

[OPINION](#)

Commentary: At the track, tradition and tragedy collide

First impressions of Saratoga Race Course are shaped by a horse's death.

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“Jimmy,” my uncle said to my cousin, “take Johnny to the track.”

He reached into his wallet and removed some crisp bills. I was visiting from Vermont. From their home in southwestern Connecticut we could be at Yonkers Raceway in under an hour. Horses. Harness racing. Wagering. Learning new terms – win, place, show. It was a new experience. An adult experience. The memories of it stayed with me.

Fifty years later, central New York had delivered a quintessential August weekend. High clouds in blue skies, a bright sun and low humidity. On our way home to Vermont we decided to check an item off our bucket list: the Saratoga Race Course in August.

We bought tickets for the grandstand but later discovered that the lure and charm of the place are in the grounds – the family picnic spots, the paddock, the rush to the rail when you hear the call for the next race.

We got a taste for the excitement with the first race, then signed up for a tour. We were given insights about the different jobs at the course, the riders in red who accompany horses and jockeys to and from their positions, the rider in red and white who is called into service in the event of a problem on the track.

My wife placed a bet in the third and didn't pick a winner. I went to a window to place bets for the fourth race. Two horses to show. I was going to bet the three and four horse, but number four had scratched. I bet the three and six. Someone had said to bet the jockey. I tried to do that as we looked at the day's program. The nice lady at the betting window acknowledged that my bets were conservative and so, perhaps, safe. We headed to our seats in the mid-grandstand with a good view to the track in front of us and a brilliant blue sky.

The field for the fourth race was small. They would be running on the inner track of grass. TV screens showed the horses making their way into the gates on the far side of the track. They were off – we couldn't see them yet, but we followed our horses' numbers on the screens. They came down the stretch for what we thought would be the finish and were surprised when they kept going for a second lap. We don't know racing.

As they came around the final turn we kept our eyes on the lead group. It wasn't a big race or a big field, but the excitement grew as the horses moved towards the finish. The pack was right in front of us.

And then, out of nowhere, a loud moaning of hundreds of voices. I turned and saw: A horse was down.

More gasps. The jockey lay motionless on the track.

A chestnut horse got up, but its purposeful gait was gone. Directionless, riderless, it moved towards the shrubbery of the inner rail, its movements halting. An injured left foreleg.

The rider in red and white moved quickly to the injured animal and fallen rider.

We left our seats quickly. The race had barely finished seconds ago. We heard a horse had gone down the day before; surely it couldn't happen again, and on our first experience of this unique place.

An ambulance was on the track. And then a large blue screen, in a field of deep green grass.

The jockey who lay still on the track for several moments in the final turn of the fourth race responded to the call for "riders up!" in the paddock for the fifth race.

I went to a betting window. Two ten-dollar bets to show had yielded \$33, and an emptiness, a sadness, that will never be erased. It was Ever Summer's final race.

John C. Mahoney lives in Burlington, Vermont.