

BREEDERS' CUP FEATURE: In Good Hands

ARCADIA, November 2 – When Nancy O springs from the gate in Friday's Grade 1, \$1-million Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies Turf, she'll have enjoyed all the benefits one might expect a high-performance athlete to receive - - including massage therapy.

The knowledge that Nancy O, trained by Carolyn Costigan, and owned, in part, by her father, Robert Costigan's Arravale Racing, has received treatment might sound alarm bells for handicappers trying to find a winner on racing's biggest day.

However, Marguerite Old, three years into her practice as a Registered Equine Massage Therapist quickly dispels any notion that the two-year-old filly might be in ill health.

"Absolutely not," states Old. "More often than not, I'm used as part of a maintenance program to get a horse working at its optimum. There's something called maintenance massage and that is sports massage therapy. You get a horse on a maintenance massage program, so you're keeping the horse as supple and as healthy as possible."

Old, who operates Equine Edge Massage Therapy, makes her daily rounds on the Woodbine backstretch, and has become a regular part of the team that has brought Nancy O from a green filly working towards her first race to a contender at the game's highest level.

That Old, who graduated from the Darcy Lane School of Equine Massage Therapy, is an integral part of the Arravale Racing team, may sound strange at first blush. However, considering what is at stake – a \$1-million purse, grade 1 black type and a chance to raise the profile of both horse and trainer, why wouldn't a trainer try and give her horse every possible advantage.

A look at the 2012 media guide for the Toronto Raptors reveals that the basketball team's staff includes an athletic therapist, strength and conditioning coach and a massage therapist. Health professionals are prominent staff members of most top-level sports teams, so applying a similar concept in horse racing is hardly far-fetched.

Old's treatment, which generally focuses on large muscle groups, is catered to the needs of the equine athlete. Developing a bond is paramount to success.

"It's important to spend a little time with the horse and introduce yourself before getting right into the treatment," explains Old. "I usually gently pat them on the neck, speak softly to them and give them the opportunity to get used to me."

"With aggressive horses that are known to bite or kick it is important to respect them as much as possible and show that you are confident, trying not to back down when they show signs of aggression or dominance, it is important to stand up to them but still show respect for what they are trying to say. This is something that takes a lot of patience to learn and is very challenging."

Old, who works with 10 Woodbine-based trainers on a regular basis, notes that each conditioner has found their own unique way to incorporate her talents to suit their horses.

"Certain trainers I work for, a good portion of their stable, will get pre-race massage 48 hours from the race, or less," offers Old. "Other trainers want it 72 hours out, and others just want a massage when they see a problem to see if that will fix it. If they see a horse is moving a little

stiff one day and I pop in after training, they say, 'Yes, we could use that today. Others use it before a chiropractic adjustment.'

To put her work in perspective, Old offers the following analogy.

"I think of a massage as an oil change," starts Old. "In its most basic form, it increases circulation and lymphatic flow to cleanse a horse's system and increase tissue perfusion of oxygen. It helps nutrients get to the tissue faster and it promotes healing. And it also promotes a state of wellbeing with the horse."

Or, more palatably put, she adds, "A lot of trainers will tell me it really relaxes the horse and with thoroughbreds, that's pretty important. If anything, that horse is in a better mood and for a training athlete, state of mind is important."

Costigan has certainly seen tangible benefits of Old's hands-on approach with Nancy O.

"When Marguerite started working on Nancy O, she right away told me her glutes are tight and her lower back on the right is tight," says Costigan, who gallops Nancy O each morning. "She knows nothing about how the horse moves, she hasn't been on her, it's just from putting her hands on the horse and telling me what she feels. I'm able to back that up and say when she moves on this lead I can feel she's a little bit tighter in her right hind."

Nancy O, who arrived at Costigan's barn in April a mere splinter, has bloomed and grown into herself. And as the filly has changed, so has the treatment.

"When I first started working on her, Carolyn and I would laugh about it because she's so little and didn't have much muscle mass," starts Old. "Carolyn would say, 'No one has any respect for this horse, she needs some help'. Giving her so many massages, she's grown and filled out so well. It's really quite remarkable. What massage has done is help her maximize her potential, kept her nice and sound, and calmer."

Old, once an executive administrative assistant at a pharmaceutical company, can't imagine going back to being a desk jockey. Her new career at the racetrack consumes her.

"I love what I do," she says. "This will be my best year yet. I always come out to watch the horses I worked on run. It makes my weekend. It's like I never have a day off. I watch every race, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

While Old realizes there will always be skeptics that question the value of what equine massage might offer - particularly in the already bill-laden world of horse racing with its vets, blacksmiths and feed companies - she asks potential clientele to try massage themselves first.

"I ask trainers if they've ever had massage therapy themselves. Some have, some haven't," explains Old. "The ones that have, understand what it does, that it makes you feel better, and how it can help with an injury."

Old, who overcame a chronic neck injury with a combination of massage therapy and chiropractic work, believes wholeheartedly in her work and challenges each of her clients to let their own team prove the value of the treatment.

"If possible, after I've worked on a horse, I'll ask the trainer not to tell the exercise rider that the

horse has been worked on,” starts Old. “When the rider comes back from training, ask them how their horse travelled.”

Costigan met Old’s challenge and felt the benefit first hand.

“I now go to a massage therapist because Marguerite was working on my horses,” says Costigan. “It’s completely changed how I sit on a horse and how I sit and stand in every day activities. It’s not hocus pocus. Doctors prescribe massage therapy for patients that have had car accidents or injuries caused from any kind of repetitive work or strained muscle. Marguerite is applying that exact same science to the horse’s musculoskeletal system.”

As for Nancy O, the filly is just happy to enjoy the treatment and the human contact that most thoroughbreds crave.

“Nancy is a funny filly. Carolyn says she just loves me,” grins Old. “I’m not sure about that, but Nancy knows who I am and she knows why I’m here. I would say there’s definitely a bond.”

And that bond could pay huge dividends on Friday.