



PHOTOS BY DAVID STEPHENSON | STAFF

After his accident, Clyde Bramble was fighting for his life. Now, he's working to get his life back on track: "This is really the worst shape I've ever been in."

AT THEIR OWN RISK

Injuries come with the job

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Backside: The stable area on the race-track. Also known as the backstretch.

Exercise rider: Takes horses out in the morning for breezing (a moderate workout) or a sharper workout at a faster gallop. Free-lancers are paid \$10 a head — more in special cases — and might ride 15 to 20 horses a morning.

Groom: A horse's primary caretaker. Feeds, waters, cleans and bandages the horse and sees that the stall is cleaned out daily. Usually paid between \$300 and \$500 a week. Each groom might care for as many as four or five horses.

Hot walker: Walks the horse to cool it down after a workout. Usually paid \$5 a horse.

What is workers' comp?

Workers' compensation insurance exists to protect employees and employers in the event of disabling injuries sustained on the job. Workers are covered for lost wages and medical expenses, and employers receive protection from liability lawsuits.

Costs to employers vary, depending on their claims history and payroll. In Kentucky, a \$400-a-week groom could cost a trainer between \$1,092 and \$2,496 in premiums a year.

A Kentucky native, Bramble, 58, had spent 42 years bumping around small tracks in Kentucky, Ohio, West Virginia and Delaware, first as a jockey and then as a trainer.

He'd buy horses for \$1,000 or so, win a bit of money and then sell them. In 19 years, he'd had 120 winners out of 1,262 starts.

Bramble had left Mountaineer Park in West Virginia last winter, with plans to head to Florida in April. He wanted to get up a string of horses again. He stopped in Northern Kentucky first, on a vacation of sorts, and picked up some work as an exercise rider at Turfway in Florence.

"I wanted to stay fit, so I was riding for some friends," he said. "I was making my way."

Bramble doesn't remember March 29th, or the gray filly he was riding for a fellow trainer.

Just trying to stay fit

On that overcast morning, as he came around in front of the grandstand, Bramble's left rein broke off near the bit. The filly raced out of control down the stretch.

"I heard him holler," said Larry Eilers, who was ponying, or leading, another horse around the nearly empty track. The gray filly ran past Eilers and hit the fence. Bramble tumbled off, and his arm caught on one of the poles holding up the rail.

"It didn't look like he was hurt that bad, but he never did move," Eilers said.

The filly trotted on, unhurt.

Eilers rode past Bramble, expecting him to bounce back up. Eilers turned back.

That's when he saw the blood pouring out.

When Bramble came to in University Hospital in Cincinnati, doctors told him he was lucky to be alive.

He told them his right hand hurt.

They told him his right hand was gone. So was his elbow.

He also had seven broken ribs, a broken collarbone and a broken shoulder blade.

"I was just fighting for my life then," Bramble said. "It was tough for a while. ... I was just fighting to stay alive."

Learning to compensate

Small, but tough as old horsehide, Bramble has since taught himself to tie his stump down so it won't flop around when he jogs. He figured out how to drive his truck, a stick shift on the floor. He learned to button his shirts left-handed.

He is less stoic about his financial situation. For months, he scraped by with no income. A California-based charity that helps

injured jockeys and exercise riders paid his \$300 rent for six months.

When that ran out, he lived for a time in a "rat hole" of a room on the backside of River Downs racetrack in Ohio. Eventually, he had to borrow from friends to pay for medicine.

"That was hard," he said. "I always took care of a lot of people. Everybody asked me for money. Everybody. And I gave money to a lot of people, because I always had a lot of money."

In November, Bramble sued Turfway, alleging negligence.

Turfway President Bob Elliston said he couldn't discuss the accident because of the lawsuit.

"I can say I think that Turfway did everything possible in an appropriate way to address the issue that occurred," Elliston said.

Trainer James Dillion, who also was named in the suit, declined to comment on Bramble's accident — or on the question of workers' compensation.

"It's something that the less spoke about, the better it will be," Dillion said.

Bramble's suit claims that he owes more than \$172,000 to the hospital and the doctors. And with no workers' comp, it isn't clear how he'll pay it.

Bramble says he assumed the trainer would have coverage.

"I thought everybody had it," he said. A trainer himself, Bramble had always carried workers' comp in the past. So when he worked as an exercise rider, he didn't insure himself, figuring that any trainer who gave him a horse would cover him. "They're supposed to."

In Kentucky, that's not necessarily true.

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Bramble and other trainers watched morning workouts at Tampa Bay Downs on Jan. 13. Before his accident, Bramble was able to ride the horses he was training; now, he can only watch.