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by corey johnsen

A TRUE HALL OF FAMER

My good friend and mentor Chick Lang passed away last week. Chick is best known as “Mr. Preakness.” During his tenure at Pimlico, he was the driving force behind taking the Preakness from a weak sister to the Kentucky Derby and Belmont S. to making it the “Middle Jewel” of the Triple Crown. While Chick will always be remembered for his contributions to Maryland racing, those accomplishments are just part of a wide-ranging career that touched virtually every aspect of Thoroughbred racing, making him a true Hall of Famer.

Chick Lang – The Racing Executive

A passion for the Thoroughbred racing, a respect for every participant and a never-ending attention to detail were part of every racing executive’s responsibility to the sport, according to Chick. That attention to detail required a continuous improvement plan and work ethic. If a track manager did not display those prerequisites, Chick believed that they belonged in another line of work. Being an important steward of the sport was too important to take lightly.

His accomplishments with the Preakness are legendary. He was a tireless promoter of the race. Like Colonel Matt Winn did with the Kentucky Derby, Chick played to the media, making every Preakness a compelling sporting event, one that was understood by sportswriters and columnists who may only have had a cursory knowledge of Thoroughbred racing. He embraced the controversy that could accompany any high-stakes contest. While many executives try to hide from controversy, Chick engaged in it, always supporting the Preakness.

As with any true promoter, Chick was not afraid to take risks. When he first introduced his idea about using the infield on Preakness Day to the Pimlico Board of Directors, it was met with a lukewarm response. Finally, after numerous presentations with the same result, Chick told the Board that he would take all financial risk to allow fans in the Pimlico infield. He was so sure of his idea that he provided them with a money-back guarantee. They could not lose. The rest is history, and the infield Preakness event is now one of Maryland’s greatest parties and traditions.

Chick’s knowledge of racetrack operations was astounding. He was the senior racing consultant for Lone Star Park at Grand Prairie when I was president of the track. He would travel to Texas two to three times a year and, within four hours of his arrival, he would be in my office with a card that had a list of improvements on it. I thought we ran a solid operation with a great team, but his attention to detail was second to none. The suggestions usually were to benefit the workers in the stable area or the two-dollar bettor, areas that can be easily overlooked by track management. “Chick’s List” was always completed in 24 hours, making Lone Star Park a much better place.

Chick Lang – The Mentor

We all owe our success to a series of mentors. Usually, they are older and wiser. They listen to one’s ideas and point out the potential downside to any plan. They provide caution, which can balance youthful enthusiasm. Chick was different.

Imagine driving down the road in your car. You are traveling at a reasonable speed with both hands on the steering wheel. You have everything under control. Then, the person in the passenger seat reaches over with his foot and stomps on the gas pedal, and says, “Let’s go! You are going too slow! We need to make some progress around here!” That was Chick.

While there was plenty of coaching in his mentoring, Chick believed that unless you were trying new things, you weren’t doing your job. It was your job as a leader to shake things up and make things happen.

Chick Lang – The Humanitarian

As a former hotwalker, groom and jockey’s agent, he was a true “racetracker” and never forgot the importance of each individual who played a role in Thoroughbred racing. Chick believed that the backstretch worker deserved the same amount of respect as the wealthy owner. He was a tireless advocate for the rights of the less fortunate in our sport.

Thanks to Chick’s advice and hard work, we had a great run with the All-Star Jockey Championship at Lone Star Park. We provided a national stage for some great athletes, but, more importantly, raised over \$600,000 for the Disabled Riders’ Fund. It was a great event that brought together the top jockeys in the nation for a true championship competition. This would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of Chick, John Giovanni and his dedicated team at the Jockeys’ Guild.

Chick was a man of principle. No flip-flopping on important issues so as to be considered “socially correct.” It was either right or wrong, no matter the personal consequences one might face. To illustrate Chick’s character, one of my favorite stories involved Cab Calloway in the 1950s, when many institutions in our nation had segregation policies. Unfortunately, some Thoroughbred tracks were no different.

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At the time, Chick was the agent for jockey Bill Hartack. Whenever Cab would attend the races, he would stop by and see Chick and get his selections. One day, Cab mentioned he needed a place to sit, so Chick gave him his turf club pin and told him to get a table. After a few minutes, a dejected Cab returned and said they would not let him in because he was a Negro. Chick phoned the appropriate individual in racetrack management and said, "If Cab Calloway is not good enough to sit in the turf club at this track, then my jock will never ride here again, starting today!" Cab returned to the turf club, got his table and the color barrier was broken at that track.

Chick Lang - Hall of Famer

For his contributions to Thoroughbred racing, Chick Lang should be in our sport's Hall of Fame. I looked at what is done in other sports, and they have a category for pioneers, organizers, executives and contributors. The NFL has 18 contributors in their Hall of Fame, including legends like Pete Rozelle and Tex Schramm. Basketball has 56 contributors, including many team general managers. And baseball has 26 individuals in that category. Thoroughbred racing should add a category for contributors, in order that legends like Chick can be properly recognized for their careers.

Just like Colonel Matt Winn and his efforts on behalf of the Kentucky Derby, Chick should be honored for his contributions to the Preakness. I urge the Board of Thoroughbred Racing's Hall of Fame to study this situation and open up a new category to recognize these legends of our sport. In the meantime, Chick Lang will always be in my Hall of Fame.