

October 5, 2015

PHOTOGRAPHER STEPPED IN TO CATCH SPEECHIFY AFTER SPILL JULIE SMOAK FILLS IN DETAILS OF WHAT HAPPENED AFTER HE GOT UP GELDING RETURNED TO GULFSTREAM PARK SAFE AND SOUND ON MONDAY

The terrible scene of Speechify falling over a stricken horse in his path at Keeneland on Saturday during the Woodford Stakes played out vividly on TVG and on the track's simulcast and Internet feed, and several of the horse's partners witnessed it with their own eyes from the grandstand. Adding to the horror for many of his connections, including trainer Ralph Nicks at Gulfstream and Barry Irwin in Toronto, was not being able to see if he was injured, loose on the track or both.

Speechify did get up and run loose through the stretch and toward the first turn. What happened from there was another element of his incredibly good fortune, and Team Valor is grateful to the onlooker who took it upon herself to ensure his safety. It was a photographer, Julie Smoak, on foot who caught Speechify, as she related to Jeff Lowe in filling in the details of what she saw and did after watching the spill through her lens. Smoak, the Environmental Manager for Toyota Tsusho America of Georgetown, Kentucky, does freelance work for Keeneland's track photographer, Coady Photography. She also has been around horses all her life, as is evident in her account that follows:



Julie Smoak and a friend.

"I shoot head-on shots with a large 600 millimeter lens, so I unfortunately had an unobstructed view of the incident as it happened through my lens. I immediately stopped shooting until, as the horses were running on, I could no longer see the downed horse in the background.

"I finished shooting the race and as the horses galloped out past me I took the camera from the front of my face and saw Speechify was running along the outside rail. I thought about the risk involved in stepping out on the racetrack and trying to catch him. I certainly thought about Jeff Lukas who was run over by Tabasco Cat and pretty much was never the same. I also thought about Wayne Catalano's horse that last meet ran off and the outriders couldn't catch him. He jumped the backstretch rail and fell 30 feet.

"I watched Speechify and tried to gauge how panicked he was. He was still galloping as he passed the racing office and he tried to duck out the gap. He was obviously hoping to go back to the barn. They had the padded temporary rail up so he kind of bounced off that and that slowed him down a little bit. Then he started looking at me. I could see his eye was soft. He did not appear panicked at all. He was really just looking for a friend or someone to help him out. I started talking to him saying 'Come on, it's going to be OK. Come on, let me catch you.' At that point, he was in an animated trot, still coming quickly to me but at least he wasn't galloping any longer. The reins were hanging in front of his chest, so they weren't still over his neck; that would have been a completely different story. They were hanging right there and he came up right to me. I had a heart in my throat moment of 'Is he going to stop?' As soon as I grabbed the reins, he stopped.

"He didn't fight me at all and he seemed like a very smart horse. He wasn't panicked, he just didn't know what to do. I turned him back to walk toward the stretch and find his people. I walked about 20 or 30 feet and he was still on the muscle, still blowing pretty hard, but not fighting me at all. I heard the outrider behind me say 'I'll take him,' and I handed him off to the outrider. I trembled for about 20 minutes and cried over the horse that had broken down. It was quite an experience."

Miraculously, Speechify escaped the incident with just a scratch on a knee. On Monday, he returned home to Gulfstream, safe and sound.