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Whatever Became of Harness Racing?

Bennett Liebman

October 8, 2002

Newspaper coverage of harness racing is becoming a relic of the past. Nowhere was this more in evidence than the lack of coverage of the Trot Mondial in Montreal on September 28. Here you had the final performance of Italy's Varenne, arguably the greatest trotter of all time.¹ You had Fool's Goal the leading trotter in North America. You had Varenne going head-to-head with Fool's Goal for nearly all of a mile-and-three-eighths race. You ended up with a longshot winner in the 45-1 Fan Idole. It looked like harness racing's version of the 1930 Travers where the longshot Jim Dandy won after Gallant Fox and Whichone raced each other into defeat. The 2002 Trot Mondial was a most memorable race.

The media thought otherwise. A review of newspapers, utilizing both Westlaw and Nexis searches, shows a nearly complete lack of interest in the race. There were a grand total of five articles in North America that mentioned the race. The Canadian Press², the New York Daily News³, and the hometown Montreal Gazette⁴ wrote articles on the race. The New York Post had a 145-word, five sentence, note on the race⁵, and the Toronto Star mentioned in the race as part of a general sports wrap-up feature.⁶ They ran a great race, but nobody in the media cared.

If this non-coverage of harness racing were an isolated event, maybe it would be no big deal. But this isn't the case. Harness racing, except in isolated pockets, has disappeared from the newspapers.

Thus far in 2002, we have not seen one article on harness racing in the Wall Street Journal. There have been no articles in the Los Angeles Times on harness racing. In fact, harness racing has only been mentioned three times this year in the Los Angeles Times. The most prominent mention was in the midst of a biography of Edward Allred who had eliminated harness racing from Los Alamitos.⁷ One might argue that there is no longer any harness racing near Los Angeles, but the fact is that this is an area where harness racing thrived for years at both Santa Anita and Hollywood.

¹ Varenne has been referred to as the greatest trotter ever in the Melbourne Herald Sun of September 30, 2002, the Hamilton Spectator of September 28, 2002, the New York Daily News of September 27, 2002, and in series of newspapers worldwide after a mother in Italy went to court to prevent her son from being named after the horse. For an illustrative article, see "It's a Crazy World," Sunday Mercury, August 25, 2002, at p. 18.

² "Fan Idole Beats Varenne to Win the \$500,000 Trot Mondial," Canadian Press, September 28, 2002.

³ Dave Little, "Varenne Stunned as 45-1 Shot Struts," Daily News, September 29, 2002, at 98.

⁴ Paul DeLean, "Fan Idole Upsets Varenne in Trot Mondial," Montreal Gazette, September 29, 2002, at B7.

⁵ Deborah A. Little, "Longshot Fan Idole Captures Trot Mondial," New York Post, September 29, 2002, at 68.

⁶ "Serena Keeps on Rolling," Toronto Star, September 29, 2002, at E06.

⁷ David Wharton, "An E-Ticket Ride, Doc Allred Made a Small Fortune in the Abortion Business and Spent One to Rescue Los Alamitos," Los Angeles Times, July 26, 2002, at Part 4; Page 1.

Boston Globe

The existence of a harness track in a major metropolitan area does not equate to media coverage. The Boston Globe rarely notes the existence of Plainridge Racecourse in its suburban area. Only eleven articles in 2002 have mentioned this racetrack, and only one of these articles mentioned a live race. The Boston Globe covered the Labor Day running of the Bert Beckwith Memorial, but even on that day, the track shared the article with the feature race at Rockingham.⁸

Newsday

Neglect of harness racing is surely not limited to locations outside of New York State. Newsday on Long Island used to be synonymous with extensive harness racing coverage. The newspaper started publication on the day after Roosevelt Raceway opened in 1940, and its first edition featured coverage of Roosevelt's first races.⁹ Newsday's headquarters for decades was in Garden City, about two miles down the road from Roosevelt. Now its harness racing coverage is as dead as Roosevelt. In 2002, there have been no Newsday articles on Yonkers Raceway, which shared its dates with Roosevelt for a third of a century. The track has only been mentioned twice in Newsday: once in a letter to the editor on simulcasting by OTB's¹⁰ and once in connection with the death of harness driver Jimmy Cruise.¹¹

New York Times

While the tabloid papers in New York City have some coverage of Yonkers Raceway, the same cannot be said about the newspaper of record, the New York Times. The Times has covered one race this year at Yonkers, the Yonkers Trot. It had one small (175 word) article on Bubba Dunn winning the Yonkers Trot,¹² and had written one sentence about the Yonkers Trot in the days leading to the race.¹³ Other than that, the Times has barely noted the track's live racing. Yonkers was mentioned in an article about the licensing of Herve Filion.¹⁴ The paper described the track's stakes schedule,¹⁵ and Yonkers was part of an article in the Time's Westchester Weekly on the hopes for horsemen now that the track could be expected have video lottery terminals.¹⁶

⁸ Ron Indrisano, "'Prince' Is Plainly Best," Boston Globe, September 3, 2002, at D9.

⁹ "Long Island in the News," Newsday, January 17, 1990, at Part II, p.2.

¹⁰ "Viewpoints," Newsday, May 29, 2002, at A32.

¹¹ Tom Demoretcky, "Obituaries, Jimmy Cruise, Sr.," Newsday, February 7, 2002, at A63.

¹² Alex Yannis, "Plus: Horse Racing; Bubba Dunn Wins Yonkers Trot" New York Times, August 25, 2002, at Section 8, p. 9.

¹³ "Plus: Harness Racing; Chip Chip Hooray Installed as Favorite," New York Times, August 22, 2002, at Section D, p.7.

¹⁴ Bill Finley, "After Nearly Seven Years, Filion Resumes Racing," New York Times, June 24, 2002, at Section D, p. 8.

¹⁵ "Plus: Harness Racing; Yonkers 2002 Stakes to Pay \$6 Million," New York Times, January 17, 2002, at Section D, p. 7.

¹⁶ Marek Fuchs, "County Lines; A Horsemen's Hunch," New York Times, January 27, 2002, at Section 14WC, p. 1.

The Journal News

The Journal News, which is published in White Plains, New York, is the dominant newspaper in Westchester County,¹⁷ which is the location of Yonkers Raceway. While the Journal News has covered events at the racetrack, it has actually written only six articles on live racing at Yonkers. It wrote two articles each on the New York Sire Stakes,¹⁸ the Yonkers Trot¹⁹, and the Art Rooney Pace.²⁰

Upstate New York

This same pattern with frequent articles on the racetrack – without covering live racing – has spread to upstate New York. Thus far, this year, the Syracuse Post-Standard has mentioned Vernon Downs in 71 articles. Not one article has mentioned an actual horse race at the track.

The Albany Times-Union is known for its non-stop coverage of thoroughbred racing in Saratoga Springs plus its frequent mentions of socialite Marylou Whitney's activities. (She has been mentioned in 38 Times Union stories thus far in 2002.²¹) The same cannot be said of the Times Union's coverage of harness racing at Saratoga Equine. The paper has extensively covered the issue of video lottery terminals at Saratoga Equine. It has also covered concerts, craft shows and polo at the track. It hasn't covered harness racing. The Times Union has only covered one race – the appearance of champion Bunny Lake at the track on August 31 - in an unbylined 133-word article.²² The paper mentioned Bunny Lake's likely appearance in two articles leading up to the race.²³ The longest of these articles was 141 words. Marylou's guest lists appear to rate more coverage than live racing at the harness track.

While both the Buffalo News and the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle extensively covered the reopening of Batavia Downs on July 29, 2002, since that date, coverage of Batavia has been scant. Batavia has been mentioned in five articles in the Buffalo News since opening week and in only four in the Democrat and Chronicle. In

¹⁷ The newspaper has a weekday circulation of 145,708 as of March 31, 2002, according to the figures of the Audit Bureau of Circulations.

¹⁸ Srikanth Reddy, "New York Night of Champions," The Journal News, September 22, 2002, at 16C; Srikanth Reddy, "Chemung Blue Chip to Ride into Retirement after Yonkers Race," The Journal News, September 20, 2002, at 3C.

¹⁹ Srikanth Reddy, "Yonkers Trot," The Journal News, August 25, 2002, at 10C; Srikanth Reddy, "Yonkers Trot," The Journal News, August 24, 2002 at 6C.

²⁰ Srikanth Reddy, "Art Rooney Pace," The Journal News, July 28, 2002, at 9C; Srikanth Reddy, "Harness Racing," The Journal News, July 27, 2002, at 4C.

²¹ By contrast Marylou Whitney's name has appeared once in the New York Times in 2002 in Susan M. Kirschbaum, "The Way We Live Now," New York Times, October 6, 2002, Section 6, p. 30.

²² "Bunny Lake Sets Record," The Times Union, September 1, 2002, at C10.

²³ "Bunny Lake at Equine Center," The Times Union, August 31, 2002, at C8; "Bunny Lake Returning," The Times Union, July 31, 2002 at C2.

only one of these articles would it be fair to say that Batavia Downs was the focus of the coverage.²⁴

Toronto Globe and Mail

Toronto is one of the hotbeds of harness racing in North America. The racing at Woodbine – now with the addition of slot machines – certainly rivals the Meadowlands as the best harness racing in North America. As might be expected, there is some coverage of harness racing in Ontario by the Toronto papers. But, it is no means overwhelming. The Toronto Globe and Mail, in 2002 has written a total of 14 articles on harness racing at either Mohawk or Woodbine. Two of these articles did not focus on specific races but on the drug travails of trainer Bill Robinson.²⁵ The coverage of harness racing in the Toronto Star has been similarly limited, but in defense of the Star, the coverage of harness racing by its sister newspapers (the Hamilton Spectator and the Guelph Mercury) has actually been very extensive.

The media has already cast its ballot against harness racing coverage in 2002. Memorable races are being completely ignored, and even in areas where harness racing appears to be thriving, you couldn't judge it from the minimal amount of press coverage accorded the sport. Harness racing is becoming a historical artifact for the media of North America. Next week's episode of *The Sopranos* has Tony Soprano buying a thoroughbred racehorse. Maybe if he had bought a harness horse, the media would notice.

²⁴ Kevin Oklobzija, "Trotter Was Too Fast for Church," Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, September 19, 2002, at 5D.

²⁵ Beverly Smith, "Harness Racing: Drug Tests," The Globe and Mail, September 24, 2002, at S13; Beverly Smith, "Harness Racing: Comeback," The Globe and Mail, June 25, 2002 at S5.