

# Leaving Wonderful Memories Behind

Almost 32 years ago, shortly after my 16th birthday, I awoke at 4:15 a.m., got dressed, and pedaled my borrowed Stingray bicycle to the old stable gate at Bay Meadows. I chained the bike to the fence, showed my license to the guard, then went “to work” in Dent Caton’s barn.

It was early summer. I was out of school, sleeping on the floor of my brother’s apartment, and immensely proud of just having been licensed as a stable employee by the CHRB. I could now “officially” work on the backstretch. It was an exciting and fun time, doing whatever I was told to do, running from the main track to the training track, and back to the barn. Every day was a wonderful learning experience, and provided what I later appreciated as the foundation for my love of and commitment to California racing!

I spent part of almost every summer thereafter – through high school, college, and law school – working on the backstretch, in some capacity or another, in Northern California. I won my first race as an owner, at Bay Meadows, in 1987. It was there too that I made acquaintances that later developed into longtime friendships, and where I accepted gratefully the advice and guidance more learned horsemen generously offered, and to whom I owe much of my appreciation for what they do on a daily basis.

Make no mistake; racing in Northern California holds a dear and special place in my heart. More accurately put, it is the people there who I believe are the heart and soul of racing in the North, and who deserve TOC’s utmost attention and support!

No one who has ever been part of the Northern California racing circuit sees the impending closure of Bay Meadows Racetrack as anything other than a very sad day. No one. Its closure represents the end of a glorious era, severing our ties to memorable performances by great horses such as Seabiscuit and Native Diver. But its closure was certain. Its owner – the Bay Meadows Land Company (“BMLC”) – had for years warned everyone that the track was slated for development, and had already demolished the old barns, graded the training track, and long ago built a diverse, more profitable commercial and retail center on the property. All that remained was the setting of a date certain for the closure of the track.

Over the past six months, senior Bay Meadows management has – at different times – informed TOC’s Northern Directors and staff, and officials with Golden Gate Fields and the Fairs, that it was “highly unlikely” that the track would race beyond its Fall 2007 season, then that it may run during the first half of 2008, and later that it might seek to run through that entire year. Each such disclosure came in the midst of meetings intended to plan for the future of Northern California. While seemingly welcomed news, we requested of Bay Meadows to receive assurances that it would provide the industry with sufficient “lead time” to assure that we could have in place contingency and long-term plans for a new – and hopefully – improved racing circuit in the North, at facilities and on track surfaces horsemen and fans deserved, but the track’s ownership and management consistently refused to do so.

Honestly, when Bay Meadows recently applied to the CHRB for a two-year exemption to its mandate requiring engineered racing surfaces by January 1, 2008, our hopes were buoyed that the request signaled a decision to continue operation of the track. However, when asked point-blank by the CHRB if the request represented a commitment to continue operating for two more years, Mr. Liebau indicated that it did not. Despite the request, nothing had changed.

With literally thousands of jobs dependent on the continuation of a vital racing circuit at risk, and with the future of investments made by countless owners and breeders in the State uncertain, TOC – and the rest of the California racing industry – had little choice but to accept that now was the time to move on. Whether this disappointing reality were to occur in 2008 or sometime thereafter, we all needed to move forward with plans to improve existing or develop new racing/training facilities in the North. The key word here being “new!”

If we expect Northern California racing to regain its strength – to be a vital racing circuit – then it is time to make the difficult decisions we must, and to embrace these changes, sad as they may be, as a good thing! Life repeatedly teaches us that from difficult times often wondrous and wonderful things emerge, if we look to make such things happen.

BMLC long ago elected to purchase, close, and develop the Bay Meadows racetrack. That was its decision, and its decision alone. However, it is now up to those that wish to see a successful racing circuit reborn in the North, to step forward, accept this change, and to move on toward a new future.

I, personally, will have wonderful memories of Bay Meadows. But, I’m confident that I will have another opportunity to create more such memories on a new racing circuit in the North! Come along, and join us there!



*Drew J. Couto*

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Drew J. Couto'.