

## RUS Fair final winner has jumping background

by Michelle Miller, RUS New York

**Milford, NY ---** Finger crossing is a hand gesture commonly used to wish for luck. Rider Vanessa Karlewicz did this superstitious act before racing in her first RUS fair final on Sept. 7 at Batavia Downs and the outcome was great for the 36-year-old and her mount, Admirable Hanover, because the duo ended the night in the winner's circle.

Karlewicz, of Florida, N.Y., called the experience "surreal."

"When I crossed the line there was a massive roar, but I had no idea if I had won by half a second, by 1,000th of a second or even lost," she said.



*Paul White photo*

**Admirable Hanover and Vanessa Karlewicz were 2:03.4 winners.**

"As we slowed our horses up on the backside, I was still unsure as to who would be continuing on to the winner's circle," she continued. Then the placings were announced... I had won! It finally sunk in and that's when I became emotional. My first meaningful win on a bigger track. I was overtaken with joy and gratefulness."

As the race moved off the last turn, Karlewicz pulled Admirable Hanover and drew alongside last year's fair final winners Andrea Pratt and My Friend Charlie. Admirable Hanover edged his way past the wire and won by a neck in 2:03.4. My Friend Charlie was second and Jeanie Marie closed sharply for third after an early race miscue in the non-betting event.

Karlewicz said it is natural to envision yourself winning, but said she also tried to keep her expectations grounded.

"We have had a few wins this year, but those were all on fair tracks," she said. "I also knew that there was a competitive field of horses in the final, not to mention last year's winner. Certainly I knew I had my work cut out for me, but was going to give it my best shot."

This marked the third year RUS New York has organized a fair series. It included 12 races at nine fairs across the state, a race at Saratoga Harness Track (a part of their fair day) and the championship race. It was a historic event because it was the first time Batavia Downs had ever held a racing under saddle event.

The win was the third in six starts under saddle for Admirable Hanover this year. The horse is owned by Peter Gerry and is trained by his rider, Karlewicz. This is the fourth year the 9-year-old gelded son of [Cantab Hall](#) has competed in RUS and the 2:03.4 time was a new lifetime RUS mark for him.

The win was a little extra special for Karlewicz because it came the night before her birthday.

"Admirable certainly gave me the best birthday gift ever," she said. "I was so overwhelmed with both people congratulating me on the win, along with birthday wishes. To say I was on cloud nine is probably still an understatement. Everybody's kind words and support was very meaningful."

Karlewicz has not always been in the racing business and still considers herself to be somewhat of a "newbie." In fact, Karlewicz's full-time job is managing her family's horse farm, The Stables at MiraBella. It is primarily a hunter/jumper facility. The farm houses about 40 horses -- a mixture of boarders, lesson horses and young stock as breeding is also a big part of the business.

Karlewicz said she initially got introduced to Standardbreds three years ago through Connor Racing Stables.

"I started out jogging a few horses once in a while for fun. The more I was around it, the more fascinated I became. I was intrigued to learn about a different side of the sport and I was certainly drawn into the speed and thrill of racing," she explained.

According to the horse enthusiast, she received a lot of support while learning the sport and was ultimately able to get her trainers/driving license. Karlewicz said she was graciously supplied with horses to drive and race from both the Connor Stables as well as owner/driver Peter Gerry.

"RUS specifically was something I never knew existed until I saw a race one day during the Goshen matinees," Karlewicz said. "I knew instantly that I had to try it."

Gerry's horse was stabled with the Connors where Karlewicz said he never quite developed into a horse for the "big races" so they gave her the chance to drive him in an amateur series.

"He has proven to be a bit of a quirky horse in that he has struggled with the starting gate and he tends to get nervous and makes breaks especially when starting from the rail (the post position the duo had in the fair final)," Karlewicz said.

This was a challenge being new to the sport, according to Karlewicz. However, she said, figuring the horse out has made her a better horsewoman.

The rider/trainer said everyone at the Connor Stables and Gerry are supportive of RUS and were willing to try different horses in their program to see how they would fare doing it. Both Jennifer and Brian Connor have ridden horses under saddle themselves.

"It always seemed like something Admirable was good at and seemed to like," Karlewicz said. "This year I decided to put most of my efforts towards RUS versus driving and made arrangements to take over Admirable's care and training schedule myself."

"Being Admirable's full-time trainer brings a great sense of pride in that I feel his wins this year solidify my horsemanship skills in a field that's relatively new to me."

Admirable Hanover and Karlewicz have had time to bond. She says she has had a lot more experience driving him, but feels he is much calmer while working under saddle.

"One of the greater challenges driving him is that he is a very hot horse; both jogging and in the race bike," Karlewicz said. "The under saddle work, I feel, keeps him calmer and therefore he's easier to handle. He is a horse that we towed a lot instead of jogging in an attempt to avoid him overworking himself in a jog cart every day. This is where I'm happy to offer him the under saddle work off the track. I think he really enjoys that."

Every horse has a preferred racing style or at least one that lets the horse perform at its best. For example, some like to leave, while others do better if tucked in a hole with cover and conserving energy until the end. So what is the secret to Admirable Hanover?

Karlewicz said she always has to ease Admirable Hanover into the race and is not one that she likes to leave the starting gate with too fast.

Her strategy for the final was to try and be patient off the starting gate and make it around the first turn.

She said, "Once we make it that far, I can usually ease up and start participating in the race. There are usually always horses that like to leave so it works out for me to tuck behind someone. Addie generally races better mid-pack so getting away third suited us. I knew going down the backstretch for the second time that I needed to start to make my move if I stood a chance. I pulled his ear plugs and he nicely filled the gap. Coming around the final turn I was really happy with where we were. I felt my horse had more in him, so I pulled to the outside and urged him on. Crossing that line first in that close of a race is a thrill I will never forget."

Karlewicz started riding when she was 8 years old. She said jumping has always been her main focus. However, she said she has dabbled a little with dressage, eventing, western, Thoroughbreds, and Arabians.

"Jumping has always been my passion. Years later it's intriguing to be learning yet another side of the sport," she said.

Karlewicz said she would love to see RUS continue to grow and one day evolve into a betting sport here in the U.S.

"I would love nothing more than to be able to continue to participate in this sport, hopefully get more rides, and expand to racing at new tracks," she said.

The rider/trainer said she has always been an adrenaline seeker so that is why racing under saddle "spoke to her." She said, "Once I got a taste of racing, both driving and RUS, I was instantly hooked."

Now that the fair series has come to an end, Karlewicz said she is looking forward to starting back up in the North American Amateur Driving Series that takes place at Monticello, Yonkers and Freehold this fall.