

XAVIER AIZPURU EMBRACES NEW ROLE AS ASSISTANT TRAINER TRUSTED EXERCISE RIDER IS KEY MEMBER OF RICK METTEE'S TEAM LEADING STEEPLECHASE JOCK WILL OVERSEE A DIVISION AT SARATOGA

Xavier "Shav" Aizpuru, a key member of Rick Mettee's team for more than a year now, has been promoted to assistant trainer, a position that reflects his important place in the organization.

Since last May, Mettee has counted on Aizpuru as a primary work rider, as a traveling head "lad" for horses shipping to races, and for his overall input as a veteran horseman. Aizpuru continues as an exercise rider but is now more involved in the day-to-day management of the horses and staff now ensconced at Fair Hill.

Mettee said "It is a good role for him. With the horses, his opinion means everything to me: how they are training, how fit they are and what we should do next. He is in his prime as a rider and knows Fair Hill so well—he has been here for a lot of years, he has worked for top barns, and he provides a lot of perspective. And Shav is very good with the staff. I can really count on him."

Barry Irwin said "Shav brings a lot to the table as a rider, as a communicator and as a horseman. He is level headed and thoughtful. He has told me a lot of stuff about the horses that has turned out to be very accurate, and when people do that,

you gain a lot of confidence in them. Rick is an extremely good horse person and he is at his best when he can concentrate on what is going on with the horses. Shav is the right kind of person to help Rick with the staff, to make sure there is ample communication, as a conduit."



A Peb cartoon from the cover of the annual review book American Steeplechasing 2013, depicting Xavier Aizpuru and other winning connections from the Grade 1 Colonial Cup last November.

Aizpuru, whose first name is pronounced "Shav-iare," started out as a Steeplechase rider in his native England and found immediate success when he moved to America in 2004 and began riding for Hall of Fame trainer Janet Elliott. He later teamed up with another power in the jumps game, trainer Jack Fisher, and was the National Steeplechase Association's champion jockey in 2007 and 2008. Aizpuru rode in the mornings for Graham Motion for 4 years at Fair Hill during this period and later for Tony Dutrow for 2 years. Now 39, he continues to accept mounts on the Steeplechase circuit but is most active at Saratoga, where he won a couple races last year. The big highlight came at end of the season when he guided Alajmal to a Grade 1 score in the Colonial Cup for his former boss, Elliott.

This summer, Aizpuru also will be at Saratoga to oversee a string of horses for Team Valor that is expected to include several promising 2-year-olds. A Q&A follows with Aizpuru:

How are things going in your new position with Rick and Team Valor?

XA: I am enjoying it. I've always had a good relationship with Rick anyway. I'm enjoying my new role and working with him closely. We sit down and discuss things and bounce ideas off of each other,

and anything he needs me to do and organize, I just try to make his job easier and make the barn run as smoothly as I can. We are utilizing the facilities more this year. We have some of the best turnout paddocks at Fair Hill and we didn't really use them last year. This year, we felt it was really important to get the horses out as much as we can when the weather permits. It helps them relax. They move around, they are happy and it keeps their minds right rather than being cooped up in a stall all day, every day, and just coming out for short periods. They can enjoy themselves and relax and just be mentally happy. That is one of the biggest changes this year.

What are some of your new responsibilities?

XA: I've done a lot of the breezing and we have always sat down and talked about the horses. Rick has always asked me my opinion, which I always considered a compliment coming from him. A lot of that hasn't changed, we still do that, but now as an assistant rather than a rider I feel like I have a little more input and if I have an idea, I can put it to him a little more confidently. Apart from that, my extra responsibilities are around the barn. I find out what Rick wants and how he wants it done and try to make sure that happens. At the same time, we need to have a happy staff. So I try to mediate between every one and keep things happy and smooth in the barn.



Mexikoma and Xavier Aizpuru are regular partners.

Are you going to continue riding races like you have been?

XA: Yes, but I've only ridden in one race so far this year. I have kind of been dictated by work here with Mexikoma and it just hasn't worked out where I can go to the races. I'm not considered retired by any means. If I get the right opportunities to ride races, I will do it. I am just not riding week in, week out at the moment. The plan is for me to go up to Saratoga with some of the Team Valor horses and if I get the opportunity to ride some [Steeplechase] races, I will take it. Those are the best races. You have to take your opportunities when you can, but I'm getting older by the minute and I have to be a little more careful and selective. I can't just ride any horse in any race like I did when I was 18. My body has aged a bit. I'm just a bit more selective in what I do.

Are you dealing with any particular injuries right now besides the usual aches and pains?

XA: Not really, just wear and tear from years of riding races. I have broken collarbones and fingers and stuff like that. I have been fairly lucky that I have been able to avoid any serious, serious injuries. Unfortunately, whether you are just galloping in the morning or riding flat races, you are going to have falls in your life and Steeplechasing just increases that chance. Through the years, it catches up with you when you are getting older.

Around the barn is there a horse or two that you are particularly fond of?

XA: I have a soft spot for Infinite Magic. He was the first horse that I traveled with for Team Valor. We went to the American Derby at Arlington and he won. That was a great way to start the relationship with Team Valor. Mexikoma, for his age and his experience, just acts with so much class, so you can't help but like him. You might think that is easy to say because we think he is the best horse in the barn, but it is not just that, he just acts with so much class. I have spent a lot of time with Brujo and got very fond of him too. We have a few more this year that I am just getting to know now, and there are a few that have caught my eye, so hopefully for the right reasons I will be very fond of them too.