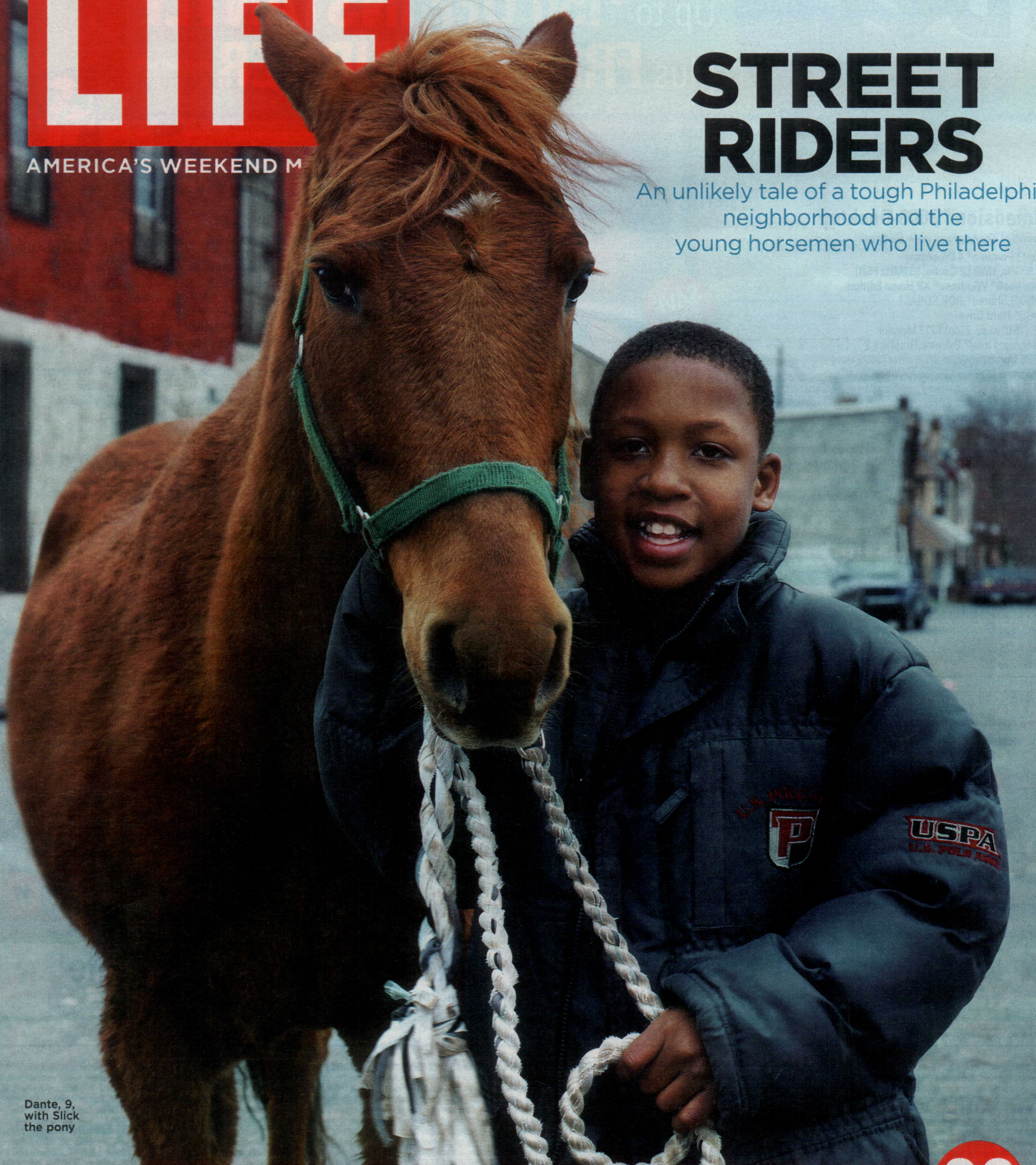


LIFE

AMERICA'S WEEKEND M

STREET RIDERS

An unlikely tale of a tough Philadelphia neighborhood and the young horsemen who live there



Dante, 9, with Slick the pony

Photographs by MARTHA CAMARILLO

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HOOFBEATS ON FLETCHER STREET

Deep within Philadelphia's inner city, generations of boys grew into men by learning how to care for, ride, and—most weekends—race horses. In one last neighborhood, they still do.



Donnie Glenn steadies No Show Jones to a stop, pats the caramel horse on the neck, and calmly rises with both feet planted on the seat of his saddle. He stands stock-still, looking across a forlorn lot; a hungry dog picks through a rusted-out water heater before loping across the muddy grass. Behind Donnie, 19, the stables of Fletcher Street stand amid the devastated blocks of Strawberry Mansion, the northern Philadelphia neighborhood where an improbable tradition of urban horsemanship thrives.

No Show Jones, a 2-year-old born with one eye, huffs, stomps at the ground. Donnie drops in an easy motion back into the saddle. "He's still learning," Donnie says. "He's a baby." It is out here in a dense grid of low-slung houses that kids train horses and, in the process, learn life lessons that they can carry through their coming of age in one of the city's toughest areas.>

Donnie Glenn demonstrates his signature trick atop No Show Jones. "You learn a lot from these horses. How to be on time, how to be independent," he says. Rasul (opposite), one of the young riders, takes pony Iesha for a spin.

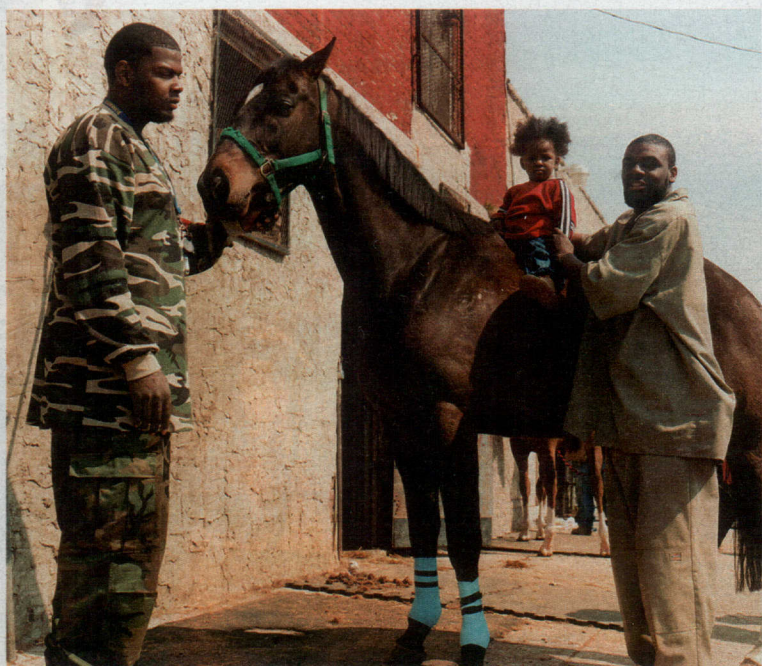




The riders of Fletcher Street trot to a race (left). "The city'd rather build houses on this land," says "Choo Choo" Charlie, a retired millworker and horse-owner. "Eventually, the stables will be gone."

Johnny Wilson, a blacksmith, shoes a horse outside the Fletcher Street stables, where he's a regular (below left).

Rahim (below, at left) and James pose with Rahim's son, atop Poncho. LIFE photographer Martha Camarillo (not pictured) first saw the riders racing in a park in December. "There was something very raw and special about this scene," she says. She's spent nearly every weekend since shooting on Fletcher Street.



As late as the 1960s, horses hauled milk, ice, fruit, vegetables, and junk through the narrow streets of Philadelphia's inner city; later, they were used purely for recreation. But as the years passed, one stable after another was shuttered, some of them victims of urban renewal. In many neighborhoods, riding traditions that had been passed on from generation to generation simply ceased.

But on Fletcher Street, the tradition remains: A kid from the surrounding neighborhoods comes to learn about horses. That first day, he might be sent to the store to fetch a pack of cigarettes. The next day, he'll get to feed or clean a horse. Before long, he'll get to ride. If he shows dedication, tends to the horses early in the morning, exercises them in the afternoon, then he'll "own" one—meaning, even if one of the elders bought the

animal, it becomes his responsibility. No government funds subsidize the stables or the expense of feeding, housing, and caring for the 30 or so animals. The cost of keeping the tradition alive falls on the riders who've gone on to succeed as adults.

For those who came up in Strawberry Mansion, like 35-year-old Lee Cannady, the horses provided a vital antidote to the lure of the street. "For a lot of young guys it's about self—and you can't be about self when you got a horse," says Cannady. Though he's moved with his wife and four children to Wynnefield, a short drive away, he still brings them here every weekend for race day—the culmination of a week's labors caring for the horses. Like many adults involved with Fletcher Street, Cannady considers it his duty to buy, at auction, horses for the younger generation.

"If we can keep these guys here at the stable, gettin' dirty," he says, "then they're not getting involved in drugs, stealin', killin'."

A lifelong friend of Cannady's, James "Hop" White, 40, owns and runs one of the block's three stables. He makes his living in plumbing and contracting, but he's been riding since he was 2. "This is a tradition that went through generations," he says of Fletcher Street. "You want to be a rider."

When his father died two years ago, White inherited the cramped but tidy 14-stall stable. Now he walks through the stalls as young riders prepare their horses for the afternoon's race. On this spring morning, the crowd of several dozen range in age from an infant teetering on the shoulders of his father to Roosevelt, a senior citizen and local legend.

Fletcher Street begins to percolate at noon. One by one, the six "runners" are loaded into dilapidated horse trailers for the journey to a nearby public park. By 1 p.m., about 50 onlookers have assembled there. Joggers and cyclists pass by as the riders and their horses trot out to the edge of the well-worn clearing that serves as the racetrack. Two riders race at a time. The finish line, a quarter-mile away, is marked only by a group of older men smoking plastic-tipped cigars and drinking tall cans of Budweiser.

Donnie lines up against a Fletcher Street veteran named Keith. With his scraggly beard, cornrows, and jeans, Keith doesn't stand out in the crowd. But once he's on horseback, it's clear that he's a star in the saddle.

There is no starting gate or pistol shot; the two riders decide when to start, and then they simply bolt. The



thud of hooves intensifies, competing with the hooting of the crowd as the horses approach. Donnie holds close to his opponent for almost 20 seconds before Keith pulls ahead by a length, the crowd parting as he finishes.

After several more races, the group returns to Fletcher Street. Someone has spread buckets of Kentucky Fried Chicken on the hood of a car as a celebratory meal.

Donnie trots No Show Jones out into the lot while the others eat. The sun is setting, and the stables on Fletcher Street will soon close for the night.

Clearly, Donnie feels the horses have helped him. He's not sure what his future holds, but he's considering studying engineering or architecture at college in the fall. Of one thing, though, Donnie is certain: "I'm going to be riding the rest of my life." ■



Timmy, 29 (above), races Power at the quarter-mile strip of muddy grass that has served as a racetrack for Philadelphia riders for decades. Ten-year-old Lawrence Cannady (left), a third-generation Fletcher Street rider, prepares a saddle before a race. "On a summer day, you might have 100 kids here," says stable-owner James White.