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Indiana Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association

Indiana Grand's Leandro Goncalves Becomes Naturalized Citizen Of United States

Story by Tammy Knox - Photos by Linscott Photography



SHELBYVILLE, Ind.; – June 27, 2017 – For many born outside the red, white and blue, a lifelong dream is to come to America. According to the Official Website of the Department of Homeland Security, during the last decade, U. S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) welcomed more than 7.4 million naturalized citizens into the fabric of our nation.

Leandro Goncalves' upbringing in his native Brazil wasn't exactly the Portuguese version of Leave It To Beaver. Sadly, he was separated from his parents at a young age and not reunited with his mother until much later in his teens. His youth was spent on farms and without a chance to attend proper schools. His talent on the back of a Quarter Horse made him a very a hot commodity. The uncle of his childhood sweetheart saw his raw talent and knew that would he would transition easily to Thoroughbreds and helped send him to jockey school.



Goncalves had always dreamed of coming to America as a kid. Fast forward to August 2005, that dream became a reality with the help of California trainer Jose DeLima. With a Jockey Visa and a desire to live his dream, he wasted no time and rode his first American race at Del Mar, albeit to a 10th place finish. After riding a few mounts around the bullring at Fairplex, he traveled to the opposite end of the country to Mountaineer Park in West Virginia. But the "American dream" wasn't exactly going as planned and went winless in 18 starts in less than two months. Goncalves said that due to lack of opportunities, he was ready to quit the only job he'd ever known. Shortly after in the beginning of 2006, he was prepared to never ride again and that his dream turned into a nightmare. With his jockey visa near its expiration, his bags were packed and he was ready to return to his native Brazil.

With his best friend's endless encouragement, he decided to stick it out and see his journey through. Through a trainer and lawyers help, he extended his Jockey Visa and started back riding the following year. Like a scene written for a Hollywood come-back tale, on April 5, 2007 Leandro Goncalves legged up on his first mount in more than a year at Turfway Park. His mount, Danzigforaprice was coming off a layoff herself, nine months. Despite his time away, the talent never left him. They pressed the pace early at 1 1/16, gained command on the backside and drew clear in the stretch to win by more than two lengths. That win seemed to turn things around, and for the better. For a rider that couldn't buy a mount when he came to America in 2005, he's now ridden more than 10,700 of them. Goncalves has since earned more than 1,700 wins, 12 of which were in Graded Stakes. Those wins have produced earnings of more than \$37 million.

"I spent the five years required on the green card to take the naturalization test to be a U.S. citizen," said Goncalves. "It was 100 questions about American history and politics. I'm really proud of myself. I know more about American history than I do about Brazilian history. I would've been really disappointed if I wouldn't have passed."

"I see myself being here forever and I want my son (who resides in Brazil) to be an American citizen. My son just turned 15 and I would really like him to come to America soon," said Goncalves. "I would like him to go to high school and attend college here.

He's taken English classes for seven years. When I see my son come here and grow up and go to college, I know that I won't have to worry about anything else in my life."

In the fiscal year 2016, 752,800 people were naturalized. When the statistic comes out for the number of people naturalized in 2017, Indiana Grand jockey Leandro Goncalves will be on that list.

The 15th season of Thoroughbred and Quarter Horse racing continues through Saturday, Oct. 28. Racing is conducted Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday at 2:05 p.m. EST with Saturday racing beginning at 6:05 p.m. EST. Thursday racing will be held July 6 – Aug. 24 at 2:05 p.m. EST.

About Indiana Grand Racing & Casino: Indiana Grand Racing & Casino holds multiple awards from industry publications for customer service, entertainment, gaming and dining. Located in Shelbyville, Ind., Indiana Grand features 2,200 of the latest slots and electronic table games in addition to a one-mile dirt race course and a seven-eighths mile turf course offering live Thoroughbred and Quarter Horse racing each year. Simulcast wagering is also offered year-round at Winner's Circle Brewpub & OTB located on the casino floor as well as an off-track betting facility located in Clarksville, Ind. For more information, please visit www.IndianaGrand.com.