

Frank Mazer

Berlin raceday

The horses (with jockeys atop in their brilliant colors) are loping towards me. I stand in the middle of the turf track staring through the camera viewfinder while my all access press pass clings to my wrist. The green splendor of the scene captivates me. Plush green forest all around the bright green race course and the magnificence of the movement of the horses all nicely framed in my camera lens. I'm "in the zone"—that is until it occurs to me that I am also in the way. I put my feet in motion. I spin clumsily on the soft turf and collide with another camera clutching journalist. We both stagger off balance. He has bounced out of the path of the creature. I catch a glimpse of a rider tugging on the reins as my foot catches a clump of turf and I stagger towards the rail like a wobbly boxer.

Hoppegarten. German racing. A beautiful, mid-forest location on the Eastern outskirts of Berlin. Children frolic. Dogs enjoy the day at the races with their masters. These things catch my eye as soon as I enter the grounds. I have attended many a race day at Hollywood Park and Santa Anita as well as Del Mar. I've seen few children among the crowds. No fans with

dogs were ever spotted. At Hoppegarten a festive family atmosphere prevails. Some folks seat themselves on blankets with picnic baskets on the grass in front of the grandstand. A large crowd might be 5,000. Price of admission for a family with any number of children is 12 euros. After the race day ends about 5:00 pm groups of people remain as they continue to picnic to the sound of trance music being played from the grandstand stereo speakers. Betting seems to be a secondary activity. Bets can be as low as half a euro (perhaps that soon extinct species of coin) and yet also filled with exactas and all kinds of exotic bets the happy bettor might pursue. A few folks clutch the German equivalent of the Daily Racing form. The names of horses vary from German to English to French. The leading jockey hails from Ecuador.

Camera in hand, for one race I choose to stand on the track in front of the rail taking pre-race photos of hundreds of children leaning over to look at the horses. The eyes of the children are filled with wonder. I recall the old crowds of 50,000 at Hollywood Park. Many super and loyal fans in the stands. I also flashback to the look on the faces of the “railbirds” lining the rail at Hollywood Park, mostly hard core bettors all with adrenalin fed look in their eyes. I am flung back to this moment, in the “now”, the children are glowing with exuberance.

For another race I snap photos from among the crowd between the rail and grandstand. As the horses round the distant far turn of the mile and a half track they begin their surge down the stretch in a close race. The giant forest trees loom behind them. I wait for the thunderous roar of the crowd, screaming for their chosen steeds to go faster go go go! As their horses push their noses forward in a thrilling stretch duel there are few voices heard. There is mostly a low, quiet buzz breaking the silence. The crowd watches intently with a relaxed look of curiosity on their faces. The children seem fascinated. There are a few scattered shouts here and there which seem to quickly dwindle into space. I want to shout the name of the mighty creature I have wagered my one euro on but I suddenly realize I cannot remember the name. As the horses cross the finish line some fellows cheer on their chosen one. These cheers are not hurled with intense passion. The loudest cheers turn out to be reserved for after the race when the winner and its opponents trot back to the edge of the track before being led to the tree lined paddock for cool down.

Hats off to the hats on. I trot behind the horses as they make their way to the cool down area and the winner's circle. There is always more to enjoy here and in this moment I choose to

focus on the hats. Womens' hats. Obviously a day of fashion hat fun. Wide ones. Tall ones. Red ones. Small ones. Flopping ones. In pursuit of "hat beauty" I almost find myself walking into the posterior portion of a horse walking ahead. It occurs to me that this would give new meaning to the phrase "being a horse's ass". The fans lining the railings of the pathway watching the horses and journalists seem amused. I'd tip my hat to them; if I had one. Thankfully, the horse walks far too rapidly for my camera and I to become lodged anywhere. Photos of the winning trainer, jockey, owner and proud horse are in order after each race. Us feline paparazzi enjoy the scene of victory and the public address interview with the trainer as done by the professionally dressed, raven haired, woman tv presenter for the track who is filled with enthusiasm. I look around. Everyone is having fun again! Children grin. Dogs sniff. Couples head for the food stands.

So it is that, considering myself a veteran race reporter after the first 3 races I over-confidently and filled with pride, stand mid -race course as the horses gallop back after their race and as I click away and savor the setting and the beautiful creatures and find myself in the previously described paroxysm of stumbling panic and tribute to thoroughbred power as I am humbled by my stumble into the fellow reporter and the path of the 500 kilo muscle machine.

Fortunately, my basketball pivots and peripheral vision still function at my age. I manage to spin twice across the grass in a ballet-like manner. Was that a few cheers from the near-by crowd I heard behind me? Or just the children continuing to giggle as they enjoy their day at Hoppegarten.