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They're called "Caretakers" for a reason

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by Kimberly Rinker, OSDF Administrator

In harness racing, the person most often overlooked in the hype and glory of the winner's circle is the caretaker—an apt name for the person who spends the most time tending to the needs of a Standardbred racehorse.

One such person is Sheila Napier, a 37-year-old Cincinnati native who has four horses competing in several of the \$275,000 Ohio Sires Stakes Championships on Saturday night, Sept. 8 at Scioto Downs.

"I started working with the Delaware Equine Lab in 1995, when I was still in high school," Napier noted. "I was just a horse lover from day one and always went to the Delaware County Fair and the Little Brown Jug as a kid."

Napier worked for trainer Ron Potter for ten years and was the caretaker for 2011 Jug winner Big Bad John. For the past three seasons she's been attending to horses in the Chris Beaver Stable, located in Radnor, Ohio, just a few miles north of Delaware, and has had a Super Night charge every year.

"I'd like to say I always have great horses because I'm a very good groom," she laughed, then humbly added, "And that's partially true, but Chris' (trainer Beaver) operation is huge and it's total teamwork here at the farm. We all work together very well and everyone helps everyone else."

Napier said there are 55 horses on the grounds at Beaver's facility, where she takes care of eight on a daily basis.

"I don't have to clean stalls and that's a big plus, but I get the job done and get it done right," she affirmed. "On Saturday night, I'll be running around like a chicken with my head cut off."

Napier has three horses in the same race—the second event on the Scioto program—the 2-year-old Filly Trot Championship. Her horses include Pure Chance, Back Splash and Aunt Rose, all winners of at least one Ohio Sires Stakes leg.

“It’s going to be a very nerve-wracking evening, as Chris (trainer Beaver) actually has four horses in that race, but I’ll concentrate on getting my three ready,” Napier explained. “One of our second trainers and another groom will come over to help get two to the track for me and help afterward with the bathing and putting away. I’ll take care of Aunt Rose from start to finish, because she’s pretty nasty at times. She’s a biter and can really have her moments—every time I go into her stall I put my hands up and say, ‘I’m here!’

“For some reason, I seem to get along with the meanest and the toughest of horses,” she added.

Napier’s other Ohio Sires Stakes contestant is Never Say Uncle, a 2-year-old gelding, slated to leave from post three in the fifth race, the \$275,000 Freshman Trot Championship.

“Another caretaker will get Never Say Uncle ready for me, and then I’ll hand off Aunt Rose to them once she’s finished, and I’ll go get him out to the race,” Napier said.

“He’s a sweetheart,” Napier added regarding the son of Uncle Peter. “Overall, the Triumphant Caviars are all very sweet horses to be around. Pure Chance and Back Splash are both by Triumphant Caviars, but Aunt Rose is by Uncle Peter, so it’s funny that Never Say Uncle would be so sweet and she’d be so nasty.”

And—get ready, Napier has yet another horse in a later race.

“I have Buckeye Boss in the 13th race as well,” she said. “So, I’ll get a bit of a breather in between my last Sires Stakes and that race.”

“This is my dream job,” Napier stressed. “The best part is going to the track and seeing your horses—that you’ve put your heart and soul into week after week—perform. No matter how long your days are, when you go to the track and see your horse trot and win in 1:52, it makes all of the hard work worth it.”

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Photo Cutline: Sheila Napier stands with her Little Brown Jug winner in 2011, Big Bad John.

Photo courtesy of Sheila Napier