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# STUDY GUIDE

FIGHTING HISTORY

# A Girl, A Horse, A Dream

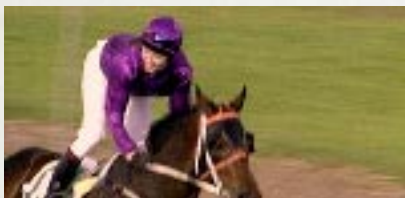




Bernadette Cooper: 'I wanted to be the best jockey ever. It never occurred to me that it would be difficult. You could have put six brick walls in front of me. It didn't matter. That was how it was going to be, and that was that.'

**SYNOPSIS**

**A** *GIRL, A HORSE, A DREAM* (2003) tells the story of Bernadette Cooper, one of Australia's top female jockeys. The film follows her over the course of a year in which she competes at some of the most prestigious races in the country. Director Rachel Landers captures a sense of the excitement of the track, the magnificence and power of the horses, and the dedication and passion of those



who work in this field. But as we witness Bernadette's grit and determination, we also gain insight into something much darker, a culture of danger and violence at odds with the glamorous media image of horse racing. A sequence of clips showing dramatic accidents,

some of them fatal, highlights the risks involved in this, Australia's third largest industry. Perhaps even more disturbing is the section of the film focusing on the prevalence of sexual harassment. This is a sport riven by discrimination, both covert and overt, and incidents of sexual violence. The film makes clever use of black and white footage from the 1970s to establish the historical context in which Bernadette continues to struggle. It also features engaging interviews with a number of former female jockeys, including the legendary Pam O'Neill,





who fought for fifteen years to overturn the industry ban against women riders. Pam became the first woman to be awarded a professional jockey's licence in 1979. But more than two decades after this momentous achievement, the progress of women in racing continues to face obstacles. Bernadette was the first woman to be champion apprentice jockey in Queensland; six weeks after that success, she found herself unable to secure a ride. Despite her talent and tremendous capacity for hard work, she confronts an almost insurmountable series of problems and setbacks. As Bernadette says of her passion for horse racing, 'It feels like it comes from the heart'. All she wants is the opportunity to prove herself.

### CURRICULUM LINKS

*A Girl, A Horse, A Dream* touches on a number of provocative issues, par-



ticularly in relation to gender. These are concerns that have wide relevance beyond the racetrack. The film also functions as a compelling character study. It would be a valuable text for senior VCE Gender Studies and SOSE. NB: Bernadette swears like a wharfie and reference is made to a disturbing series of gang rapes.

### A DAY AT THE RACES

Bernadette Cooper, after a poor result: 'Yet another shitty day in paradise'.

- The most popular media images of women at the races usually feature glamorous socialites sipping champagne, wearing pretty dresses and elaborate hats. What do you associate with racing? Can you be feminine *and* a jockey?
- In 1979, Pam O'Neill was the first woman to be granted a professional jockey's licence. She beat Roy Higgins, and Roy's wife congratulated her: 'Good on you, Pam, he's a male chauvinist'. Are you surprised by the slow progress of female jockeys in the subsequent two decades? How do you account for this?
- Select one of the many jobs involved in racing—e.g. steward, jockey, trainer, race caller, bookie, strapper, stable hand—and research what is involved in this work. Present your findings to the class.
- Gather racing reports from the daily newspaper for a week. In how many





of the articles do women figure?

## FILM CRAFT

In a very telling scene in the film, we see Bernadette standing outside the male jockeys' rooms, knocking, waiting to be let in. While this film uses captions and talking heads to convey information, film is primarily a visual medium and the composition of images is a powerful tool for the film-maker in establishing themes and point-of-view. Find three other examples from the film where the images used are particularly striking or work to communicate on a non-verbal level.

## DREAMS



Bernadette Cooper: 'Every kid's dream seems easy at the start'.

Bernadette's life has been dedicated to the pursuit of a dream: her goal is to compete at the highest levels of international horse racing. But following a dream and attaining it are two very different things, as the film points out. *A Girl, A Horse, A Dream's* title is a quote from *National Velvet* (Clarence Brown, 1944), and a sequence from that film is used to open the documentary. The reference serves to highlight the gap between fiction and reality: Hollywood guarantees Elizabeth Taylor a happier ending than Bernadette Cooper can expect.

- Hollywood is sometimes referred to as the Dream Factory. What is meant by this term? What are some other sources of our dreams and ambitions?
- What dreams have you had? Have

you realized any of them?

- What do your dreams say about you, your influences, the things you value?
- Discuss Bernadette's motivation. One of the former jockeys who is interviewed speaks of simply wanting 'the opportunity to prove we could ride'. Bernadette says: 'I want the glory, not the money. It's the satisfaction, winning is everything'. What exactly is 'the glory'?
- Bernadette also says: 'Everyone's born for a reason, and my reason's to love horses. Everything's nice about horses'. Do you agree that everyone is born for a reason? If so, have you found your reason yet?
- Bernadette does very well in a Group 1 race, but is not satisfied: 'You think you'd be satisfied when you get somewhere, but you're not ... If I can't do it at that top level, I'm not going to do it at all'. Do you think dreams that prove more difficult to achieve are necessarily more satisfying? Is it the effort involved in attaining your goal that offers the ultimate reward?
- Towards the end of the film, Bernadette reflects on the long years of hard work and the tenuousness of the position she has attained in her field. Would she do it all again if she knew at the beginning what she knows now? She says she's not sure: 'My love for horses wouldn't diminish, but my love for a male-dominated industry would'. Have you ever regretted pursuing a dream?
- Bernadette's strength of character alone is never going to be enough: 'Without the right horse and trainer,



I can't do it'. As one female apprentice jockey puts it: 'We get on the horses that the big boys don't want'. Describe the people and the factors that could hinder you in your pursuit of a dream.

## CHARACTER

Bernadette is a fiery, spirited woman, brave and determined. She works long hours, with little certainty of reward. We see her getting up in the dark at 4am to begin her day, and she speaks of a 'twelve year slog'.

- Do you like Bernadette? Why/why not?
- Write a paragraph describing Bernadette to someone who has not seen the film. Use concrete examples from the film, quoting from her interviews, recounting incidents and her reactions to a variety of situations. What are the qualities that define this character?
- Compare Bernadette and her story to that of a key character (male or female) in a novel you are studying this year. What are the qualities that define this fictional character? What are the obstacles that stand between them and the attainment of their dreams? Imagine that Bernadette and this character meet. Write a conversation between them.
- Bernadette experiences a great deal of frustration. She describes her career as a series of peaks and troughs, noting, 'that downward spiral happens as quick as I blink my eyes: to train and be competent and yet not work. How can you explain





TOLEDO  
JOCKEY SCALE



not having a ride? PISSED OFF'. We see her in the stands watching the 2002 Melbourne Cup. How does Bernadette deal with frustration? How do you deal with frustration?

- Imagine you are Bernadette and you have just won the Melbourne Cup. Compose a victory speech, keeping in mind that Bernadette is outspoken and fearless.
- Bernadette says: 'Sometimes things happen better when you're prepared for the worst'. Do you agree? Give an example from your life to support your answer.

### GENDER AND SEX

Bernadette Cooper: 'Houston, we have a problem, and the problem is gender'.

*A Girl, A Horse, A Dream's* central theme concerns the *female* experience of horse racing. As such, the film can provide a forum for the discussion of gender and society, acting as a springboard into a range of important debates. A key point to establish is that every animal and human being is born either male or female; one's sex is an inescapable *biological* fact, but gender is a *social* construct. The different qualities we have come to consider peculiar to men and women are not fixed and immutable; rather, they are subject to change, the product of a socio-historical context and charged with political meaning. The following basic questions are designed to open up discussion in this very complex field. The aim is to encourage students to examine some of their preconceived ideas about masculinity and femininity.

- What are your most masculine qualities?
- What are your most feminine qualities?
- What part does gender play in your life?
- Can you think of any other periods in history or any other cultures in which masculinity and femininity have been defined in ways that contrast with our culture?
- Has your gender ever been an obstacle in the attainment of a goal?
- At the moment, five in every one hundred jockeys are female, but



- the current President of the NSW Jockeys' Association is a woman, LeeAnn Olsen, and she estimates that fifty to sixty per cent of apprentices are women. How will this affect the industry in the future?
- Investigate a woman who has made a significant contribution to breaking down gender barriers in her field or who has achieved prominence in an area that has traditionally been a male domain. Some possible sportswomen to research include: Gai Waterhouse, the horse trainer; golfer Anika Sorenson, who recently competed in the men's PGA; and Billy Jean King, who played Bobby Riggs in 1973 in a tennis match that was widely covered as a Battle of the Sexes. In the arts, Simone Young has had great success as a conductor, in a field where women have not generally excelled. For further suggestions see: <http://www.pioneerwomen.com.au/goodsports.htm> Present an account of this person's achievements, noting the obstacles they overcame.
- Do you know any women working in a profession heavily dominated by men or any men working in an area dominated by women? Make a list of careers that are typically associated with either men or women. Consider why they have developed in this way.

### GENDER AND LANGUAGE

The film provides an opportunity to explore the power of language and



to raise questions about the value of gender neutral terms. At one point, Bernadette is referred to as 'the first lady of racing', and John Tapp talks of 'lady jockeys'. There is a tension here between the two terms, jockey and lady—two words with very different connotations. Trainer Paul Sutherland captures a sense of this conundrum when he says: 'People need to realize, they're not girls, they're jockeys'.

- Make a list of the qualities you think a jockey needs to succeed in their career. Now make a list of the qualities you associate with the terms 'girl' and 'lady'. How many qualities appear on both lists?
- In the early 1970s, professional female jockeys were referred to by the media as 'lady jock-ettes'. As Pam O'Neill wryly says, she always thought jockettes were male underpants. What do you think female jockeys should be called?
- A sign at one of the race courses reads: 'The Sport of Kings; Princesses Welcome'. But are Bernadette and the other female jockeys 'princesses'? And do you feel they are welcome?
- There is also a certain irony at play in some of the names of the horses Bernadette rides. She has an important win on a horse called 'The Man', a win she describes as a turning point in her career, and another horse she rides is called 'Sex Machine'. Invent some race horse names that reflect Bernadette's journey in racing.

### DISCRIMINATION AND HARRASSMENT

Chairman of NSW Stewards: 'She [the female jockey] has some prejudices to overcome and she's also fighting history'.

Incidents of sexism are rife throughout *A Girl, A Horse, A Dream*. Bill Casey, a respected racing journalist, notes without any compunction that he wouldn't back a horse ridden by a woman jockey; and when Bernadette comes second on a horse rated 200-1, we hear the horse's owner, John Singleton, comment 'If we had that with a trainer and a top jockey



we coulda won'. As one of the former women jockeys who is interviewed notes, 'A win lingers longer for males. If you make a mistake [as a woman jockey], they never forget'.

- List some examples of the sexist behaviour and attitudes that confront Bernadette and the other female jockeys.
- What is the difference between discrimination and prejudice?
- Have you ever experienced discrimination?
- One trainer speaks of 'covert discrimination'—as discrimination is against the law, prejudiced attitudes manifest themselves in underhand ways. Can you suggest some possible instances of 'covert discrimination'?
- In the corporate sector, the kinds of prejudices that confront professional women are sometimes referred to as 'the glass ceiling'. What do you think this phrase means?
- Are there any jobs women can't do? Why?
- One trainer argues that 'brute strength doesn't make the horses go faster, it's skill'; and as Bernadette points out, it's even possible to argue that women are better suited to racing, given their generally lower body weights. Do you see any evidence in the documentary that suggests either men or women make better jockeys?
- Former jockey, Roy Higgins, talks about the 'Kamikaze male jockeys' and the recklessness of Australian (male) racers. Do you think this culture might change if there were more female jockeys competing at the highest levels?
- In the early 1970s, when the fight for professional racing licences was initially waged, South Africa and Australia were the only countries in the world with a policy that officially discriminated against women. Towards the end of the film, Bernadette is frustrated by her lack of opportunity in the Australian scene and is considering going overseas. She says she'll just 'front up' at races and hope to get a ride. Do you think she might be able to further her career more easily overseas? Why/why not?
- Bernadette feels that the female jockeys' facilities are second rate compared to the men's. What are her grievances? How could the racing industry ensure both male and female jockeys are provided with similar advantages?
- Part of the film details the seemingly widespread experience of sexual harassment and abuse in the racing world, including disturbing accounts of gang rape. It is something of a cliché that rape is about power, not sex. Do you agree?
- In one scene, we witness a young female jockey being subjected to obscene taunts by a male colleague. How does she react? How would you react in this situation? Would you intervene if you were a bystander?
- Why are the women reluctant to lodge formal complaints about this kind of abuse?
- This is clearly an abusive culture, on many levels, but Bernadette says that women are up against so many odds, sexual harassment is a minor issue. From what you witness in the film, do you agree?

## REFERENCES

### ARTICLES

'Have Whip, Will Fly', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 December 2001.

This is an article in the newspaper's sports section on one of Bernadette Cooper's wins.

Tony Bourke, 'Age Shall Not Weary The Legends Of The Turf', *The Age*, 9 November 2002.

This article is an account of a gathering of legendary, veteran jockeys, including Pam O'Neill, the first woman in Australia to be granted a professional jockey's licence.

Jacqueline Magnay, 'Top Athletes Are "Victims To Sexual Abuse"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 March 2001.

Mark Presnell, 'Black Marks For The Gibes, But Racism Was A Rarity', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 November 2002.

This article discusses the documentary, *Aboriginal Stars Of The Turf*, which features female jockey, Leigh-Anne Goodwin.

### BOOKS

Mike Hayes, *The Track: The Story of Good Breeding and Bad Behaviour*, ABC, Sydney, 2001.

Garrie Hutchinson (ed.), *They're Racing: The Complete Story of Australian Racing*, Viking, Ringwood, 1999.

Kevin Perkins, *Against All Odds: Gai Waterhouse – Woman in a Man's World*, Sun, Sydney, 1997.

### WEB SITES

<http://www.hreoc.gov.au/>

This is the site for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. It also provides a transcript of a speech made by Pru Goward, the Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, on 'Women and Sport' (20 May, 2003).

<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/s332365.htm>

This is the transcript of an article on ABC radio's *PM* programme, entitled

'Racing Industry Addresses Sexual Harassment'.

[http://www.geocities.com/f\\_o\\_th\\_h/foth-main.htm](http://www.geocities.com/f_o_th_h/foth-main.htm)

This site, 'The Female on the Horse', includes interviews with over sixty female jockeys, plus links to other relevant sites. Much of the information is American.

<http://archives.tcm.ie/breakingnews/2001/02/02/story3170/asp>

This is an account of the experiences of Valerie Kost, an award-winning jockey who was raped by nineteen men.

<http://www.now.org/issues/wfw/speakout>

This is an article entitled 'Female Jockey Discriminated Against By Florida Race-track'.

<http://www.awu-nsw.asn.au/news/industrial>

This is the web site for the Australian Workers' Union, and features an article, 'Jockeys Safety At Work Must Come First', from 29 January, 2003.

[www.jockeysroom.com/](http://www.jockeysroom.com/)

This site includes racing news, biographies, statistics and photos.

[http://www.australian-racing.net.au/arb\\_sexual\\_harassment.pdf](http://www.australian-racing.net.au/arb_sexual_harassment.pdf)

This site presents 'The Discrimination/ Sexual Harassment Policy For The Thoroughbred Racing Industry'.

<http://www.racingnsw.com.au>

This is the NSW Thoroughbred Racing Board's official statement on harassment policies, procedures and practices.

<http://www.pioneerwomen.com.au/goodsports.htm>

This web site has sections including: 'Women's Work'; 'First In Their Field'; 'Breaking The Mould'; and 'Good Sports', which refers to Pam O'Neill, the first female jockey to be granted a professional licence.

<http://www.racenet.com.au/articles/templates/profiles>

This is a profile on Bernadette Cooper, in which she is asked: 'If you could implement one thing in racing, what would it be?' She replies, 'Equal rights—equal-

ity is rare'. She is also asked about her funniest moment in racing. She says: 'Being told "When you get out on the track, think like a man". Perhaps if I'd thought like a woman I would have won!' Bernadette writes a regular column published in *The Hills Shire Times*, *Northern District Times*, *The Parramatta Advertiser* and *The Sydney Turf Club Online Magazine*.

<http://www.vicbookmakers.com.au>

This site looks at women in harness racing.

<http://www.ausport.gov.au>

This site presents the paper, 'Australian Research on Harassment in Sport', and includes information on a number of sports, not just horse racing.

<http://www.dier.tas.gov.au>

This is the site for the Department of Infrastructure, Energy and Resources' document, 'Racing Services Tasmania', which includes information on Harassment and Discrimination Policy.

<http://www.qpc.org.au>

Queensland's Racing Code of Conduct can be found at this site.

### CREDITS

**Writer/Director:** Rachel Landers

**Producer:** Rachel Landers/Ian Iveson

**Editor:** Emma Hay

**Composer:** Elliot Wheeler

**Cinematographer:** Simon Smith

**Sound Recordist:** Chris Bollard

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