

THE BACKSTRETCH

Rockefeller at Spa

By Dave Alexander

NELSON ROCKEFELLER, the handsomest and most ingratiating Governor in the history of New York, arose soon after the clockers on Whitney Day at Saratoga and arrived at the clubhouse entrance of the track at 8:40 while the sets were still working on the main course.

His entrance was as informal as that of any of the early-morning railbirds who breakfast on the terrace. He was driven to the course in an open car by John Hay Whitney, his host for the day, and arrived without retinue. His only bodyguard was a small and appealing dog in the back seat.

Rockefeller has one invaluable quality above all others. The second you meet him you gather the impression that this is a human being of great good will who likes all sorts and conditions of people, not because they're voters—just because they're people.

He shook hands as cordially with casual and startled bystanders as he did with James Cox Brady and Edward T. Dickinson, heads of the NYRA. He complimented an elderly lady on the pretty hat she was wearing. He greeted all the photographers, officials, reporters and publicity men and seemed honestly pleased that they had come to meet him.

Rockefeller entered a station wagon with Brady and Dickinson and was driven to the stable area, where his first stop was at the barn of that racetrack institution, Sunny Jim Fitzsimmons. Mr. Fitz had a set of eight horses on the grass plot in front of his barn.

The Governor sat on a fence rail while Mr. Fitz commented upon the points of each colt and filly. A non-starter named Eastern Tale that took the visitor's eye was led up to the fence for closer inspection.

Old. Wise Mr. Fitz

Old, Wise Mr. Fitz

"PET him, Governor," the photographers called. "Sure," said Rockefeller, "I'll do anything but ride him."

"Horses do well up here, don't they?" he asked Mr. Fitz.

"Men, boys and horses do well up here," Mr. Fitz replied.

The stars of the stable—Hitting Away, Bold Princess and the good grass horse Royal Record—were each led up in turn for admiration and a gubernatorial pat on the nose. Mr. Fitz commented wryly upon each of his horses, since he enjoys underrating his charges. Some of his comments made the Governor laugh long and loud.

As the Governor was leaving he wished Mr. Fitz luck with his starter in the fourth of the afternoon, Royal Ascot. "You root for me," said Mr. Fitz, "and I'll be rooting for you in the fall."

"By golly, I'll root real loud," Rockefeller promised.

The tour of the stable area lasted for the better part of an hour. At the jockey house Rockefeller shook hands and chatted with riders, exercise boys and grooms and seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

A small exercise boy said, "Mr. Governor, you give me a tip on the election and I'll give you a tip on a horse."

"I'd rather try to pick a horse," Rockefeller said, "and I'm no good at all at picking winners."

Rockefeller was nattily clad in a gray, blue-checked suit, striped shirt, dark blue tie and tan cordovan shoes. The backstretch was muddy from the storm of the night before and the cordovans became soiled, but the Governor didn't seem to mind taking an earthy memento of Saratoga home with him.

Natural Charm

BACK on the front stretch for breakfast on the terrace, Rockefeller chatted amiably with surprised people at nearby tables who recognized him. I don't think it was merely a politician's act he was putting on. If it was, it's the best I've ever seen. He is a man of tremendous and completely natural charm.

He spotted the veteran Max Hirsch at the rail clocking a set of two-year-olds and went down to talk to him. Breakfast was delayed for 15 minutes by their chat.

Hirsch wouldn't allow even a Governor to interrupt his morning work of clocking and he continued at the important task all during the conversation. Rockefeller seemed particularly interested in Max's stopwatch, an ornate affair with a gold-mesh fob.

The Governor ate melon, sausages, eggs for breakfast finally and seemed to have a healthy appetite. There was a stream of visitors at the table and Rockefeller took time out to give each of them courteous attention. The visitors ranged from just plain racegoers to jockey Con Errico to the distinguished turfman George D. Widener.

Over coffee Frank M. Basil, treasurer of the NYRA, came to the table and a conversation of serious import seemed to develop. This may well have been the most important period of the Governor's pleasant day at Saratoga.

It is by no means impossible that the financial difficulties of the association were discussed and that the need for added revenue so vital to improving Belmont was brought to Rockefeller's attention.

The afternoon was more formal. Rockefeller sat in the Governor's box, received distinguished citizens, presented the trophy for the Whitney Stakes. I rather suspect he enjoyed the morning more.

This was Rockefeller's first visit to the track. During the morning he said he was "impressed—greatly impressed."

I hope he was. Saratoga is an institution that should be supported by the highest office in the state.

Anyway, he got some racetrack mud on his shoes and that's the best way for any man to learn what racing is really all about.