hands along the lower leg, feeling the heat within the skin and the finely engineered ligaments and bones.

"I didn't feel an obvious fracture," Northrop said. "It was all ligamentous."

Chelokee's pastern was up alongside the cannon bone.

Northrop immediately radioed Bramlage, an equine surgeon and the on-call vet for the American Association of Equine Practitioners. "We can save this guy if we want to. His ankle is totally dislocated. Do we try and put it back in?"

"Of course, save him," came Bramlage's reply over the radio.

Northrop, flanked by Dr. Lafe Nichols of the Kentucky Horse Racing Authority, aided and stabilized Chelokee in the horse ambulance. Northrop grabbed hold of Chelokee's leg and leaned his weight back. All the supporting ligaments were torn; so, too, were the collateral ligaments. What supported Chelokee's leg were the tendons, nerves, and blood vessels. Northrop grabbed hold and used his thumbs like a screwdriver to pry the bone into the joint. It took all his strength, but he was finally able to re-articulate the limb back into the ankle socket.

With the joint in place, it was clear it wouldn't hold, certainly not under the weight of a horse. So Northrop wrapped the fetlock tightly with bandages and fixed a trauma boot. Still, with the soft tissue shredded, he needed to stabilize the joint further. He took more bandages and wrapped them around the top of the trauma boot to the knee to keep Chelokee from twisting in place. Northrop knew he had to salvage whatever blood supply was still intact in the leg. He gave Chelokee the proper anti-inflammatory to reduce swelling and pain, and to facilitate

Chelokee broke down at Churchill Downs last May, but his strength and courage have led him to a stud career



Chelokee at Vinery

Chelokee

blood flow to the foot.

The next thing Bramlage heard over the radio were the vets asking the stewards for permission to drive to Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital near Lexington.

"Yes, go ahead," the steward said. The ambulance drove straight to the hospital, just over an hour away, to see if Chelokee's leg could be put back together.

50-50 CHANCE

Eighteen hours had passed. Derby day turned out sunny and clear. Bramlage arrived at the Churchill Downs press box in mid-morning, and with about eight hours to post for the Derby, an update on Chelokee was in high demand.

"I changed his cast," Bramlage said. "He's doing great. The blood supply is better. He dislocated the ankle and his pastern was about five centimeters up the side of his leg. The ankle is unstable and will require surgery. It's a career-ending injury and hopefully, with a little luck, he'll be a stallion."

Bramlage reached into his pocket and turned on his Blackberry. He scrolled down to show pictures of Chelokee in his stall. Chelokee's spirits were high as he played with a cone. The horse looked happy as a clam.

"He lost some blood supply to his foot,"



Chelokee at Rood & Riddle Equine Hospital in July

Bramlage continued. "We'll follow along and make the incision. The dislocation had lots of soft-tissue damage. He has at least a 50-50 chance now. It will depend on how the surgery goes. He's terrific. He pulled his IV line out of the ceiling to try to find something to do."

Chelokee had plunged his muzzle into a feed tub and crunched five or six mouthfuls. With grain peppering his mouth, he



Dr. Larry Bramlage being interviewed after the Alysheba

stepped back. This feed was new to him, not what trainer Matz had provided him since he was a baby. Chelokee seemed to pass the first set of tests: his mood was good and his appetite was strong.

"The sesamoids were pulled five centimeters out of place," Bramlage continued. "It's amazing. He's such a good athlete that it didn't go through the skin. His leg was flopping and he was able to stay up and protect the leg. It was incredible for what he did. If it goes through the skin and the bones surface, the damage is done."

In a matter of hours, Eight Belles would catastrophically break down and it would be Bramlage, again, who would announce to the world, to give closure, that there was absolutely no choice but to euthanize her.

With any luck, redemption would come in another form. Chelokee stood waiting. Within days, he would go under the knife as doctors hoped to repair his leg and let him live another day.

LUCK AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

Chelokee lay anesthetized, his chest rising and falling. Bramlage scrubbed in and prepped for the fetlock arthrodesis. He sliced open the flesh on the lower right front limb. It was a procedure he had performed more than 200 times since he had become a licensed veterinarian in 1975. He worked his instruments into the leg as blood spotted to the surface of the torn tissue.

Bramlage was always drawn to the equine athlete. Chelokee would be an athlete no more, as Bramlage fused the bones to eliminate the fetlock joint, and in so doing significantly limited the range of motion such that Chelokee would no longer be able to run at peak velocity. But with a little luck, Chelokee may be able to gallop through a field in the undulating hills of Kentucky.

The fusion took a plate 14 inches long

and 18 screws to lock into place. Next, approximately two feet of wire were laced into the back of Chelokee's ankle to replace the ligaments. Bramlage then put in 12 inches of high-density polyethylene to replace the ligaments in the pastern in order to save that particular joint, as it would take the brunt of the lost flexibility of the now-fused fetlock. At last, Bramlage sewed Chelokee up after three hours of meticulous craftsmanship.

After the surgery, Bramlage's final concern was to ensure that Chelokee stood well. The worry was that he would be tough to handle when he awoke. Assistants stood waiting, and when he came to, he popped up like a cork, sure-footed as ever.

STANDING TALL

"Every worst emotion went through my mind when the injury happened," said Don Little Jr., president of Centennial Farms, the partnership group that raced Chelokee. "When he stopped, he was right in front of myself and my clients. Many were crying. When they put the tarp up, it's the worst sign. But when they took it down, he was standing with a cast on and walked onto the van."


"He saved himself," Little continued. "He's a very smart, intelligent horse, who was able to pull himself up. And Dr. Bramlage did an incredible job."

"I've seen the horse periodically over the summer. The change from June to September was amazing. He's gained 50 pounds since he's been at Vinery. This is a good story. We really love these animals; we've done everything we possibly can, and hopefully we'll see his babies in a few years."

Chelokee will stand his first season at stud at Dr. Tom Simon's Vinery near Lexington. As property of Centennial Farms, Chelokee will stand for a fee of \$7,500.

Chelokee's survival was a testament to, first, his athletic ability to stay together, so to speak. Then it was the cascade of people who came to his side to save a broken horse, who now is turned out in a paddock at Vinery.

Galloping out in the field was a distant thought on that rainy afternoon at Churchill last May. For all the doctors, and especially Bramlage, this too is a triumph, a small victory for horse racing since Chelokee's injury happened on so large a stage, and Chelokee, in essence, returned from the dead.

As such, the team of doctors who placed their hands on Chelokee saved something more valuable than just a racing career. 

Brendan O'Meara is a reporter for The Saratoga newspaper in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.