

Hollywood Park Workers Look Back at History



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By Channing Sargent

On the third floor of the Hollywood Park track, under two grand paintings of horse racing scenes, Nola Ferraro sets up bar. With bouncy blond hair and a warm, red-lipsticked smile, she wears her 61 years well. She hauls heavy boxes of booze out of the stockroom, and quickly places pint glasses upside-down below the counter. "I was the first woman bartender at a Southern California racetrack," she says, raising her eyebrows. "I fought coming here for years. I thought race-trackers were lowlifes."

It is early in the day, so races haven't yet begun. Employees report to their various stations - betting windows, security posts, food counters - and greet each other along the way. "Morning, Nola," a small, white-haired woman calls out as she walks through the bar area. "Another day, isn't it?" Nola responds, as the little lady laughs, "Sure is."

But it's not just another day. They're in the first weeks of their last meet -- a series of live thoroughbred races -- before Betfair Hollywood Park closes its doors forever on December 22, becoming the largest track in U.S. history to go dark. It will soon face the wrecking ball, as developers plan to erect a large mixed-use community.

"I've worked here for 41 years," Nola says. "As soon as I got here, it felt like home. I love the people. Real die-hards, you know, people who love the sport. I've known generations of families. I knew their grandparents, I knew their parents, and now I know them. And they're good, honest people." She begins a tour of memory, talking through the park's incredible history.

A slender woman in a long black coat, big sunglasses, and tall, black, stiletto boots flourishes up to the bar. "Like this one!" Nola says. "What can I do you for, Mary Lou?" "A mimosa please," she says, with a big smile, and proffers a \$100 bill when Nola sets her drink on the counter. "I'm not taking your money," Nola says, dismissing the bill with a flip of her wrist.

Mary Lou argues, but Nola stands firm, and as Mary Lou walks away, Nola says, "She's the wife of the track's lawyer. And now you see how it is. Everyone here, we take care of each other."

As customers filter in for drinks, Nola describes the park's past as a center of who's who of Hollywood. Former director Marje Everett was friend to the stars and Nola would see the likes of Elizabeth Taylor, Cary Grant, and Walter Matthau in their box seats or ordering at the bar. Nola says there were "so many who I enjoyed, and so many I didn't." She looks wistfully out to the raceway, beyond the box seating.

Nola accompanies the live racing as it moves from track to track, working Santa Anita Park, Del Mar Racetrack, and Hollywood Park. But this is her home base. When it's shut down, she'll be transferring to Santa Anita.

"It's close to where I live," she says. But she lingers over what she'll miss in Inglewood. "I'll miss the lakes, miss seeing the finish line right out there, miss seeing the flamingos, miss the view of the track. I don't have a view of the outdoors at Santa Anita."

A man in a Betfair Hollywood Park ball cap, a black vest, white pants and white sneakers approaches her bar. His face is white with sunscreen that he hasn't rubbed in. "This is the guy you've got to talk to," Nola says, serving him plain water. "How long you been here, Joe?" "Over 40 years," he says, "like you."

He recalls how the California Horse Racing Board voted Marje Everett out of her position as chief operating officer after she built The Pavilion of the Stars, a five-story building with luxury suites and seats for 13,000 people. The pavilion was opened in 1984, to big fanfare, but it proved to be a major blunder when track fans failed to show up due to poor sight-lines.

Once Marje was gone, so was the celebrity clientele, and with the growing popularity of satellite off-track betting sites, attendance dropped drastically. "It's never been what it was," Joe says.

Nola interrupts, "You know who you've got to talk to?" she says. "You've got to talk to Jimmy the Hat. He knows all about the sport and the track. He sits in the Spender's Club, by the windows. And he wears a hat."

"Oh, yeah, Jimmy the Hat. He'll have stories for you," Joe agrees.

The back area of the third floor of Hollywood Park is a well-preserved cache of past sensibilities. The Clubhouse Beauty Salon states its name in gold script on rectangular windows behind the former Mint Julep Bar, now unfortunately dubbed Krome Bar. Along the wall to its left awaits a shoe-shine stand, empty of patrons or proprietor. To the right, tinted glass doors shroud the VIP Room in exclusivity. Dramatic portraits of horses and jockeys line the wall above the betting windows to the right.

Sharp, showy older men stride purposefully from the grandstand to the betting windows. They all wear hats - cowboy hats, fedoras, bowlers, newsboys; the bartender at the former Mint Julep Bar says he hasn't seen Jimmy the Hat yet today.

On the other side of the grandstands, near where Nola Ferraro tends bar, Ronnie McClellan works the \$50 window. His business card reads "Stay ahead of the pack, get back on track with Ronnie Mack."

He's a Parimutuel clerk, a teller who receives wagers and completes payouts. Stocky, with salt-and-pepper hair, a youthful complexion and smiling eyes, he has distinguished air yet exudes approachability. Wearing a gray argyle sweater and wire-rimmed glasses, he stacks the cash being handed to him by bettors upon a rough wooden shelf that looks as old as the park itself.

Ronnie's father is the legendary RH "Chick" McClellan, who rode as a jockey when the track opened - in 1938 - before becoming a successful jockey's agent.

Ronnie spent his childhood here with his dad and when he was 17 he too became an agent before eventually moving into mutuels. He's worked at Hollywood Park for 44 years, just a bit longer than his little brother, leading Southern California jockey agent Scotty McClellan. Like Nola, he follows the meets to the other Southern California tracks and will transfer his home base to Santa Anita after Inglewood's inevitable end.

"It's very sad," Ronnie says. "They call this The Track of the Lakes and Flowers. It's the most beautiful of the tracks." He reminisces about the earlier days, when racing was celebrated, and Hollywood Park was the premiere track in Southern California, and crowds would flock to its grandstand to watch as the Goose Girl - winner of the annual beauty contest - paddled around the lakes in a flowing white dress and fed the geese. "Horse racing was more romanticized back then," Ronnie says.

A lanky man in a black leather baseball cap walks up to the window with a stack of papers and a notebook. "\$42 a horse, three, four, five," he rattles, as he flips through his notebook. Ronnie repeats: "\$42 a horse, three, four, five." The man pauses for a bit as he scans the pages of his book and adds, "And six, seven, eight."

Ronnie punches the numbers into a computer. "Okay, that's \$252."

As Ronnie completes the transaction, he shares some unforgettable historical events: In 1954, a horse named Fault Free that his dad had trained won the Westerner Stakes, beating a Kentucky Derby winner named Determined. In 1972, in one of the most exciting races of all time, a thoroughbred named Convenience went up against a competitor named Typecast. The race drew nearly 54,000 to the stands, and Convenience won by a neck.

Ronnie runs another transaction - "\$15 dollar double nine three" - as he pulls the Convenience vs. Typecast race up on YouTube on his smart phone and lets it play.

"Hey! Look who it is!" Ronnie calls out. "This here is the legendary Scottie McLellan!" He reaches across the window and puts his hand on his brother's shoulder. Scottie is shorter than Ronnie and white-haired, with the same youthful complexion. He smiles big. Ronnie continues, "this is the man who ran me out of business!"

Then Ronnie calls out to another man passing by, asking about his memories of the park. It's Frank Garnett, and Ronnie says he's a Hall of Fame footballer. Frank clarifies he's a Grambling Legends Sports Hall of Famer -- an honor bestowed upon him by Grambling State University in Louisiana. Frank's been coming to the park for 44 years. "I never thought I'd see the day this place would close," he says. "It's a shame." He walks away shaking his head.

"Twenty box four seven, 60 to win on seven," a big black-haired man in dark-rimmed glasses wagers. Ronnie introduces him as Tom Proctor. "This guy's dad trained Convenience," he says. "What day was that, Tom?" and Tom answers: June 17, 1972.

"This place is my life," Tom says. "My first race as a trainer was here, on July 15, 1978."

Ronnie nods, "You see?" he says, "It's sad, seeing this place close. And it's not just the history, it's our lives. Over one third of my life was spent here. It's truly the end of an era." Brother Scottie nods in agreement.

"There are so many people here with such wonderful memories," he says. What about Jimmy the Hat? "Oh, yeah. You gotta talk to him," Ronnie says. "VIP Room, by the windows. He's always there. He wears a hat."

Behind the tinted doors of the VIP Room a huge, wall-sized window overlooks the parking lot, and six or so men - in hats - sit next to it. One guy, Michael Tolaney, points to a man whose hat makes the biggest statement, a yellow fedora with a blue ribbon, and declares, "Yeah, yeah, this is Jimmy the Hat!"

But his friend shakes his head. "No, no, I'm not. Jimmy the Hat sits over there," in the empty chairs to the right, yellow fedora says. "But this is Julio Canani, the famous trainer!" Michael exclaims. "I'm just a gambler," he adds. "But Julio's been a trainer for 30 years. When'd you get your license, Julio?" Michael asks.

Then Michael rattles off Julio's resume: Canani started training in 1966 and has won three Breeders' Cup races. His first win was by six to seven lengths. He raced in the Breeders Cup on September 11, 2001.

Michael lives in Arcadia, not far from the Santa Anita racetrack, but prefers Hollywood and comes every day of the live meet. "There's 60, 70 years of tradition here. It's the Track of the Lakes and Flowers. It's the best turf course in California."

Of Jimmy the Hat, Michael says, "He'll be here. He just went down to the paddock to look at the horses."

Out at the former Mint Julep Bar, a long line of people order drinks with just enough time - 12 minutes - before the next races. "Twenty to 30 years ago, there were about 70 percent more people here under the age of 35," one man says. "Somewhere along the way, the owners stopped trying to market to a younger crowd, stopped trying to make racing cool."

A stately gentleman in a tweed fedora walks by, and the man points him out: "That's Jimmy the Hat."

Behind the tinted VIP doors, Jimmy the Hat settles into his chair near the windows. He is impressive in appearance, of solid build in a brown leather jacket, and glowing skin accented by a thin white goatee under his tweed fedora.

"I've been coming here every day for live racing for the last 27 years," he says, removing his sunglasses and placing them on a splayed out pile of racing forms on a desk in front of him. "I'm at every track for every day of live racing. I'm a professional horseplayer. This is what I do." He does not refer to himself as a gambler.

He is Jimmy Allard, a former Hollywood stuntman who's been obsessed with horses all his life. He began racing in high school and then went on to buy, sell, breed, and finally, to wager professionally.

He is a subject of awe for hitting the Pick Six more than 200 times, and notorious for hitting Pick Six tickets in excess of \$1 million three years in a row. His fame was cemented when he became the featured bettor on Animal Planet's 2009 television series, "Jockeys."

Jimmy the Hat heads to the paddock between each race to study the racehorses' body language and eliminate lame runners, then returns to the VIP Room to place his bets. When Hollywood Park closes, he'll lose the quick commute from Santa Monica, driving to Santa Anita or Del Mar for live racing.

But it's the loss of California history that upsets him far more. "This used to be a real swinging place," he says. "With The Turf Club and all the celebrities . . . anyone that was anyone would come to the track back in those days."

A shout from nearby players puts Jimmy's attention on the TV screen above his desk simulcasting the race outside. He watches silently until its finish. Then he narrows his eyes, remembering, and begins talking of his love of the sport and the great races that unfolded here.

"You had the great Charlie Wittingham, Bobby Frankel, Native Diver, Zenyatta, The Gold Cup, The Hollywood Derby," he says, excitedly listing the famous trainers, famous horses, and most famed races that have graced the track. "Great horses raced here. But 2013 is the end of it."

He slides his sunglasses back on. It's time to head to the paddock -- only one of a handful of opportunities to ever do so here again -- and suss out the possibilities of the shining and still glorious Hollywood Park racehorses.