



This picture: Turfani take the lead at Chantilly racecourse. Below: Gina's neat stableyard just outside Paris. Below right: Gina with Turfani

‘I like taking a cast-off horse and turning it into a winner’

A few years ago Gina Rarick was a journalist who loved horses. Today she's France's first fully licenced American female racehorse trainer and as John Gilmore found, she knows how to win races

As the horses galloped to the turn at Chantilly racecourse, shooting past the grandeur of the Château de Chantilly and into the home stretch, a dark brown filly, easy to recognise thanks to the small diamond of white hairs on her forehead, surged to the front of the pack. To the shouts of the crowd, and urged on by her jockey, she raced past the post in first place. In the stands no one was cheering more loudly than Gina Rarick, the filly's triumphant trainer. She had spotted the young horse one year earlier at a sale in Newmarket in Britain. Back then the animal had been nothing much to look at, but Gina felt that within the filly's large, lanky body was the potential to be a winner. 'And she had a wise face, like that of an older mare, not a three-year-old,' says Gina. Gina bought the filly, called Turfani, for just £1,000 and brought her back to her stable yard just outside Paris. Over the following months Gina worked with the horse, feeding her up and teaching her to race – from how to leap out of the starting gate to the final

hard gallop towards the finishing post. Her faith in Turfani was rewarded a few months later when last September the filly easily won the Prix Du Pain De Sucre race at Chantilly, netting the €6,500 prize money. However, Turfani was not Gina's only success that month – within nine days she also had two other winners, Hard Way and Skid Solo, earning total prize money of almost €26,000. Not bad for someone who has only been a full-time trainer since February 2008. Before that Gina, 46, was financial editor at the *International Herald Tribune* newspaper (IHT) and had been a journalist for 20 years. She gave it up to train racehorses, acquiring her professional licence in September 2008, which made her the first fully licenced American female racehorse trainer in France. Despite swapping a good salary (and the security that came with it) for uncertain earnings and a seven-day working week that begins in the early hours of each morning, she has no regrets. 'Racing is a very competitive and exciting world,' she says. 'I like the challenge and emotion of racing, of taking a cast-off horse and winning

races with it. It is really, really difficult to win a horse race, and when you do, it's a fantastic feeling of accomplishment. You get the chance to cherish a success that money can't buy.' However, money is big business in French racing. It offers a purse that is amongst the highest in the world – the average for a flat race is about €20,800, compared to €17,750 in Britain and €13,750 in America – and thoroughbreds from all over the world travel to race here. Gina has lived in France since 1994 – and both her arrival here and her foray into French horse racing happened by chance. Turning her back on her dairy farm upbringing in Wisconsin for journalism – 'The career choices for women were either farmer's wife, nurse or teacher and I never wanted to be any of these things,' she says – Gina worked her way up the career ladder, from Milwaukee to Chicago, before being offered a job in either London, Tokyo or Paris. She took the role of financial editor at the IHT and, accompanied by her husband Tim, arrived in France. 'I would have taken the London job, but

unfortunately animal quarantine was still in place and I know this sounds stupid, but I just couldn't put my dogs in kennels for six months,' she explains. 'In France there were no pet quarantine rules. We had never seen France before, neither of us spoke French, but I had never heard anyone complain about living here. In truth it turned out to be a fantastic move for all sorts of reasons. I am pretty certain I would never have had the good fortune to fall into the horse world anywhere else.' Gina was introduced to racing when she began writing about it for the IHT as a sideline. She took her interest quite a few steps further when, having won a horse race amongst racing journalists, she decided to become an amateur jockey. 'It never occurred to me that it was possible for me to ride in a horse race, and when I saw that it was, it became a huge goal,' she says. 'I weighed over 80kg at the time, so I went on a diet and in about two months lost 22kg, which still made me on the heavy side for racing, but was enough to qualify me to ride in the "mixed" races for men and women.'

Underlining her decision to ride was

also the desire to do something different with her life. 'I was pushing 40 and I guess it was sort of a midlife crisis thing,' she says. 'Once I lost the weight I felt more fit than I ever had in my life, and racing – even amateur racing – was the toughest mental and physical challenge I had ever faced and it was great. I never won a race, but I was placed a few times and it was a great experience. As a trainer, I feel like I can give better orders to my jockeys because I understand what happens out there and how fast it can happen.' Gina realised that if she wanted horse racing to become a living, she couldn't continue as a jockey. 'No one was going to put a slightly overweight middle-aged American woman with virtually no experience up on their horses,' she laughs. So in 2002 she took the trainers course run by French racing's governing body, France Galop, and obtained her amateur licence. It allowed her to train up to five of her own horses (she couldn't train horses on behalf of other owners). Gina rented a stable yard and began training, but continued at the IHT. 'I worked from 3pm to 11pm at the

paper so I had the mornings free to work with the horses, and if I planned it right, even got to take a bit of a nap before I had to show up at the paper! My colleagues did get a bit fed up with all the afternoon phone calls ordering hay, talking to vets...!' After several years' experience as an amateur Gina took the leap into professional racing. With the backing of a British racehorse owner, she acquired Pixie's Blue, a three-year-old filly, for €6,500, and she gave Gina her first professional win, and has so far earned €12,500. Another, a three-year-old gelding called Cape Tycoon costing £3,500, won his first race last July, earning €7,000. Skid Solo, who won last September, was bought for £13,125, has so far won €20,850 from win and place earnings. Gina has also been helped by established French trainer Jean-Paul Gallorini. 'I started riding his horses for free when I wanted to get my amateur jockey's licence. Over the years we've become friends and I have learned a tremendous amount from him. I know I'm doing things right when he no longer gives his advice, because he tells me I know what I'm doing.' Gina has also had to get to grips with the racing world here. 'French racing is like anything else in France, closed until you know how to open it,' she says. 'The bureaucracy of it all makes it difficult, but once you're in, you're in. I do feel the jockey club is keeping a close eye on me, but I

pinch and bridles that fit. Of the €55 a day that Gina charges, she makes just €5 profit, and takes 10 percent of any prize money. 'So if we're not getting our horses in the money, we're not eating very well,' says Gina. 'And believe me, a good trainer will skip a meal rather than skimp on feeding a horse!' Gina's yard is not far from Maisons-Laffitte racecourse. She reckons she needs six horses to break even and currently has 11, with two staff, and the capacity to go to 15. But even though she's not full, training is extremely hard work. 'The daily frustration involved in working with horses – especially in winter, when you hike over to the barn in the dark, cold, rain or snow to saddle up the first horse of the day at six o'clock in the morning or when the horses suffer injuries, or they don't run up to expectations – sometimes makes you wonder whether it's all worth it.' Gina's worst moment was when a horse collapsed under her while training. 'A horse I was galloping

“ If our horses are not in the money we're not eating well. I would skip a meal rather than skimp on feeding a horse... ”



suppose that's normal. They've never had to deal with anyone like me.' Her French, although slow to begin with, is now much more fluent. 'I needed to speak and write the language to get my trainer's permit,' she explains. Today, as well as training horses for others, Gina continues to buy thoroughbreds herself, later leasing them to others or selling them when they are ready for racing. 'I don't have the expertise to choose a good yearling, but I do have the eye to judge a horse in training,' she says. 'Horses are like humans – some are athletic and some are not. Some horses have a bad attitude to work but are still talented. Some have a bad attitude because they aren't up to the task. It's my job to tell the difference.' So far she has done well with inexpensive horses, which she describes as a 'blessing and a curse'. 'It's easier to get new owners into the game when they don't have to spend a lot to get started, but then they're reluctant to spend more on better stock,' she explains. It's quality horses – those with good breeding and more speed – that give a trainer the chance to win the races that come with greater prize money. So, at the moment, Gina is busy trying to recruit new owners – and that means a lot of socialising. 'Since I'm building my yard from scratch and recruiting mostly non-French owners, I sometimes find myself going to more parties than Paris Hilton!' she says. For a small trainer like Gina, making a living from training is not easy. It costs about €20,000 a year to keep a horse in training and in winning condition: top quality feed, a diet tailored to each animal, bedding and the best equipment such as saddles that don't

had a cardiac aneurysm and literally died underneath me,' she says. 'We had worked out of the starting gate on the grass track, and after 400 metres he just went down, dead before he hit the ground. It was shocking and no one could have predicted it, and walking away from an accident that could have been fatal to me too, made me realise how dangerous it is to do what we do every morning.' Over the past year Gina has seen a number of trainers leave the profession. 'This is a very expensive business, you can't cut any corners if you want results,' she says. For the moment she is financially secure. 'I'll be able to build my stable over the next year, without having to worry,' she says. 'After that I need enough clients to function independently, but new owners are coming and I think it will work out.' It takes a certain toughness to succeed in such a competitive and uncertain profession and Gina admits she can be demanding. 'I have a low tolerance for incompetence,' she says. 'I was a tyrant at the International Herald Tribune – I'm sure many of my former colleagues were not sad to see me go – and that hasn't changed in the stable yard. I want things done in a certain way and done right. That said, I'm very hard on myself when I make a mistake, and I wouldn't ask any of my employees to do anything I wouldn't do myself and they know that.' One day soon she hopes to see one of her horses win a top class race. As a journalist she covered the prestige races in Hong Kong as well as the world's richest horse race, the Dubai World Cup. 'My goal is to one day have a horse that is good enough to run in one of them.' **TFP**

INTERVIEW BY TERESA HARDY

~ C'est Ma Vie ~

Jason Roberts, 39, is a lifestyle management consultant. Originally from Sussex, England, he now lives in the Poitou-Charentes. After spending seven years working throughout France, he has launched his own personal fitness company and business support group association.

Why France? My mother wanted to move to France so we spent three months in the summer of 2002 driving all over the country in a 1.1 Ford Fiesta trying to find a quiet location not too far from a major town. We found the perfect house in Normandy during the final week! While the buying process was being completed I cycled down through France looking for grape harvest work. I found a vineyard in Amboise in the Loire Valley and worked there for three months. It was the most wonderful – if backbreaking – experience, and made me decide that I, too, wanted to stay in France. Since then my mum, and I moved further south.

Why a personal fitness trainer? I have 10 years experience in personal training and sports therapy and I believe there's a real need for proper training programmes for expats who may be worried about the language barrier. Also the gyms here seem to have few staff available to help and personal trainers are rare.

What is the fitness mistake people most often make? Not knowing how to progress: people stick to their exercise routines, but forget that the body adapts to exercise. Muscles groups know in theory what comes next,

so progress becomes stagnant. The same principle applies to aerobic training. People need to change their routines and the times they train, and need to have their progress monitored.

If you only do one thing to keep fit, what should it be? Rowing, as this works practically every muscle group and can give you a good aerobic workout at the same time. You can buy good quality machines online these days.

What is your perfect super-food? Pasta has to be top of my list because it's a great source of carbohydrate, is good for energy and is also slow release. Jacket potatoes and salad would also be high on my list.

What has been your most interesting discovery in France? The Alps – I worked as a high altitude mountain bike guide in Chamonix for a while. To get to the interview I strapped my tent to the handlebars of my bike and cycled the 720km round trip! It took me three and a half days to get there and I met some lovely people on the way. But I would have to say the Loire Valley is still a favourite, and especially the town of Amboise. It has the most wonderful château and such a romantic feel about it. The Sunday market is worth a visit.

What do you love most and least about living here? I like the French people, their generosity and their way of life, plus the fact that you actually get to interact with your neighbours. People don't hide behind closed doors, so you get more of a community spirit. As for what I like least, it's the same as most people: the paperwork. There's too much of it, and often one office doesn't know what another is doing. It makes it difficult if you're running a small business, which is one of the reasons I'm launching a small business support group. It's also difficult being a young person in this area of France because you have to look hard to find social things to do for your age group. It's truly an adventure living here, though: not always an easy one, but a worthwhile one nonetheless. *Jason's business: www.profizik.com Business support group: www.poitoucharentebusinessgroup.org*

The French-O-Meter Test
JASON, HAVE YOU EVER...
Tried snails? 'No, they're along in the garden.'
Shouted 'Allez (les bleus)!' at a French sports match? 'Yes, in a bar in Normandy for the world cup.'
Told a joke in French? 'No.'



Clockwise from this picture: Jason cycling hard; at high altitude in the Alps; the lovely town of Amboise; Ice climbing in the Alps

