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2,816 AT BELMONT

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2,816 at Belmont

On June 5, 2004, a crowd of 120,139, - generally described as the largest crowd in New York sports history – attended the Belmont Stakes to see whether Smarty Jones would win the Triple Crown. But on Friday, October 22, 2004, the scene is a little different at Belmont. There are 2,816 people present, and many of them seem to be in hibernation at American horse racing's largest facility. This is a plant with a mile and a half main track, two separate turf courses, nearly 33,000 seats, 430 acres, and 91 acres of parking lots. There are 6.5 fans per acre. Belmont has to be the one place in Nassau County without suburban squall.

I take a walk into the paddock for the feature race. It's actually pleasant in the paddock in the late afternoon with the temperature in the high 50's, and the feature has brought out many of the top names in American racing. Wayne Lukas – while not present - has entered a horse. There's Barclay Tagg, the trainer of Funny Cide with an entry. There's Hall of Fame trainer Bobby Frankel with the favorite ridden by Jerry Bailey. There's America's current leading trainer in overall earnings, Todd Pletcher, and there's me. Twenty minutes before post, it's just me and the statue of Secretariat in the paddock. Five minutes later, Secretariat and I are joined by three other fans to watch the horses being saddled by their handlers.

It's not just the paddock that is empty. The stands are bare as well. There are more than 1,000 unreserved seats on the second floor of the clubhouse. Two minutes before post time, three are occupied. By the time the race is run, the crowd in the stands swells to seven to see Pletcher's horse win at 2 –1. There was a ceaseless roar in the stands throughout the running of Belmont Stakes. Today, there's no cheering in the clubhouse seats, because there's nobody in the seats.

It's not that this crowd was out of the ordinary. The crowd for the corresponding race date in October of 2003 numbered only 100 more fans. Who lost Belmont? This is, after all, "beautiful Belmont." Sports Illustrated may not list Belmont as one of its top venues, but there's no sports facility that compares to this one. It is one of America's great treasures. While rebuilt in time for the 1968 meeting, it turns 100 years old in 2005. It is Man o' War, Secretariat, Count Fleet, Citation, and Equipoise. It's where the people's horse Stymie made 38 starts, where Tom Fool carried 136 pounds to win the Brooklyn, where Forego carried 137 pounds to win the Marlboro Cup, and where Affirmed battled Alydar on five occasions. It's even where Ruffian broke down. It has it all. History, tradition, pageantry, parkland, monuments, stately oaks in the backyard, and views from the top of the grandstand. It can be elegant and pastoral. There's ivy on the walls, and the trees in the backstretch are turning colors. At its best, it's a combination of Yankee Stadium and Wrigley Field.

Instead, on a fall weekday, it's more like Montreal's Olympic Stadium with a dose of Candlestick Park. It's vacant, cavernous, and cold in the grandstand. Unlike

Belmont's backyard and paddock area which are generally sunny, the stands face north and are bathed in shade and unheated. The wind whips through the stands. You better dress up for winter if the thermometer falls below 60 degrees. It should be an equine shrine, not an equine mausoleum. Most every Friday in Saratoga brings out 20,000 people. How can there be less than 3,000 at Belmont?

It seems almost inevitable that the New York Racing Association – or whomever runs Belmont in the future – will seek to bring video lottery terminals to the track. Maybe given the state of racing, the size of the current crowds, and the space available at Belmont, these video lotteries will be a good thing. The money from video lottery terminals has to be used to revitalize Belmont. There is an overwhelming need for heat throughout the plant. There is a need to create larger, comfortable rooms for fans to watch and wager on simulcasts from other racetracks. There have to be more television sets for the fans, and the food options have to be increased. There ought to be some way to restore Belmont to its former glory. It should be a Mecca not a morgue. Let's hope we can restore Belmont as a vital racing center for the next one hundred years.