

# THE HOT TRAINER ANGLE IN THE FLESH:

## A Profile Of Trainer Gina Rarick

By Mark Cramer

**Y**OU WILL NOT HAVE HEARD of Gina Rarick because she trains in France, and in fact is the only American trainer operating in that country. However, the handicapping lesson from my portrait of this best-kept secret in the training profession can be applied universally wherever races are run.

The method is simple. The handicapper should keep a set of "longshot trainer standings", and whenever a trainer is successful with more than one longshot, he or she is likely to have more winners, with horses that do not "look good" in the past performances. This is because trainers often win in clusters. Stables round into form.

The "what" is clear, but I wanted to find out about the "why". I went to Rarick's home and stable in Maisons-Laffitte on a stunningly beautiful autumn day, to visit her stable and then follow the process of her racing a 3-year-old maiden, Skid Solo, in a handicap race for a purse of approximately \$40,000. The gelded Skid Solo had 14 losing races, finishing in the money only four times, and was picked near the bottom of the 16-horse field by the Paris-Turf analyst.

Rarick was what we would call a hot trainer. She showed 42 races with 4 wins, roughly 9%, but her average mutuel was \$34.37, so a player who backed all of her horses would have had a return of investment in the vicinity of 200%. Most important for the trainer-cluster method, she had just won two of her last three races, both at high odds.

She was unaware of these percentages until I told her. Even excluding her longest-shot winner, Cape Tycoon at 57-1, she still yielded a profit for her backers.

Her record would make the "supertrainers" blush, and yet she is an advocate of drug-free racing. She's a straight shooter who plays by the rules, and the anti-doping rules in France are Draconian.

"I can't use steroids," she explains, "so I gotta find out what they like to eat."

A look in the feed area of her tack room would qualify her as a chef of haute cuisine. She had me smell the various mixes. I was tempted to scoop a handful and stick it in my mouth.

One of her horses eats oats with Guinness. She'll mix garlic flakes in the feed of her filly Turfani to increase circulation and keep away mosquitos. Turfani, a recent winner at 9-1, gets a special feed because Rarick found that the high-quality Bailey feed was too rich for the filly. (She had purchased Turfani for a scant thousand pounds in England. Small owners take notice!)

Lasix is unfathomable for Rarick, who reduces a horse's stress by providing hands-on care and a pleasant living situation.

The only doping in Rarick's life is her fresh-brewed morning coffee at 6am ("I can't function without it" she admits), or if not, Red Bull, a natural source of caffeine which Rarick recognizes is loaded with unfriendly chemicals.

On my visit to her house and stable, I found her living room and dining room cluttered with all sorts of legendary French paperwork and other odds and ends. She apologized for the poor condition of her yard, which was burrowed here and there by her two hyper-friendly dogs. No way to be meticulous about house and yard when her horses take up all her time.

Across the street (streets in Maisons-Laffitte have right-of-way signs for horses), everything was impeccable and the stalls,

which she mucks out at least three times a day, were big and comfortable, not like what you see on the backside of a typical American race track. I could not imagine camping out in her cluttered living room but I would have gladly slept overnight in her stable, which looks more comfortable than most Parisian apartments.

No wonder lasix is not necessary for Gina Rarick! Her training philosophy is: "make 'em happy". All her energy is focused on the stable.

We visited the stall of Skid Solo, who would later be walked to the track before his sixth race appearance.

"I can't figure why he hasn't done better," said Rarick. "I still feel he's the best in my barn." Once an amateur race rider (amazingly she learned to ride in an urban stable in Chicago, where she was working as a journalist for Knight-Ridder), she had been aboard Skid Solo on numerous occasions.

Her two recent longshot winners both came with jockey switches, and the same pattern could be found for Skid Solo. Here was what handicappers call a "pattern match".

We handicappers might consider this a piece of worthy evidence but it was not enough to rally a whole lot of confidence. Rarick doesn't bet and she had no strong opinions about the race. In fact, she had tried to enter Skid Solo at a lower level but the race had filled. From a classical handicapping perspective, things did not look at all good for Skid Solo.

"American handicappers are spoiled because of all the numbers they have," she explained. "I'm a trainer and I know all the things that can go wrong, beyond the numbers."

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Skid Solo had been 16-1 in the early off-track betting but strangely opened at 11-1. Everyone in Rarick's entourage wondered where the action had come from. Eventually the horse drifted up to 20-1, more or less where he belonged if you took the past performances literally.

"On paper you're a hot trainer," I told her. "You're the protagonist of a strong handicapping factor. When a trainer's horses win in a cluster at high odds, we take this factor into account."

She was attending to Skid Solo at the moment of my grand revelation. She looked up at me with a perplexed smile, as if to say, "If I understood such things I'd be betting on my own horses."

There was no perceived sign from the trainer that we should bet her horse. Still, my bicycle and racetrack partner Alan Kennedy and I both made small win-show bets on Skid Solo (no place wagering in France), our enthusiasm constrained by the gelding's 0-for-14 record and the fact that he was facing multiple winners in a handicap.

The jockey switch was to Thierry Thulliez, who may be remembered by American players as the pilot of longshot Breeders' Cup Mile winner, Domedriver, also seemingly outclassed in the past performances.

Rarick gave instructions to Thulliez in the walking ring. I was there. As a motivational gesture, I reminded the rider that this could be a "Domedriver experience". He grinned.

There were few paths in Rarick's life that would have pointed to this sweet Autumn moment in time, standing in the paddock of an elegant race course and giving instructions to a Breeders' Cup jockey. She had grown up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, where horses were considered unproductive. She took up riding after the age of 30.

But she became hooked on horses and made up in intensity what she had lost in time. She leaped at the chance to come to Paris in order to work as racing writer for the International Herald Tribune.

"My husband and I did not adjust to France for many months, having arrived in the midst of the grey Paris winter, but all that changed when we visited vineyards in Bordeaux."

Eventually she quit the pleasurable writing job when she realized that training would occupy all her time. And that precious time was now being spent on getting to know all the physical and "personal" idiosyncrasies of each horse.

"I school some horses over jumps because it freshens them up. I can discover back problems when I ride them uphill because you can feel the whole back end, like going to the gym. That would be on my wish list, to have hills around. Everything about Maisons-Laffitte is great, except it's flat."

It was getting near post time. Across the track you could see the first autumn leaves adding sparkle to the luminous afternoon. The meandering Seine River was mostly hidden behind the thick foliage of the backstretch.

In the paddock, Skid Solo was acting up, and for a moment it looked as if he would come in on us, having left the walking circle in an unruly and threatening way. Rarick's heart sunk. All the labor that had led up to this moment could be suddenly erased if the horse simply didn't feel like running.

Thulliez gave Skid a kick and partly straightened him out. He looked a little smoother when galloping onto the track. (French horses do a light gallop instead of a post parade.)

The 6-furlong event was on a straightaway so it was impossible to see the start from any angle in the grandstand. We watched the monitor from a second floor perch, Gina, Ian, the British owner of the horse, my partner Alan and a couple of other friends of Gina. (She has lots of friends, thanks to her refreshing honesty and percolating enthusiasm. Her owners root for all her horses and not only their own.)

This was their Breeders' Cup, and for me it was one more chance to attempt to understand the hot trainer phenomenon. Even if Skid Solo were to lose, a distinct possibility, I was now convinced that Rarick had done her best. Winning streaks came from the artistic patience of sticking with a horse day to day, and she never missed a beat.

Skid Solo got out of the gate smoothly and went for the lead. Rarick, who was standing next to me, let out a sigh of fright. In France the bias favors followers rather than leaders, and she felt that Skid Solo would do better racing with cover.

From an American player's point of view, it looked as if the horse were in a

pace duel, with four or five others grouped beside Skid Solo. From the head-on, Skid's nose was barely in front of the cluster, but not by much.


In fact, the pace was not fast, and Skid was going fluidly without being asked.

When they galloped in front of us in graceful elegance, clustered near the apron rail, Skid Solo suddenly surged to a comfortable lead, with nothing else from behind accelerating.

Skid Solo had won, rather easily, at 20-1. Rarick hugged us all. She was nearly as surprised as the majority of handicappers who had chosen not to bet on Skid Solo, those who had held the belief that a literal reading of the past performances was more effective than the hot trainer factor.

I'm not sure that horse owners with large designer stables will feel the same depth of joy that we all felt sipping champagne at a makeshift outdoor table in Gina's yard. Not only are Gina's horses treated with great care but she goes to lengths to share the sport with her owners as well.

Alan and I were then walking back to the Maisons-Laffitte train station along wooded streets (the city is literally inside a forest, with dirt horse riding paths crisscrossing the narrow roads) and we bumped into Gina's husband, who was bicycling back from the station. (He commutes to work in Paris by train.)

Alan told him about Skid Solo's victory. He did not seem surprised. Perhaps he can shed some light on the hot-trainer factor. 

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margin of profit sufficiently large to warrant their inclusion.

Surprisingly, maidens—which we do not look upon with great favor—proved profitable when played in conjunction with the basic idea upon which this method is based.

As might be expected, the date of the last race reveals itself as more important than any other single factor. In short, 12 days is the most profitable date spread between a horse's last race and today.

The reader may wonder: Why 12 days? Why not seven, eight, 10 or 15 days? Twelve days proves to be the optimum time frame because it allows the trainer a four-day mar-

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