

Murray Robinson

Man Who Beat the Races

(PART TWO)



ROBINSON

The oldtimers of Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn's strange parlay of sea and horse traditions, walked somberly this weekend in the wake of Sunny Jim Fitzsimmons' passing last Friday at the age of 91.

Down along the Emmons Ave. bayfront, the fishing boat hands worked busily against the coming of Spring. But the natives who remember the horse glories that were the Bay's long ago wagged grizzled heads solemnly as they talked about Sunny Jim.

For Mr. Fitz, fabled horse-trainer, unassuming sage, gentle man, was the Bay's most famous son.

He was born right over there, that's where the Sheepshead Bay racetrack used to be. He raised his family in his house on nearby Sheepshead Bay Road, where his son John still lives. When Mr. Fitz was at home, with the races being in New York, he and John and a few cronies had a Sunday morning ritual after church—a trip to Silver's in Coney Island for a Turkish bath.

Right at the track site on Ocean Ave. are Healy's funeral parlor, where Mr. Fitz's Bay neighbors and racing's great and small pay their last respects to him today and tomorrow, and St. Mark's R.C. Church, where a Solemn Mass of Requiem will be offered for him Tuesday morning.

And so the end of Mr. Fitz's saga comes full circle to its beginning in the Bay, an ancient part of Brooklyn which, in part has managed to retain its picturesque small-town identity.

Mr. Fitz got a kick out of a discovery I had made a few years ago. It was that every barkeep anywhere near the Bay proudly claims his joint stands right in the middle of the Sheepshead track's onetime infield.

"If those saloons are where the infield used to be," Mr. Fitz said with a grin one morning as he cooked his breakfast eggs in his cottage across from Barn 17 at Belmont Park, "they were built after the track was torn down. I go them one better. I was born in a house that was there BEFORE the track went up."

For close to 40 years, almost since he started training for banker William Woodward, Mr. Fitz was among the best-known trainers on the Big Apple. His name was instantly associated with those of great horses in the

Woodward, and, more recently, the Phipps family, colors—names like Gallant Fox, Omaha, Johnstown, Nashua, and Bold Ruler.

And so it's hard to realize that, before he achieved fame, he had spent nearly four heartbreaking decades as a struggling young jockey with a weight problem and as an "outlaw" track trainer with cheap horses—and a growing family.

Mr. Fitz was a tolerant man with a faint smile which had an enigmatic Mona Lisa quality. With it, he greeted his early trials and later success on equal terms. That serenity is what made him The Man Who Beat the Races more than the \$13,000,000 earned by the horses he trained.

He regarded his millionaire employers with old-fashioned reverence for "class" and preached that they were the backbone of racing. But he also fought for a better break for apprentice jockeys, remembering his own misery as a nomadic bug boy on the leaky-roof circuit. He had left home to follow the races before he was a dozen years old.

When he was 13, he got malaria at the Long Branch track in New Jersey. The local doctor told him to give up racing because his weak heart wouldn't stand up under the excitement. "That was back in 1887," Mr. Fitz said a few years ago with his slow smile. "I've always said people are just as unpredictable as horses."

It was a measure of Mr. Fitz's set of values that he thought more of the declasser horses that were good to him in the lean years than the great ones he trained in later years. I once asked him which horse gave him his greatest thrill in 78 years on the tracks.

"Crispin," he said quickly. "First horse I ever won with, at Gloucester in 1890. Next was Nashua when he beat Swaps in their match race in 1955."

In 1960, Mr. Fitz turned over his impressive collection

of trophies and awards to Aqueduct, to keep the symbols of his triumphs in one place. But he uttered one regret.

"I wish," he said, "that I had trophies for some horses nobody remembers or even heard of. But they'll live forever in my heart. They put the pork chops on the table for me when the going was rough. Honest horses, they were, and they kept me going. There are no monuments to horses like that, except in a man's memories."

John Fitzsimmons, who handled his father's stable accounts since 1937, recalls one of "Pop's" early travails—making weight. "Once," John said, "he took off 13 pounds in 24 hours, to get a mount. And I remember him sitting on a stool in our quarters in Elkton, Md., where my brother George was born, with a sheet over him to keep in the steam from a pot of water on an alcohol stove. He was trying to reduce. The sheet caught fire and Pop was lucky to get out alive. Right after that, he quit riding to become a trainer."

The Bay will miss Mr. Fitz. So will Aqueduct, his favorite track, which opens tomorrow for the 1966 season.