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COMMENTARY

Op-ed: Goodbye, Arlington International Racecourse, and good riddance

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People view racehorse statues at Arlington International Racecourse on Sept. 25, 2021. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

Every reader has probably been to a wake or funeral and heard friends and family characterize a death as a “blessing” because so much suffering had been involved.

The same might apply to the recently departed Arlington International Racecourse whose last race day was Saturday, Sept. 25, and which will likely never host racing again. Churchill Downs put it up for sale, and the Chicago Bears signed a purchase agreement for the racecourse.

The suffering, which is thankfully coming to an end, is what I witnessed as a one-time security guard at Arlington, day in and day out by both the regulars, consisting of the same several thousand attendees who showed up at the track every day, and by those who visited only on occasion, mostly on weekends, for family entertainment.

But it’s unlikely that the regular attendees in recent years are much different from the ones I knew, such as the zombie-eyed laborers just off the night shift, retirees and the unemployed, with many of the classic symptoms of a compulsive gambler on joyless display. Neither the jockeys’ colorful silks, nor race announcer Phil Georgeff’s rhythmic recitations over the P.A., could cover up the tension, restlessness and irritability of those afflicted with a disease that destroys jobs, relationships and entire families, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Not everyone, of course.

There were, for example, a small number of nicely dressed, wealthy men, experts in handicapping the races, who appeared to win more than they lost. I got to know one who explained that instead of driving to the track every day, he only showed up when he was sure a particular horse would win.

And many of the retired regulars knew one another. For them, Arlington was more of a venue for hanging out, and their spare betting habits neither enriched the racetrack nor bankrupted their families.

Finally, there was the sizable contingent of wannabe experts who quit their jobs in the futile expectation of making a living at the track; and those others whose addiction left them so broke that they couldn't afford the admission fee, and either waited to be let in for free before the final races, or passed their wagers through the fence to a confidant already inside.

I spoke with very few since I was considered part of the institution which they thought robbed them of their money and rigged the system against them. I was the enemy, often summoned to haul one or another down to the public safety office because of a noisy dispute with a teller, or for falling-down drunk.

For all the eulogizing over the past two weeks about the beauty of the racetrack and its wholesome family fun, the most heartbreaking suffering I witnessed was when a mother, father, grandmother or out-of-town visitor sought our help, often in tears, after being victimized by a thief.

When a fire destroyed a portion of the facility in 1985, I secretly hoped it would not reopen. Not just because of the plight of the addicts, or the harsh working conditions for the Mexican backstretch workers who groomed and walked the horses and cleaned their stalls, while living on the premises with their families.

But there were also the hundreds of horses whose fragile legs shattered during races, and who had to be euthanized. The Humane Society is one of several animal rights organizations condemning tracks for running horses too frequently in too many races, and breeding them for speed to the exclusion of the strength and endurance needed to prevent such injuries.

At times, harm to horses had been arguably the most shameful problem at Arlington, which in 2006 euthanized 17, more than five times the national average.

In my English classes, I used to teach the poem “A Blessing” by James Wright. It was among my favorites, and I read it to my young children before bedtime.

I have not taught “A Blessing” in a long time. I stopped after watching a replay of a [2009 race at Arlington](#) when a jockey, seeking competitive advantage, steered his mount into another horse, Born to Be, at 40 miles per hour, causing the thoroughbred to tumble and flip backward, its legs flailing upside down in the air. The freakish contortion of such a large animal appeared to be an illusion. Something you would only see in a cartoon.

Yet, it was real. Jockey Renee Douglas was crushed beneath the 1,200-pound horse, paralyzed from the waist down. Born To Be lay unconscious until the vet arrived with a syringe of phenobarbital to end its life.

The illusion was that Arlington International Racecourse has been a place of pastoral beauty and light. An equine celebration, where families with children might “break into blossom.”

Instead, it has been a dark place for the impoverished lives on the backstretch, for the frustrated souls yelling at the track’s TV monitors and for disposable horses bred for speed and greed.

This is why it would be a “blessing” were Chicago’s beloved Bears to start a new tradition at Arlington and restore the light.

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