

Se habla español

Delaware's horse racing industry depends on Spanish being spoken here

By SUMMER HARLOW, The News Journal

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Juan Hernandez dipped four fingers into an oily, neon-yellow salve that gave off a stinging medicinal odor.

On his knees, avoiding a fresh puddle of urine, 48-year-old Hernandez smeared the soothing poultice from the hoof to the knee of Carlita, a brown thoroughbred with a white star on her forehead.

"Mamita," he cooed at her in Spanish as she stomped her foot, pulling away from him. The race horse's legs were inflamed, he explained, wrapping cloth and plastic over the ointment.

Standing, his faded jeans brown and dusty from the knee down, Hernandez did a slight backbend, stretching, before wiping sweat from his face.

"I'm exhausted," he said. After five years, he's gotten used to waking at 3:30 a.m. to work as a groom at Delaware Park. But like any job, he said, some days are harder than others.

And on one day recently, Hernandez was missing his wife and four children, who were back in his native Guadalajara, Mexico.

Hernandez is one of tens of thousands of foreign seasonal workers who make their way to the United States each year on H2B visas to work in the horse, hospitality, landscaping and construction industries.

Hundreds end up at Delaware Park, mostly from Mexico, mostly as grooms.

Only 66,000 such visas are available nationwide each year, which isn't nearly enough to meet demand, those in the horse industry say. In past years, Congress has stretched that limit by not counting workers who had received an H2B visa in the previous three years.

But now, with Congress hesitant to approve any immigration bills after the cave-in of controversial immigration reform legislation earlier this year, the industry is waiting nervously to see if lawmakers will once again extend the exemption for returning H2B workers.

That extension, approved the past few years, expired Oct 1.

Racing at Delaware Park is linked to more than 6,200 horse-related jobs, including grooms, trainers and jockeys, and the park gives away an average of \$263,760 in purses a day. With the horse racing industry contributing \$360 million a year to Delaware's economy, the state can't afford to lose H2B workers, say industry experts and Delaware's delegation.

"In the past, this exemption has provided much-needed relief for many small and seasonal businesses in Delaware, including the horse-racing industry, and it is my hope that this exemption will continue to help Delaware businesses," said Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., who co-sponsored legislation to not count returning workers against the 66,000 visa cap.

Dirty work, but worth it

Walking past horse-crossing signs, weaving among the park's 41 barns, Latino men on bikes or pushing wheelbarrows whistle at a visiting woman.

The muddy streets are loud with Spanish, grooms talking to each other or to one of the 1,400 horses stabled at the track.

"It's like a different world back here," said Samuel Wrighter, trainer Scott Lake's assistant and one of only two non-Latino faces at Barn 23.

The grooms say that Delaware Park is "puro Hispano" -- pure Hispanic.

But it hasn't always been that way.

The horse industry's work force transformed during the past 30 years, going from about 90 percent American workers, to probably no more than 5 percent today, said Steve Klesaris, a trainer whose 18 H2B workers comprise about three-quarters of his employees. "In my own barn on the backstretch, I'm the minority," he said.

The problem, according to those in the horse industry, is that Americans just don't want to wake up before dawn seven days a week, 365 days a year, to muck stalls and feed, bathe and care for horses.

Trainers say they try to hire locally. In order to recruit foreign workers, employers first must prove they advertised in local newspapers, and went through the state work force agency and unions and associations appropriate to the industry, without being able to find enough qualified American workers.

"Today's generation of American people, they won't get up and do this kind of work anymore," Klesaris said. "And it's not just our industry. You don't see them shoveling driveways or mowing lawns like they used to, either."

It's more than the work and the hours that are draining.

There's the smell, and the manure. You never feel clean, and you're constantly doing laundry, grooms say.

"It's dirty work," said Adrian Salazar, a 27-year-old seasonal worker from Michoacan, Mexico, who has received six H2B visas. "Most Hispanics are used to it, because in Mexico the work is dirty, but the pay is very low. You work to eat. Here it's better. We work, eat, shop, buy clothes. You can buy a car."

In his six years at Delaware Park, Humberto Salazar remembers only one or two Americans showing up to work. "They come for a day, and then we never see them again," he said.

Allotting 66,000 visas a year just is not enough, especially because that number is divided among many industries, said James Hickey, president of the American Horse Council. He argues the cap needs to be lifted altogether.

And until an exemption for returning workers is approved, trainers have to decrease the number of horses they work with -- a bad way to run a small business, Hickey said.

"These jobs may be considered low-skill, but taking care of race horses requires familiarity with animals," Hickey said. "These are athletes in training. They're not like the ponies used in pony rides at a child's birthday party."

Opponents argue that expanding the number of H2B visas leads employers to become reliant on foreign labor, rather than forcing them to recruit locally more actively, or look to long-term solutions, such as mechanization or providing job training.

"Foreign guest workers are not necessarily filling a labor shortage," said Jessica Vaughan, senior policy analyst for the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies, which favors immigration limits. "They're more attractive because they're cheaper. By becoming dependent on them, employers have no incentive to raise wages or improve working conditions to make the job more attractive to Americans. I'm insulted by the notion these are jobs Americans can't or won't do."

With 4 million unemployed Americans, she said, employers shouldn't be able to claim a labor shortage. However, she acknowledged there hasn't been much research to determine whether Americans aren't filling these positions because they don't want to, or because the jobs already are taken by foreign workers.

"There's not enough justification for the U.S. government to provide a subsidy to the industry in terms of cheap labor when there's a question as to whether we really need it," she said.

Living 'afuera'

Lake, the trainer at Delaware Park, said he doesn't buy the argument that if trainers upped the pay, more Americans would be willing to get down and dirty in the barns.

The pay is good, he said, with grooms averaging \$650 a week, plus a \$200 bonus if one of the horses they care for wins a race.

Grooms say they take pride in their work, jokingly boasting about their superior horse-keeping skills when one of their charges wins.

Plus, a \$200 bonus means more money to send home that week. Many are saving to build a house, or open a business in their native countries. Others are paying to send their children to school.

Hernandez, who makes \$660 a week, said it's just enough money to provide for his wife and four children.

He lives, rent-free, in one of Delaware Park's neat red-brick, dorm-like buildings: eight rooms per house, two workers per room, eight per restroom.

Workers talk about life "afuera," or outside the park, as a great unknown. Most spend their days inside the confines of the park. Workers say it's only the couples or families that live "afuera."

Delaware Park offers community activities such as soccer, movie nights, church services, even drug and alcohol abuse counseling, to keep workers occupied during their downtime, said John Wayne, executive director of the Delaware Thoroughbred Racing Commission.

"There's a camaraderie that's built up," he said.

One 40-year-old groom, who would not give his name because his visa expired, said it's much easier to live on park grounds instead of "afuera."

"It's all Hispanics, so everyone speaks Spanish, and there's nothing to worry about," he said. "You don't feel alone or isolated, like you would if everyone was speaking English and you were the only one speaking Spanish, like on the outside."

Although he initially came on an H2B visa in 2000, when he couldn't get it renewed, he stayed. "There's so much competition, it's hard to get one," he said. "So I stayed. I didn't have another choice. I couldn't afford to go back. And there's no work for me in my country."

'Main soldiers'

Each year, the visa cap is being reached earlier, said Shawn Saucier, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services spokesman. The limit for the first half of this fiscal year was met Sept. 27. Last year that date was Nov. 28, and the year before that it was Dec. 15.

More than 100,000 petitions typically are filed for the 66,000 available slots.

Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., said the H2B program ensures businesses have a legal way of filling jobs when Americans aren't available, and enhances safety by ensuring workers are screened. "This program deserves to be extended and it serves as an example of how we can improve security while also maintaining the strength of our economy," he said.

Trainer Klesaris, who has 65 horses at Delaware Park and Maryland's Fair Hill Training Center, said that because of the work force problems, he won't expand his business. "The industry will continue to shrink if Congress doesn't do something about the visas," he said.

Horse racing, Lake said, is a "dying industry."

Delaware Park depends on its H2B workers, Wayne said. So much so that in March a representative traveled to Mexico to meet with the government and to arrange employment for Mexicans to come work at the facility, he said.

Klesaris called the Hispanic workers his "main soldiers."

"If this industry is to survive, we need more immigrant workers," he said. "The unemployment office isn't sending people to the racetrack. Our country has quite a bit of unemployment, but those people aren't coming our way to work, and they won't."

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