

PASSING THE TEST

BY GARY McMILLEN



Jockey Richard Eramia's journey to U.S. citizenship

MARSHALL BLEVINS PHOTOS

The ceremony can take a long time, but these are people who are used to waiting.

They stand up, put their right hands over their hearts, and listen to a recording of the national anthem.

They sit down and listen to speeches from local officials followed by a welcoming video from President Barack Obama.

They stand up again to recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

Sitting back down, the group awaits the final step in the immigration and citizenship process.

One by one, men and women are called to the stage in alphabetical order of country of origin. On Sept. 10, 2015, in the auditorium of the U.S. Immigration and Citizenship Services field office in Dallas, Texas, more than 100 people were assembled to receive their framed document of United States citizenship.

Finally the name of Richard Edgardo Eramia, five-time leading rider in his native Uruguay, was called.

“Out of all those people, I was next-to-last,” Eramia said with a smile. “The guy behind me was from a country that I never heard the name of before.”

It was a dream turned into reality.

For the son of a cemetery grave digger in San Jose, Uruguay, the long path to U.S. citizenship was not typical of what you read about on social media or hear on the news.

“It was a simple life in my little home town,” Eramia explained. “The people are mostly farmers.”

Two miles from his home was a race-track, and the 9-year-old Eramia talked his way into the barns and began grooming, feeding, and walking horses. The seed of an idea began to sprout and take root.

“Always I love the horses as soon as I see them and touch them,” Eramia remembered. “I wasn’t afraid of them. I

knew that I wanted to be a jockey, and it was always in my mind to come to the U.S.A.”

Eramia began his career as a jockey at the age of 15, competing and winning in races with 14 to 15 horses in every contest.

“After 2003 in Uruguay, the racing was really good,” Eramia said. “There were five tracks. The casinos came in and the purses were better and you could make money. I watched the big races in the United States on television. There were plenty of good riders to respect.”

North America was put on hold while Eramia traveled to Argentina and Brazil to ride in stakes races. But to progress or succeed in the racing industry, sometimes it’s all about whom you know. Eramia didn’t know anybody. There were no uncles, cousins, or grandfathers in the horse business to help him network with stables in the United States.

“I wanted to come when I was 17, but I had no contacts, no connections,” Eramia said. “You need to know someone or have a sponsor. Opening the doors was difficult for me.”

Ticket to Ride

Passport in hand, Eramia secured a travel/vacation visa and arrived in Florida in 2005. Alone and without friends or family, he stayed at Tampa Bay Downs for a month and then moved to Calder Race Course, where he paid a lawyer to change his vacation visa to a work visa.

"It was expensive, but I was documented and ready to ride," Eramia said.

The only plan that Eramia had was that he did not want to return to Uruguay. After Calder he went to Louisiana Downs and began picking up mounts on the Louisiana/Oklahoma/Texas circuit, where he caught the eye of trainer Michelle Lovell.

"Richard did not speak a word of English," Lovell remembered. "About all I can do is speak in barn Spanish so we played charades in the paddock, communicating with our hands and making gestures."

Lovell was instrumental in networking Eramia with jockey agent Rick Mocklin and promised she would support Eramia with mounts. Suddenly, Eramia had the connections that would jump-start his career in the U.S.

For Eramia two things about the U.S. put Uruguay in the rear view mirror.

"I liked the organization," Eramia said without hesitation. "Everybody and everything was organized. If somebody said they would meet you at 8 o'clock, that is what they meant. They were on time. The racetrack was the same way. Everything happened on time. Every country and culture is different, but I like the organization here in the States. Also, I feel safe. I don't have the feeling of crime or being in places that are dangerous."

Mutual respect explains the working relationship between Eramia and his agent that has continued for seven years.

"For a guy that came from Uruguay all by himself and could not speak a word of English, the obstacles must have been enormous," Mocklin said. "We have no clue what these people have been through to get here. I knew all along that he was trying to get his citizenship and you could sense his excitement. We take a lot of things for granted in this country, so it's good to be around someone that has shown perseverance and appreciates what freedom really means."

Something is clicking on all cylinders because Eramia has won the riding title at Louisiana Downs for the past five sea-



Richard Eramia with agent Rick Mocklin on the Fair Grounds backstretch

sons. In terms of graded stakes, Eramia won the 2014 Texas Mile Stakes (gr. III) and the Lone Star Park Handicap (gr. III) with Grand Contender, and the grade II Smile Sprint Handicap with Gantry at Calder in 2012. Eramia has tasted the national rankings in number of wins, finishing 13th in 2013 and 14th in 2014.

Good manners, strong work ethic, and a positive personality have opened many doors for the 36-year-old Eramia. His agent sees him on a daily basis and offers an explanation for Eramia's success.

"Nothing has come easy for Richard, but you never hear him whine or complain," Mocklin said. "Watch him on the racetrack and you will see he rides every horse past the finish line, trying to get every piece of the purse he can for the

owner. It doesn't take trainers long to get to know him and that makes my job easy."

Federal law requires green card documentation along with proof of residency for five years before a person is eligible to apply for citizenship. Published by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the pamphlet newcomers are given to study has a long title: "Learn About the United States, Quick Civic Lessons for the Naturalization Test." The pamphlet, with an illustration of Mt. Rushmore on the cover, contains 100 questions and answers, covering details of the Constitution, systems of government, federal holidays, U.S. history, and geographical information.

Some of the questions are easy: Who



Eramia aboard Gantry after winning the 2012 Smile Sprint Handicap at Calder

wrote the Declaration of Independence? Why are there 50 stars on the flag? Where is the Statue of Liberty?

Some of the questions are difficult: Who is the Chief Justice of the United States? The House of Representatives has how many voting members?

The next step in Eramia's journey became a family project. An audio CD accompanied the pamphlet and Eramia and his wife, Jhessika, played it over and over in the car. At home his daughter Cynthia became the drill master of repetition and Laffit, his 7-year-old son (named after Hall of Fame rider Laffit Pincay), witnessed the late night study sessions.

"My daughter asked me the questions because she speaks good English," Eramia recalled. "The pronunciation is what I need to hear and then memorize the answer. Some of the words were hard to understand."

Some people go to classes. Some people pay for tutors. Eramia studied for three months with his family to prepare for the citizenship test. There is no free pass. Jhessika wrote a check for \$685 to cover the fingerprinting, background check, and application fees that are required before admission to the scheduled exam, which involves demonstrating ability to read and write in English, some conversation with the examiner, and answering five to six questions contained in the pamphlet.

"I was really nervous on the day of the test," Eramia stated. "I didn't want to mess it up. I want to pass on the first time. I just know that I love this country plus I have two children and a wife and they want 100% to live here. It is important to keep the family together."

Some examiners speak fast and some speak slowly. Some are friendlier than others. It can be a six-month wait to re-take the exam if a person fails any of the components. For the reading segment, Eramia remembers it was about the due date for paying taxes. For the conversation segment Eramia talked about his family members and his home address.

"I can talk anything about horse racing, but it is difficult to talk about things like the Senate and Supreme Court. Those things are new to me," Eramia admitted. "The man was very friendly and kind. He knew that my English was not perfect and I was told it was OK to ask him to repeat, but he knew that I had studied hard."



Eramia has plenty to smile about since becoming a U.S. citizen last September

Deep Stretch

With the finish line in sight, Eramia had answered four questions correctly. The last of the five questions put to him was "What three countries did the United States fight in World War II?" His answer was a hand ride. "Germany, Japan, and Italy," said the jockey from Uruguay.

On his first try Richard Edgardo Eramia had passed the examination and became a citizen of the United States.

Few people cry at the ceremony that comes months after passing the exam. It's a celebration of smiles, hugs, and iPhone selfies. Along with his wife, Eramia invited his longtime friend

Kevin Halter, who lives in an adjoining Dallas suburb near the Eramia family. Retired, Halter had once owned a string of 25 horses, including stakes winner Dream of Angels, that he raced in Florida, Maryland, Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Eramia was Halter's main rider at Lone Star Park and a friendship developed.

"I took notice of his riding talents," Halter explained, "but also of what a unique and special person he was away from the racetrack. I consider it a privilege to have Richard as a friend. The swearing-in ceremony was a major day in the life of a very deserving person."

There is a traditional saying in Central and South America that goes, "No se puede vivir sin buenos compadres." Translated to English, the phrase means that no one is able to live without good friends.

"I am very happy now, and I want to show my gratitude to this country and to everyone that has helped me," Eramia said. "The system is good and I feel very comfortable. Now I can look ahead and not worry. In November I can vote for President. It is very important to vote. It is my responsibility. I can't wait."

(Footnote: Wife Jhessika Eramia passed her citizenship exam Dec. 17, 2015. Accompanied by Kevin Halter, Eramia's daughter, Cynthia, likes to attend civil court proceedings where she listens to the lawyers. Eleven years old, she has set a goal to attend Oxford University in England and pay her tuition by washing dishes and getting a scholarship.) BH



Eramia, a five-time leading rider in Uruguay, plies his trade on the Louisiana/Oklahoma/Texas circuit