In the Lead:

The Belmont Stakes Racing Festival: A “Big-Event” Blueprint for Success

There was a moment on June 11, Belmont Stakes Day, when the years blurred. Up on the Belmont Park’s infield HD television board before the more than 60,000 fans in attendance appeared a feature on NYRA’s winning of Street & Smith’s Sports Business Journal “Sports Event of the Year” Award for the 2015 Belmont Stakes. And yet it was 2016 as all the planning, collaboration and execution that NYRA people delivered so well last year played out to create another triumphant Belmont Stakes Racing Festival.

The 2015 Festival served as a blueprint for how to create both a three-day festival of top racing and entertainment—and for all NYRA “big-event days” like the Whitney and Travers Days just ahead at Saratoga Race Course.

A Testament to Planning

For CEO and President Chris Kay, the Belmont Stakes Racing Festival anchored by the 148th Belmont Stakes, won by Creator, is a testament to the planning, preparation and commitment of NYRA employees to perform at their best before and throughout the Festival.

“Thanks to our collective efforts, I saw so many people having a great deal of fun, whether they were in the backyard, in the paddock, in reserved seats, in boxes or in one of our various dining areas,” Kay said. “We had a much larger number of people who were young, dressed up in fashionable outfits and having a wonderful time at our ‘must see’ big event—a concept now clearly resonating with the public. We are changing the public’s perception of our events.”

On a granular level, the story of what worked so well is reflected in the way NYRA people worked—together and collaboratively, with a sense of continuous improvement and with professionalism and pride. Some examples:

- **Working together:** In the same spirit as last year, teams from across NYRA created a multi-faceted event that kicked off early on Belmont Stakes Week with the bell ringing ceremony on Tuesday, June 7 at the New York Stock Exchange and the Post-Position Draw at Rockefeller Center on Wednesday, June 8. Accompanying the racing at Belmont Park was top-scale entertainment by country stars Maddie & Tae, the multi-platinum, multi-Grammy nominated Daughtry, the West Point Band and the cast of the Carol King musical, **BEAUTIFUL**.

- **Continuous Improvement:** Led by Senior Vice President and Chief Experience Officer Lynn LaRocca, the Internal Solutions Center was a centralized phone bank and response center where calls and texts were directed and handled promptly on Belmont Stakes Day. It came together with the combined efforts of the Experience, Security, IT and Facilities teams—and “comprising the one thing missing from our event operations in 2015 that other large-scale sporting facilities have for big events,” said LaRocca. “These departments worked together before and during the event to make that area a huge success.”

What endures is a recipe for more success, similar to the kind that earned NYRA the award for “Sports Event of the Year.” “The 2016 Belmont Stakes Racing Festival was another building block, a model that we are using to enhance the experience for all of our fans and horseplayers,” said LaRocca. “It positions us for continued success in the future.”

Big Sound at the Big Sandy: Daughtry
One-on-One: Tony Allevato

As President, NYRA Bets and Executive Producer, NYRA Television, Tony Allevato is overseeing the launch of NYRA’s new national ADW platform, NYRA Bets, which debuts with the 2016 meet at Saratoga Race Course. NYRA Bets will enable viewers across the country to wager on New York’s world-class racing, taking the place of NYRA Rewards, which was restricted to New York State residents. Coinciding with the launch of NYRA Bets are a host of new features from the debut of the Belmont Park/Saratoga Live television show on MSG+ to several television deals including the one with FOX Sports to telecast more than 80 hours of live racing coverage from Saratoga Race Course on FS2. And Altitude Sports will telecast 38 shows of Saratoga Live this summer to a national audience of 5.7 million homes across 10 states in the Midwest and Rocky Mountain regions. Allevato was the first production hire at TVG, and spent 14 years at the nation’s leading ADW and racing channel as Executive Vice President and Executive Producer. Most recently, Allevato was the Coordinating Producer for the NFL Network’s flagship program, NFL Total Access, and oversaw nearly 400 hours of programming annually. He started working for NYRA in February.

Your career has taken you from TVG to the NFL Network and now back to horse racing with NYRA. Is it good to be back?

Yes. You don’t know how much you love something until it’s gone. I went to the NFL Network and learned a lot, but I knew early on that I wanted to get back to horse racing. The opportunity at NYRA was too good to pass up. We have a great team in place here and a phenomenal product, namely the best horse racing in the world.

I’ve been fortunate enough to work with every major track in the country during my career—and I’ve come to realize the NYRA TV team is second to none. From a television standpoint, we have great announcers—Maggie Wolfendale, Rich Migliore, Jason Blewitt and Andy Serling. That makes my job easier and the job itself a lot more attractive.

I look at what the NYRA TV team led by (Senior Director of NYRA TV) Dan Silver, (Chief Engineer) Julian Segura, (Director of NYRA TV John Imbriale and (Production Supervisor) Frank Langton have been able to do with these shows and what’s ahead—and I’m hard-pressed to find anyone else in the industry able to match what’s happening here. To be able to do all that and launch a national ADW—getting people nationally to wager with us and give them a great experience—is exciting.

What did you learn at the NFL Network that you can apply here?

I learned that how people are watching television is changing—and at a rapid pace. We commissioned a study at the NFL Network that showed 40 percent of our audience was watching with a secondary device in their hands—that is watching while texting or emailing or on social media. So it only makes sense that we provide access to our product to millennials in a manner in which they’re familiar. We have to demonstrate that we’re up to date on social media and television and with apps.

Given that probably half the betting in the U.S. will soon be from people at home, we must be a part of the change. From a television standpoint, what we’re doing is really unprecedented. To have 80 hours of television on a consistent basis in one meet as we’ll have this summer with Fox Sports is an unbelievable opportunity. And by launching on multiple channels—MSG+, The Altitude Network and Fox Sports 2—we’ll be putting our product in about 65 million homes.

How can you continue to attract a younger demographic?

Millennials are watching less and less television, and many of them not living at home don’t even have cable television. So for horse racing to grow and adapt, we’ve have to be working in anticipation of where the industry will be in five years.

Our programs and features adapt to this new reality. In conjunction, we’re making the shows available on a NYRA HD app as well as on iOS, all Apple products, Android and Roku—and eventually on Play Station, Apple TV and Xbox. It’s really exciting for horse racing to be a part of this technology.

What other technology and enhancements are you adopting?

As we get into the national ADW market, we are differentiating ourselves on broadcasts, starting with new virtual graphics, which give the illusion of images painted on the turf course. It’s similar to the first-down line painted on the field during the NFL broadcasts.

We’re also working hard to include interviews with horse owners on the TV broadcasts, which makes the ownership experience a better one and helps the sport grow long-term.

It’s all a matter of giving fans an opportunity to watch the sport they love and to learn about it as we expand NYRA racing and wagering to a new part of the country.

How else do you stay on top of where the industry is headed?

We have to keep embracing the technological changes underway. That was happening even before I arrived with (Chief Revenue Officer) Dave O’Rourke recognizing the need with development of the NYRA’s HD app and setting up the full HD signal for the simulcast show.

My coming on board only confirms the changes underway. That was happening even before I arrived with (Chief Revenue Officer) Dave O’Rourke recognizing the need with development of the NYRA’s HD app and setting up the full HD signal for the simulcast show.

Our People
Beyond the Belmont: A Look at Other Races on Belmont Stakes Day

With 13 races, six of them Grade 1 races, Belmont Stakes Day was a feast for fans. Here is a look at some of the G1 races that preceded the 148th Belmont Stakes:

**The Woodford Reserve Manhattan:**
The European turf sensation Flintshire arrived in New York with some hype—and the 6-year-old son of Dansili who won last year’s Sword Dancer at Saratoga—didn’t disappoint. With Javier Castellano aboard, Flintshire rolled to a 1 3/4-length victory over 1 ¼ miles on the turf for horses aged 4 and up. “He ran to his works,” said trainer Chad Brown. “He picks things up at light speed, oozes class and is a privilege to work with every day.”

**The Longines Just a Game:**
Celestine reaffirmed her fondness for Belmont Park’s Widener turf by shattering the previous stakes record. If Celestine was very good in winning two stakes last year at Belmont Park after being trained by Hall of Famer Bill Mott, the 4-year-old Scat Daddy filly blazed one mile in 1:31.64 seconds to easily best Tapitsfly’s clocking of 1:32.34 in 2012. “I waited until we turned for home to ask her,” said jockey Junior Alvarado. “I couldn’t ask for a better trip.”

**The Mohican Sun Metropolitan Handicap:**
“He did it all on his own and I was just a passenger,” said jockey Joel Rosario after directing Frosted, the runner-up to Triple Crown champion American Pharoah in the 2015 Belmont Stakes, to a stunning winning margin of 14 1/4 lengths over one mile for horses aged 3 and up. “To beat that great of a field of horses like that is pretty incredible,” said his trainer Kiaran McLaughlin.

**The Ogden Phipps:**
Racing six-wide into the stretch, Stonestreet Stable’s Cavorting made up ground to draw off by 2 ½ lengths in this race over 1 1/16 miles for older fillies and mares. In doing so, the 4-year-old Bernardini filly, “responded well when I asked her to go down the lane,” according to winning rider Florent Gerou. The race marked Kiaran McLaughlin’s third victory in the Ogden Phipps, including Wedding Toast in 2015.

Sharing the “Sports Event of the Year” Award

The question was how best to share in the excitement of NYRA’s winning of Street & Smith’s Sports Business Journal “Sports Event of the Year” award for the 2015 Belmont Stakes.

The answer was lunch—a buffet spread in early June at Belmont Park to which all NYRA employees were invited to have their photo taken with the handsome Tiffany award. And hundreds of employees responded by enjoying lunch and posing with the trophy, which was displayed, gala-style on a table mounted on a red carpet.

NYRA earned top honors among a premier group of finalists that included Super Bowl 50, the FIFA Women’s World Cup Final, NASCAR’s Southern 500 and the Mayweather vs. Pacquiao prize fight. Launched in 2008, the Sports Business Awards were established by Sports Business Journal and Sports Business Daily to celebrate and recognize the leaders, visionaries and day-to-day practitioners who personify excellence in the business of sports.

The 2016 nominees and winners were recognized for excellence and outstanding achievement in the business of sports for the period from March 1, 2015 to February 29, 2016.
Nervous...Quirky...And a Champion Whose Feat Stands the Test of Time

As a 2-year-old in 1940, he was quickly branded as "nervous" and "quirky," difficult to saddle and apt to rear up. His trainer Ben Jones called him the "dumbest horse I ever trained."

His breeder, Warren Wright of Calumet Farms, was more tactful in analyzing his erratic prodigy. "One doesn't employ a system in raising an unusual child," Wright told the Thoroughbred Record. "One studies the child ... follows awakening interests (and) carefully bends the twig."

So it went for Whirlaway for whom Jones "ben(t) the twig" enough that the big chestnut turned it around in 1941 to accomplish something unique in the history of racing—taking the Triple Crown, the fifth such thoroughbred to do so, and following up at Saratoga by winning the Travers. Seventy-five years later, the feat stands: Whirlaway remains the only horse in history to take those four big races.

Like Father, Like Son

Whirlaway's pedigree gave some idea of the blend of greatness and unpredictability ahead. His sire, Blenheim II, won the Derby at England's famed Epsom racecourse, but had the curious tendency to drift outside before accelerating to beat his opponents. Whirlaway's dam, Dustwhirl, was said to be excitable though she never raced.

As a 2-year-old, Whirlaway displayed enough raw talent to win seven of 16 races, including the Hopeful Stakes and Saratoga Special at the Spa and the Breeders' Futurity at Belmont Park. But resorting to bad habits, he careden wide on both turns in the Pimlico Futurity to finish third, beaten by five lengths.

Enter Ben Jones. Recognizing that eight different jockeys had ridden Whirlaway to mixed results by the spring of 1941, the master horseman secured a ninth: the great Eddie Arcaro. Next, Jones made a critical equipment adjustment: To ensure Whirlaway did not veer wide, the trainer adjusted his pupil's blinkers with his pocketknife by cutting away the cup on his left and leaving the right eye covered.

Then, to get Arcaro familiar with Whirlaway, Jones fashioned an unusual drill. Astride his pony, the trainer took up a position a few paces off the inside rail on the far turn at the spot where the colt often went wide, and told the jockey to steer Whirlaway in his one-eyed blinkers between the rail and the pony. Arcaro did, and just as Jones figured, the colt turned flawlessly.

Getting It

Whirlaway thrived. In the Kentucky Derby, he was boxed in but Arcarlo skillfully threaded him through the crowd to vault into contention and take the race in 2:01 2/5, a mark that would stand for 21 years. A week later in the Preakness, Whirlaway's three overmatched opponents tried slowing the pace but Arcaro was too smart to fall for it. Winning by 2 ½ lengths, the Triple Crown was theirs.

Whirlaway became one of the great sports stories of the year. In a world distracted by war, the erratic horse who had found himself captured the public imagination. He was a star on par with the feats of baseball's Ted Williams who hit .406 that year and Joe DiMaggio's legendary 56-game hitting streak.

The Travers on August 16 seemed almost anti-climactic. In the days when top thoroughbreds typically raced every few weeks, Whirlaway pressed ahead through the summer of 1941, running mainly for War Bonds—and raised $5 million. He retired after two starts as a 5-year-old, having earned 32 wins in 60 starts and the status as the all-time money-earning thoroughbred.

Whirlaway went on to a successful career as a sire; he died in 1953.