

Sports

From the Bluffs to the world's most prestigious race

A.L. grad Terry Thompson is scheduled to ride Dublin in the Kentucky Derby

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By Mike Patterson, World-Herald News Service

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If Hollywood is looking for a horse racing script, it would do well to consider the life story of jockey Terry Thompson.

And even then, most people might not believe it.

Thompson, a graduate of Abraham Lincoln, will be riding the colt Dublin in Saturday's Kentucky Derby. The fact he will be a part of the most prestigious horse race in the world is an extreme long shot, considering the improbable way Thompson began his racing career.

The key players in this drama are Thompson, who had a dream as a teenager to someday ride horses; his mother Martina, whose job with United Airlines played a pivotal role; and Hall of Fame trainer Jack Van Berg, who gave the kid his big break.

Terry was born in Omaha in 1971 and, after a couple of family moves, graduated from A.L. in 1990. He had grown up competing in gymnastics and soccer — he turned down a soccer scholarship — but wanted to pursue his goal of becoming a jockey.

Problem was, he didn't know the first thing about riding. He had never even been on a horse.

"Our neighbor at the time was really into horses," Martina Thompson said. "He told Terry that he was the perfect size to be a jockey, and the idea just kind of stuck."

After graduation, the 5-foot-3 Thompson told his mom that's what he wanted to do. Martina, a single parent, gave her approval.

"I knew that was his dream," she said. "So the next step was to try and figure out exactly how to make that happen."

She did that through her job as a customer service representative for United and her knowledge of Columbus native Van Berg, who flew into Omaha on a regular basis. Martina told the trainer at the Eppley Airfield ticket counter one day that her son hoped to become a jockey, and Van Berg offered Terry a job at his horse farm in Kentucky following his high school graduation.

"Martina told me how much he really wanted to try this," Van Berg said. "I wasn't exactly sure how things would turn out, but I thought I'd at