

# About Craig Bandoroff



By Eric Mitchell | Reprinted from: The Blood-Horse - July 12, 2002

Craig Bandoroff is understated, almost dismissive, about how he became one of the nation's leading bloodstock agents. After an attempt to become a jockey ended in a horrible and crippling accident that stole the use of his right arm, Bandoroff will tell you he had no grand plan.

Talk to Bandoroff's friends and business associates, and they will shatter the myth that things just worked out. Nothing was given to Bandoroff, they say. He saw his dream and through hard work and a zealous intensity made it happen.

Craig Bandoroff *"He is not Leslie Combs and mint juleps,"* said Barry Weisbord, co-publisher of the Thoroughbred Daily News and a longtime friend and business associate, referring to the charismatic founder of Spendthrift Farm.

*"Craig won't have the best party or the best giveaways at the barn or buy the most drinks. But he will work the hardest and raise a good horse."*

Since opening their 570-acre Denali Stud in 1990, Craig and Holly Bandoroff have raised and sold some of Kentucky's best horses, such as Sophisticat, who won the Coronation Stakes (Eng-I) at Royal Ascot on June 21 (2002). Before reaching the racetrack, the 3-year-old daughter of Storm Cat out of 1995 champion Serena's Song had already distinguished herself by selling for \$3.4 million at the 2000 Keeneland July select yearling sale. She was the second highest-priced filly that year and one of three top fillies sold by Denali Stud since 1999. Denali consigned the top-priced filly that year, getting \$2.8 million for a daughter of Gone West out of Miraloma, and did it again in 2001 with a \$3.7-million daughter of Seeking the Gold out of 1998 champion Escena.

Denali Stud became the leading consignor by average at the prestigious Keeneland July sale for the first time in 1999 and repeated in 2000. The farm ranked second by average in 2001 with three selling for an average \$1,666,667.

After driving hard for more than a decade and achieving such successes, the Bandoroffs might be expected to back off on the gas pedal. Forget it.

*"People are naive in thinking that once you've made it you can relax a little bit,"* said Holly Bandoroff. *"You have to keep working as hard as you can possibly work just to stay where you've gotten. It is like running on a treadmill. If you let up, you'll fall."*

Craig would not have it any other way. Determination wakes him at 5:30 a.m. every morning and pushes his solidly athletic, 5-foot-2-inch frame out the door to run five miles. He has been preparing for a 10K road race; otherwise, he would be running three miles. He returns home to help Holly feed breakfast to their three children--Katherine, 13, Conrad, 10, and Isabel, 2. Then he drives a half-hour from the high-end, tree-lined streets of Lexington's Chevy Chase neighborhood to the farm where he has been known to spend entire days talking to clients on the phone. Bandoroff's cell phone is never off, which means he takes calls early in the morning from European clients and late in the day from California clients. When he's not on the phone, Bandoroff is out on the farm inspecting horses or

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showing sale horses to prospective buyers. He prefers working late because after 5 p.m. the phone stops ringing and the quiet time allows him to catch up. Bandoroff usually returns home by 7:30 p.m.

Determination and dedication have not only made Bandoroff a successful businessman, they probably saved his life.

## WILL TO WIN...AND SURVIVE

Bandoroff was living his dream as a jockey in late 1974. The native of Cherry Hill, N.J., whose family lived minutes from Garden State Park, latched onto the idea of riding racehorses after realizing he would be too short to participate in sports beyond high school. Bandoroff was a natural athlete who played varsity soccer for three of his four years at Cherry Hill High School West.

An inherent fascination with horses and encouragement from his classmate and friend, Sammy Boulmetis Jr., the son of Hall of Fame jockey Sam Boulmetis, led Craig to believe race riding could be his competitive outlet.



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**Bandoroff captures  
first wins as a jockey**

*“Craig was stocky and really strong,”* said Boulmetis Jr. *“And he had brains, which is a combination you don’t find too often.”* Boulmetis Jr. was a jockey from 1973

to 1981 until a riding accident left him paralyzed from the waist down. He is now a steward at Philadelphia Park.

Bandoroff was a National Merit Scholar who seemed assuredly college-bound, so he shocked his parents when he said he wanted to be a jockey.


*“We were very unhappy and surprised,”* said his mother, Ruth Bandoroff, who now lives near Atlantic City. *“We didn’t have a very good impression of the racetrack or the people around it.”*

Benjamin and Ruth Bandoroff went to visit Sam Boulmetis Sr., who told them he felt Craig had a good shot to be successful. Craig also applied to college and was granted deferred placement. So with a college education guaranteed and encouragement from Boulmetis Sr., the Bandoroffs got behind their son’s plan.

Bandoroff’s plan consumed the next two years of his life. Through a vocational education program, he worked at the track in the morning for trainer and taskmaster Marty Fallon and attended school in the afternoon. He would arrive at Garden State Park at 5 a.m. seven days a week to gallop horses and rub a few if a groom didn’t show up. During the week, he took two honors classes in the afternoon beginning at 1 p.m.; then, after school practiced with the varsity soccer team. Craig would go home following practice, do his homework, and go to bed.

*“I was always sad because he sold his youth his senior year to the track,”* said his mother. *“He never went to his prom. He never went out with his friends. He never dated.”*

Bandoroff captures first wins as a jockey The sacrifices eventually paid off. Fallon was tough, but he had a large stable and a reputation for making jockeys. Craig rode his first race March 4, 1974. He started in about 40 more races before he finally grabbed the brass ring--his first win. Seven days later he had a handful of rings. Craig won his first race at Monmouth Park on the Jersey Shore on Nov. 9, 1974, on Semi-Demi. Two days later, he captured both halves of the daily double at Monmouth and his riding career took off.



By late December, Bandoroff ranked among the top 10 riders in New Jersey. He was back at Garden State Park where he had earned nine wins, 11 seconds, and 16 thirds since the beginning of the month. The future never looked brighter. Then he crashed.

A 2-year-old colt named Old Frankfort took a sharp left with Bandoroff out of the gate in the fourth race at Garden State on Dec. 23. The colt tried jumping the inside rail but his front legs got hung up. Bandoroff flipped over his head so violently that he circled through the air and landed back on the main track where Old Frankfort collapsed on him. His right arm was crushed and right lung punctured. Bandoroff's grandparents were in the stands watching.

Several days after the accident, Bandoroff got the bad news--his arm was paralyzed. Doctors offered hope with nerve transplant surgery, but when surgeons opened the arm they discovered the damage was more severe than expected and they immediately closed Bandoroff back up. He was told he would never regain use of his right arm.

*"That was the worst I had ever seen him,"* his mother said.

Craig didn't accept the diagnosis and dedicated the next year to rehabilitation. He said he didn't want to look back and wonder whether his arm would have recovered had he tried harder.

*"In the beginning, it was very difficult,"* said his mother. *"When we left him at the rehabilitation institute, it was like leaving him at prison."*

Surrounded by people with more serious injuries, Craig came to realize he was lucky.

*"I walked out of there saying, 'Thank God it was only my arm,'"* he said. Then with the same enthusiasm he applied to his jockey career, he threw himself back into life.

*"He was very determined,"* Ruth said. *"We had a small ski boat and he was determined to ski again using one arm. We taped his arm with Velcro so he could ride a bicycle. The doctors told us we were so fortunate he is a determined young man. They said a lot of young people give up."*



Craig did decide he was done with horses, but that didn't last long. While attending the University of Virginia, he made friends with people who showed hunters and jumpers. They introduced him to renowned jumper trainer Harry DeLeyer, who had a farm on Long Island. DeLeyer designed a special bridle for Bandoroff that allowed him to ride with one hand.

*"He wanted to the best of his ability to be back with the horses,"* said DeLeyer in his thick Dutch accent. *"He loved riding that much. He would tell me, 'I want to do this again.'"*

Soon Bandoroff was training horses regularly for DeLeyer and convinced he had to find some way back into the horse business. He transferred to the University of Kentucky and immediately began apprenticing himself with veterinarians, bloodstock agents, and other industry experts. After hearing a lecture on the relationship of conformation to soundness by renowned Colorado veterinarian Dr. Marvin Beeman, Bandoroff called him and arranged a mini-internship. For six weeks, he rode with Beeman on his rounds and they discussed conformation.

*"I was always impressed with his intensity and desire to learn," Beeman said. "I have been equally impressed with the effort he's made to do something with his life."*

Bandoroff graduated, married Holly, whom he had met at UK, and took a job with Fasig-Tipton in New York. They lived in New York City for five years and there met Weisbord. Holly worked for Weisbord first as his key assistant in running Executive Bloodstock, a consulting and racehorse portfolio management business. Craig joined them soon after.

*"Craig was the hands-on guy as far as raising and selling the horses," said Weisbord, who was more involved in deal-making and stallion shares. "He has been my eyes and ears for a long time. I could do it, but he is better at it."*

The Bandoroffs returned to Kentucky in 1986 and Craig began running the sales operation for Crystal Springs, a new farm created by former Hollywood Park chairman R.D. Hubbard and the late Edward Sczesny. Hubbard had been a client of Bandoroff's New York friend Weisbord.

By 1990, Craig Bandoroff realized he had a knack for the bloodstock and sales business and decided to take the next step. He and Holly leased barns from Crystal Springs and launched Denali Stud. They retained both Hubbard and Weisbord as clients.

*"One of the things I like about keeping my horses there is I know he is worrying enough about them for both of us," said Weisbord, who keeps about nine broodmares at Denali.*

Denali's business and reputation grew steadily, but in 1998 a casual friendship transformed the farm. Craig Bandoroff met owners Bob and Beverly Lewis in 1991 during a Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association workshop at Denali Stud for new owners. The Lewises were primarily interested in racing, so Bandoroff never saw them as potential clients. He did recognize Bob Lewis as a man of means--he owns the second-largest beer distributorship in California--and wanted to be sure he stayed in the business. Bandoroff called him periodically to be sure he was being treated right and a friendship developed.

The Lewises went on to race several graded stakes winners and champions, and twice had a shot at sweeping the Triple Crown. One of their top horses was Serena's Song, who won 17 graded stakes races and was the all-time leading North America female by earnings until Spain captured that honor earlier this year.

*"When we started I had no thoughts about getting into the breeding business," Bob Lewis said. "But as it happens, you back into it. You find you have a good filly with residual value." Without hesitation, Lewis sent Miraloma and Serena's Song to Denali Stud.*

Lewis and others said that Craig Bandoroff's hands-on approach and his compulsion to do things right were the main reasons they did business with Denali Stud.

Fred Seitz, bloodstock agent and owner of Brookdale Farm near Versailles, Ky., who helped Bandoroff while he was in college, isn't surprised by Denali's success.

*"Selling horses as agent is a business of details and attention to those details," Seitz said. "All the variables of horses, owners, consignors, and purchasers. It lends itself to a detail-oriented person and a highly motivated person. That's Craig."*

