

All in the Family: Ortiz Brothers Wrap Up Banner Year in New York

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Jose and Irad Ortiz, Jr. each enjoyed a banner year in 2014

For brothers Jose and Irad Ortiz, Jr., battles are a daily occurrence. When the two are not squaring off in the latest video game, they are both at the track vying with many of the best jockeys on the New York Racing Association circuit in a test of wills to see who gets to the finish line first. That spirit of competition has driven the brothers to finish 1-2, respectively, in the 2014 jockey standings, with more than 500 wins between them at Aqueduct Racetrack, Belmont Park, and Saratoga Race Course.

Like green colts turned graded stakes winners, the brothers' early days as apprentices just a few short years ago seem far behind them.

Irad was the first to reach New York in 2011, when he came at age 19 from the Hipodromo Camarero in his native Puerto Rico to Belmont Park, scoring his first American victory with Millennium Jet on June 24. One year younger, Jose followed like his brother a graduate of his country's jockey school, Escuela Vocacional Hipica and followed in 2012, riding first at Parx Racing before moving his tack to New York, where he won with his first mount at Big Sandy, Corofin, on March 21.

Their success didn't end when they lost their bugs, however.

Renowned handicapper and NYRA racing analyst Andy Serling points out the difficulty many apprentices have in continuing their success as professional jockeys.

"What's most impressive about Irad Ortiz, Jr. and his brother Jose Ortiz, is that they both were very successful apprentices who very quickly made the turn from apprentice to journeyman," said Serling. "This is quality, and a talent [that] they both possess, you have to be constantly learning and quickly improving your game. I think you can see that clearly in both Irad and Jose. They're both very promising riders because of their ability to adapt."

Nationally, the now 22-year-old Irad is No. 3 in purses earned with more than \$20.23 million in 2014, of which \$18.6 million was earned on the NYRA circuit. The past year has been a whirlwind for the youngster, who took his first riding title on the Big A's 2012-13 inner track meet, scored his first win in a Breeders' Cup race aboard the Chad Brown-trained Lady Eli in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies Turf; was given the chance to represent North America in the Longines International Jockeys' Championships in Hong Kong, and clinched the leading rider titles at Belmont Park in the spring and fall over North America's leading rider, fellow New Yorker Javier Castellano.

"[Irad] has definitely improved his style and technique of riding just by getting on a number of different horses," said Irad's agent, Steve Rushing. "When you have trainers, like Kiaran [McLaughlin], Christophe Clement, and Brown backing you it really helps you as a rider."

Irad mirrors his agent's sentiments, saying that he feels more confident as a rider since coming to America in 2012.

"I get to ride some of the best horses right now," he said. "As with Lady Eli and the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf, [that ride] was an unbelievable experience. That whole day was amazing. For [Chad Brown] to give me the opportunity to ride there on a nice filly, and rely on me, that was amazing."

Not long afterward, Rushing, who was previously the agent for retired jockey Ramon Dominguez, was able to secure a spot in Hong Kong for Ortiz, who did not win any of the events aboard his 99-1 mounts.

"I'm good friends with Bill Nader (Executive Director of Racing for the Hong Kong Jockey Club) and he's asked me in the past about sending Ramon [Dominguez]," said Rushing. "This was the first year it worked out. The horses he was given, it was the luck of the draw, but Irad, he's always learning. For him, he said it was a great experience and he can't wait to go back."

Ortiz Jr., wasn't discouraged by the lack of victory in Hong Kong. If anything, it made him want to try harder.

"It was awesome just to get to go there and see how different the track can be," he said. "Basically, those horses [in Hong Kong] are the same here as these ones and the only difference for me was having to go the other way, to race in the other direction (racing clockwise in Hong Kong, but it's still the same as all the other tracks.)"

Younger brother Jose, now 21, is putting together an equally impressive riding resume. He is living proof that lightning strikes more than once, coming from a family in which he and his brother's grandfather — also named Irad Ortiz — and uncle, Ivan Ortiz were also jockeys.

Jose's work ethic is apparent to anyone who encounters him. That hard work, Ortiz feels is what has gotten him to where he is today.

“When I came in 2012, [it was so much different]; I was a bug and I was a little green,” he recalls. “I had to learn a lot. In 2012, most of the riding I did was breezing in the morning, now I breeze in the morning to learn about a horse; every time you ride you try to learn something new.”

His agent, Jimmy Riggio, can attest to the seemingly grueling work schedule.

“Jose consistently works hard, critiques his own riding, you don’t need to tell him, he tells himself,” said Riggio. “He wants to be the best – you know he’s young and he’s got talent but we know improvement comes with experience. Every race is a lesson. He went from riding one or two horses in races and now, he’s a workhorse, he’ll breeze, five to six horses in the morning and ride seven to nine in races in the afternoon.”

Jose has 12 graded stakes victories to his credit this year, with his most recent win aboard Belle Gallantey in the Grade 1 Beldame at Belmont Park. He took the 2014 Aqueduct spring meet riding title, and currently is atop the jockey standings for Aqueduct’s inner-track meet, which concludes in March. He also will finish the year ranked fifth nationally in earnings with more than \$16 million, \$15 million of which came in New York.

But Jose says he won’t rest until he is the best – or at least, better than his brother.

“My goals for 2015 – everything, to win everything, leading jockey, the [Kentucky] Derby, and a Breeders’ Cup,” said Jose.

While both brothers work hard to ply their trade and rack up wins and accomplishments, they understand the delicate balance between being brothers and competing jockeys.

“Riding against my brother, it’s a good feeling, it used to not happen too many times, but now he’s getting better and I enjoy it,” said Irad, Jr. “[On the track] we’re jockeys, he rides his horse, I ride my horse. It’s a competition.”

Jose echoed the sentiment -

“We support each other, but you know, when we go out there, we are jockeys,” said Jose, who claimed foul against his brother in the seventh race on December 27. “But outside the races, we’re brothers. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The Ortiz brothers have harmoniously enjoyed a banner year in 2014. But if success has made them anything, it has made them hungry to keep winning. While sharing in their accomplishments as brothers, it’s their drive that will continue to fuel their ambition to be the best.