

Graham's Corner

By Frank Graham

*It Was a Rare View
Public Had of ...*

*Turf's Greatest, Most
Appealing Figure.*

MR. FITZ ON TV

The other night Jack Lescoulie had Jim Fitzsimmons as his guest on the "Meet The Champions" TV show. This was, it says here, a notable occasion, in the sense that it afforded to the public a close-up, speaking image of the greatest, most appealing figure in racing.



JIM FITZSIMMONS

Everybody who can read must be aware of the name of Jim Fitzsimmons, or Mr. Fitz, as he is called by his friends. Yet for all the years he's been around, he's been little more than a name or a picture in the paper or, on very rare occasions, a fleeting voice on the radio or a fleeting shadow on the magic lantern. This is because he's genuinely modest and genuinely shy and sincerely believes that when a horse he trains wins an important race, the glory belongs to the horse, the man who bred him or bought him and the boy who rode him.

In the thousands of persons at a race track on a day he is shooting for a famous stake and a pot of gold, he is the least conspicuous. He's actually seen only one full length running of the Kentucky Derby. That was in 1930, when the late William Woodward, the elder, insisted upon having him in his box on the finish line to watch Gallant Fox win. In other years that he's trained Derby horses, he's been lost in the scurrying crowd, making his way slowly from the Paddock to a possible vantage point, sometimes making it, more often not.

The year, for instance, that he took Granville to Churchill Downs he was gently pressing his way through the crowd when he met Jimmy Stout, his jockey, fighting his way back, blood running from deep cuts across the bridge of his nose and his left cheek bone. All Mr. Fitz knew was that the race was over. He could tell that from the rising and falling roar of those at the track side.

"Where did you finish?" he asked Stout.

And Jimmy, fingering the cuts, said: "Right on my face." It still is, only by hearsay and the pictures he's seen that Mr. Fitz knows Granville was knocked to his knees coming out of the gate, pitching Stout over his head.

Look for Him on the Clubhouse Turn

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Mr. Fitz's favorite spot from which to view a race is the clubhouse turn. At the old Empire City Track, which is the site of the Yonkers Raceway, he had a bench to which he would retreat, after saddling a horse, to sit with George Sully and a small group of his other friends. He has his hideouts, too, at Belmont and Jamaica, and, when the new Aqueduct is unveiled next year, he'll have one there, too.

The same goes for any track on which he sends horses to the post. At Hialeah, for instance, he stands in the shrubs on the clubhouse turn. The day that Nashua beat Swaps in the match race at Washington Park, he made one of his rare appearance before the crowd, trudging across the infield from the barn where Nashua was sheltered to saddle the horse, then, having acknowledged the acclaim of the crowd, trudging out of sight again. And after the race, when someone asked his grandson, also called Jim Fitzsimmons, where Mr. Fitz had been during the running of the race, the young Jim waved vaguely toward the clubhouse turn and said:

"Down there, somewhere. Mr. Lindheimer had a seat for him in his box, but I doubt that he sat in it."

There He Was, Dressed Formal, Too

Now, on "Meet The Champions," there was Mr. Fitz for all to see. Dressed formal, he was, too, in dark suit and white shirt and dark tie, all the goodness and greatness of him shining in his face.

"Would you," Jack asked, "rate Nashua with the great horses you've trained or seen? Would you say he was the greatest horse of his time?"

"Yes," Mr. Fitz said:

"Would you," Jack asked, "like to see him run against . . ."

Jack ran down a list of great horses, ending with Man o' War, and Mr. Fitz said:

"That last one, I'd like to have had a crack at him."

This is the closest Mr. Fitz ever has come to rating a horse he's trained, even against other horses he has trained. Maybe it's because Nashua in the beginning was a difficult horse to train. Maybe it was because, believing as he does that horses are like people, if you ask him which is his favorite among all the horses he's trained, he says:

"In a family where there are several children, the father and mother are likely to lean toward the weak one, the troublesome one, that needs more care than the others."

But, surely, in that moment when Jack asked him the question, you had to believe he was wishing that, somehow, he could have seen Nashua running against Man o' War.