

Maimonides and the Clocker

I went to Saratoga on Labor Day, the closing day of the meet. I was there only to bet one horse and not for any particularly thoughtful handicapping rationale.

The horse was named “Marty the Clocker.” It was named for Marty Katz, who had been a long time clocker at the New York thoroughbred tracks. Marty died in 2006 in his early 50’s.

I knew Marty for a number of years. He had worked for the New York Racing Association in the early 1980’s, and you’d see his byline in the program notes. I knew him as a clocker working the NYRA tracks for the Daily Racing Form, and I would encounter Marty frequently when I worked at the New York State Racing and Wagering Board.

The thing was that Marty and I had a lot in common. We had similar backgrounds. We were close to the same age and somewhat obsessed by horse racing. Marty even lived in my home town. Marty took the career path of getting directly involved in racing. It was a path that I had always thought about, and may be if I had the ability to time any animal moving swifter than a turtle, I would have done so. Instead, I became a lawyer and found myself in New York State government, and wondered – to this day - whether I should have chosen Marty’s path. It wouldn’t have been a lucrative path, but where else could you find yourself at the track every day? Would that have been a better life?

Marty the clocker- unlike me - had taken the path less traveled, and the difference was that he was dead. And with his death went the dreams of my middle aged life. Some people grow up wanting to be the centerfielder for the Yankees. When I was in college, I envisioned a life at the track. I once told the associate dean of my law school that I would far prefer handicapping to attending law school. Marty had lived my fantasy, and with Marty gone, my link to those fantasies had vanished with him. If I had the guts, would I have lived Marty’s life?

The horse, Marty the Clocker, ran up the track. He finished dead last in a field of 11 maidens. The charts say that he was roughed up at the break. My dreams for the horse were doomed from the start. There was not even the hint of anything encouraging in the race. There was no likelihood of darkened form from which a clocker might have derived some encouragement for future wagers.

Later in the card, trainer Bob Baffert ran his highly touted two year old Maimonides for owner Ahmed Zayat in the Hopeful Stakes. Maimonides faded in the stretch. He ran third in a field of four, and his effort was hardly more distinguished than that of Marty the Clocker.

On Labor Day, maybe Zayat, Baffert, Marty Katz, and I should have taken the wisdom of the philosopher Maimonides to heart. It was Maimonides who thought that gambling was

“a form of robbery.” He wrote, “A gambler always loses. He loses money, dignity, and time. And if he wins, he weaves a spider’s web round himself.”

I can only hope especially for Marty Katz’s sake that the normally sagacious Maimonides had it wrong. A clocker who gambles may lose his money. He may even be free to lose money on his equine namesake. He may even occasionally lose time, but in no manner, should he be have lost his dignity by spending his life at the racetrack