

Where Is This Horse Going?

Atop the tower at the New Steel Pier (the Showplace of the Nation) in Atlantic City a woman appears. From an adjoining ramp, she is met by an eight-year-old chestnut steed. She mounts. Their destination: the Tank—15 feet deep, 30 feet in diameter, 40 feet below. This performance, the now famous High Diving Horse, debuted at the resort city in the thirties; horses and riders have made the dive about 20,000 times since. Little has changed—the diver is still a woman (there have been many over the years)—but diver and horse no longer plunge into the ocean to be rescued by a pulley-operated elevator. The tank was introduced in the forties to overcome the perils of rough seas.

The High Diving Horse—the nation's most bizarre sports entertainment—began as the result of a near-fatal accident. More than 50 years ago, Dr. W.F. Carver, a noted plainsman and champion rifle shot, was returning to his Texas ranch on a stormy night. As he crossed a rickety bridge, it collapsed; he and his horse plunged 40 feet into the waters below. Both swam to safety. Back home by the fireplace, Dr. Carver wondered whether a horse and rider could be trained to survive such a jump. The circus-bred Carver tried hundreds of horses and devised many training schemes. Finally, he perfected the dive.

The first of the women to ride the diving horse was Carver's own daughter, Lorena, who has just retired as the trainer of the act. In recent years, the reins have belonged to three divers—Shae Chandler, Terrie McDevitt, and Cindy Jano.

Shae Chandler has spent most of her 23 years around performers and animals. "My mother, now a lab technician, veterinarian, and

breeder of boxers, was once a professional dancer and singer. I was raised in Europe where I learned to dance and ride at one of the finest riding schools in Germany. The instruction was rigid and formal."

Before becoming Miss Diving Horse of 1974 and 1975, Shae Chandler attended college briefly on a track scholarship, barnstormed with a traveling repertory acting company, modeled in New York, joined the rodeo in her native Texas, and dabbled in stunting with cars and bikes. "I love working with animals," she says, "where I can see the fruits of my efforts. I've trained all breeds of dogs. I understand the mentality of animals because I have part of their instinct. Each animal has a distinctive personality and temperament. You feel their instinct—and then you 'roll' with the animal."

But nothing in Shae Chandler's experience compares with the dive on the Steel Pier. "It's the damndest kind of horseback riding I've ever done. It takes total balance and knowing the horse's movements just so. And it takes time for the rider and the horse to develop companionship and partnership. I'm all muscle. The animal has to get used to me on its back, the weight of me, the two of us together, the forty feet in the air; it takes patience. You have to talk to the animals as though they were people. They understand by voice and inflections. You work together. I always treat my partner with care and respect. I carry a bucket of carrots, sugar, and apples. This act is run on the reward system. You do something good—you get something good."

When Chandler retired from the act last summer, two divers, Terrie McDevitt, 17, and Cindy Jano, 18, took over. McDevitt, whose aunt, Josephine Knox, rode the Diving

Horse in the thirties, performed the two daytime dives. "I didn't have to be to work till one-thirty," she recalls. "I don't like nine-to-five jobs. I could lie in the sun after the dive, go swimming; it felt as though I was getting paid for doing nothing." Since the job requires no special diet, it didn't interfere with her love of fast-food snacks.

A relaxed diver, McDevitt wanted to continue her daredevilry even after she broke her arm in a bike accident. She tried to convince her doctor to allow her to dive with a waterproof fiberglass cast. He refused. McDevitt's temporary retirement was less painful when the 1976 season was washed away by Hurricane Belle.

Whether the dive succeeds or not, according to Cindy Jano, the nighttime rider, is up to the horse. "The diver has to make sure that each jump is right, but if the horse does a bad dive, you're going to get hurt, too."

"You know the horse is ready to dive when he sticks his two feet down," explains Terrie McDevitt. "Then you get down and crunch and tuck in your body and head. The horse slides down and kicks off with his two back feet. The horse has been trained to know how to dive. The diver goes in headfirst."

"You must make sure that your head is tucked into the groove of the horse's neck," adds Cindy Jano. "You don't look down at the water or at the audience; you look back of yourself at the horse's tail. You have to make sure that the top of your head is what's going to break the water when the horse enters, because the pressure of the water is enough to knock you out if you hit wrong. That's why we wear helmets. The legs are the most important thing; you grasp with your legs really tight, almost like a jockey.

You ride the way the jockey rides, sitting high but tucked down, riding low on one side. [The divers ride without saddles.] You close your eyes before hitting the water."

Although no one considers the diving dangerous, the divers do get

bruised. "The beautiful dives come when the weather is warm," says Shae Chandler. "The horse goes on his own accord, the water is between seventy and eighty degrees, and we both enjoy it. But when the water is fifty or sixty degrees and

it's windy, the horse doesn't want to go; the horse fights and the impact is rough. It's a tough life then."

Susan Subtle manufactures inflatable clothes and personalized stationery, and lives in California with a lot of giraffes.



Horses are taught to dive by being led from a platform that is raised by stages to the 40-foot height.