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Mountain High, River Deep

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by Nick Ben-Meir



At 1:46 p.m. June 14, my 7-year-old golden retriever, Harley, was looking for cover between the couch and an ottoman in our family room. It's what he always does when there's yelling in our house.

In fact, my wife and I were yelling at our TV, watching as Sailor's Cap cruised past the eighth pole, the 2009 renewal of the Poker Handicap (gr. IIIT) well in hand. I was holding the receiver of our phone up to the TV speakers, so our longtime friend, horse guru, and partner, Barry Irwin, could hear the call of the race. When you manage around 150 Thoroughbreds, it's a certainty you aren't going to see all of them run all the time, or you wouldn't have much of a life, and this was one of those times for him. Race over, I asked him if he got Tom Durkin's call. "No, I didn't hear a thing; you guys were yelling so loud," was his response.

The ensuing 48 hours were like (my idea of) being in heaven. Family and friends called with congratulations, and all the promise of the previous year had been fulfilled.

It had been more than six months since "Sailor" went to the farm, worn out by a tough 3-year-old campaign. We had last seen him here in our backyard, when he contested last year's Hollywood Derby (gr. IT). It was during that Thanksgiving holiday we got to know his assistant trainer and exercise rider, Dana Antonczyk, who proved to be as much enamored of her charge as we were...perhaps even more so.



Sailor's Cap engaging Kip Deville at the top of the lane in the Grade 3 Poker Stakes at Belmont.

Then he was training brilliantly and being nurtured and prepared for his first start at 4 by trainer Jimmy Toner, Dana, and the staff. The excitement was growing with each workout, but you never know, after a long layoff, what's in store. The Poker confirmed our hopes: He was a real racehorse, and his future was in front of him, and us...mountain high.

At approximately 6:30 a.m. June 17, my wife handed me the phone as I stepped out of the shower. "Barry," was all she said. The hairs on my neck stood up. As close as we've been all these years, a phone call at that hour couldn't be good. Sailor's Cap had collapsed and died earlier that morning,

cause, as of then, unknown. As tough a pro as I know Barry is, I could hear and feel the pain. He had bred this colt, from a family that he had owned and cherished for more than 20 years.

I got through the day in a virtual fog, attending a conference I couldn't miss, answering the condolence e-mails with my BlackBerry as word spread. And, of course, questioning myself about why I, and, for that matter, every other racehorse owner, although captivated by the majesty and beauty of the game, put themselves through the risk of feeling this kind of emotion...river deep.

The clichéd answers are many, and obvious. You can't really appreciate the high from this game if you don't ever feel the low...yeah. And then I started thinking about all the others...Barbaro, Eight Belles, Ruffian, Swale. Some so famous they made headlines; others, like Sailor's Cap, not so famous, but their passing still tore holes in the hearts of their owners. Like Tony, from Florida. Sailor's Cap was his first racehorse. I'll never forget the smile on his face when we were in the winner's circle in Virginia last year. Nor will I forget his heartfelt text message the morning we got the news.



Author Nick Ben-Meir leading in Sailor's Cap after his splashing victory in the \$600,000 Colonial Turf Cup.



There are those who think the game, or sport, is cruel and should be banned. But truth is, for the most part, the Thoroughbred racehorse is the most beloved and pampered animal on the planet. And if you don't believe they carry inside of them the desire to run and compete, you haven't spent much time around them at all.

While I hardly believe they'd solve the world's myriad problems, the love of the racehorse crosses all boundaries of race and faith and brings people together that otherwise wouldn't be in the same time zone with each other.

Here's one more cliché, probably my favorite one as I approach Social Security and beyond: "Nobody, no matter how sick or old, ever died if they had a good 2-year-old in their barn." Well, I've got a 2-year-old, but I won't forget Sailor's Cap.

In the words of the Beach Boys..."Sail On, Sail On, Sailor..."

Nick Ben-Meir lives in Los Angeles, where he is the business manager for various rock 'n roll artists. He has owned Thoroughbreds with Barry Irwin, owner of Team Valor International, since 1975.