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by bill finley

HIALEAH: WORTH ROOTING FOR

There were a lot of big races run around the country last Saturday, but the most important event in Thoroughbred racing occurred when a field of seven Quarter Horses burst out of the gate a few minutes after 1 p.m. on a memorable day at Hialeah Park. Hialeah is not yet back: running Quarter Horse races with small purses in front of crowds sure to dwindle to meager numbers after the initial excitement wears off is just a first step. But it could be a major one toward what could be the most improbable comeback in Thoroughbred history. For that, everyone in Thoroughbred racing should be grateful. This place is worth rooting for.

This sport needs Hialeah. Not the Hialeah that was unveiled the other day, but a Hialeah that is once again as special, as grand and as relevant as it was back in its day.

Hialeah hadn't run in more than eight years and hadn't had a prime-time meet since the mid-eighties. So it was easy to forget what Hialeah used to be all about. It was unquestionably the most beautiful racetrack in America--a place that resonated class, charm and quality. To enjoy a day at the races there, to soak up the Florida sunshine, to witness the graceful flight of the flamingos, was unlike any other experience in horse racing.

It was where all the best eastern stables wintered, where horses like Citation, Seattle Slew, Northern Dancer, Kelso, Forego, Spectacular Bid, War Admiral, Bold Ruler and Whirlaway made stops on their way to the Hall of Fame.

"The place is beautiful and comfortable," Hialeah owner John Brunetti said just prior to Saturday's opening when asked to comment on the current shape of the facility. "Believe me--there is a charm here you can't find any place else."

What would we give to have the old Hialeah back? There are only a handful of racetracks--Saratoga, Del Mar, Keeneland--and racing days--Triple Crown events, the Breeders' Cup, any big race at Saratoga--left that can generate the type of enthusiasm for racing that seemed to be everywhere 40 or 50 years ago. Just about everything else is a Monday afternoon at Philadelphia Park--sterile and lifeless.

Hialeah, especially if it restricts its racing season to a boutique-style meet during the height of the winter season, would be the type of place that people would get excited about, the type of place where every day is an event.

It would be the type of place where horse racing would be special again. That 26,874 people would turn out the other day to watch Quarter Horses run is all you need to know about Hialeah's potential.

Horse racing doesn't have nearly enough of these kinds of places, and Florida doesn't have any.

Calder is what it is: a utilitarian racetrack that excites no one. Gulfstream Park has turned into a casino that happens to have horse racing, leaving South Florida without a palatable racetrack or a suitable venue for the Breeders' Cup. With terrible purses and sagging fan support, Florida racing has never been in worse shape.

Brunetti isn't exactly the most popular figure in horse racing, and his motives aren't necessarily pure. He never would be doing this if he didn't see a pot of gold at the end of the slot-machine rainbow. But that's okay. He is, at the very least, committed to Hialeah's rebirth, and he seems to have the will--and the resources--to pull it off. He is talking big--about having more than just a thriving racetrack.

"We are going to create and develop a destination entertainment center," he said. "We're going to make coming to Hialeah like going to Disney World or Busch Gardens or any other great entertainment destination."

A Quarter Horse meet is merely a first step, a way to show Florida politicians, local community leaders and the Thoroughbred horse racing industry that he is serious about bringing Hialeah back. In time, he plans to overcome the hurdles needed to race Thoroughbreds. But Hialeah needs to have more than what it had earlier this decade, a drab, end-of-the-season meet that was barely noticed by anyone.

The only way to do that is for Hialeah to have at least some segment of the prime dates all to itself, even if that means only a six-week, Saratoga-style meet. That won't be easy. Gulfstream and Calder have always been very protective of their dates and don't figure to willingly step aside to allow Brunetti to take over any part of the most lucrative months on the racing calendar.

Ultimately, this is the biggest obstacle to Hialeah's future success. Brunetti is hoping that his competitors will look at a bigger picture, at what's best for the sport overall.

"I think the three tracks can get together and work as a single entity and maximize everything for the public, for racing and for ourselves," he said. "I think the constant bickering and fighting has only been destructive to all of us, as shown with reduction in the handle at Calder and with the financial trouble Gulfstream has run into. It's time to think globally--what's good for all, not what's good for individuals. I'm going to fight for that. It's going to be the bedrock of my program."

It has never worked that way in Florida and probably never will, but one can always hope. Hialeah isn't just good for Hialeah, John Brunetti or even Florida racing. A healthy, prosperous Hialeah would be just about the best thing that has happened to horse racing in a long time. The sport needs to rally around this cause.