

Knock, Knock, Knockin' on 'Toga's Door

The bell screamed. The gate erupted.

Jockey Calvin Borel's grip on the reins was *al dente* as he toed his irons in the saddle of Rachel Alexandra, the lone girl in a race against boys, *colts and geldings*, the 2009 \$1 million Preakness Stakes. She broke from the far outside and swerved to her right. Borel knew he had to hustle her. The ground was like quicksand under her as she struggled to center herself. Borel gave her a smooch, and she blitzed forward.

Rachel Alexandra cleared the field, felt comfortable. Borel told her, "That's enough," and she came back to him.

Twelve horses chased and drummed a war beat into the Pimlico Racecourse dirt. Behind her coasted the 2009 Kentucky Derby winner Mine That Bird, a gelding whose very jockey in *that* race sat chillingly still in the saddle of Rachel Alexandra. This had never been done, this abdication.

Rachel Alexandra's ears flicked to the outside, pivoting to absorb her surroundings, surroundings that included the fatigued exhalations of her pursuers. Her stride unfolded like a spool of ribbon. The colts' strides behind her shortened and chopped. And like a tide, most receded into the ocean of dirt, with maybe one more wave swelling from the rear.

The turn for home came quickly, and Borel went to work and let his filly uncork that near-thirty-foot long stride down the Pimlico homestretch. Borel's left arm chicken-winged while he let out more slack on the reins. He went to the stick and popped her twice. He switched arms and popped her again.

Mine That Bird was that final wave, the tsunami, the pregnant energy billowing from beneath the water. He took flight and split horses, gaining. Borel kept Rachel Alexandra to task as the wire drew near, its invisible laser waiting to break. Down the center of the track bombed the Kentucky Derby winner, and the question became: Will there be enough room to catch her?

Borel flattened his back and tucked his head into Rachel Alexandra's ribboned mane. His arms extended, his eyes peered to his right, he knew he had it. Rachel Alexandra's eye, ringed in fire, bore down her foe.

Race caller Tom Durkin trumpeted his words at the wire, "And the FILLY did it! Rachel Alexandra has defeated the Kentucky Derby winner Mine That Bird by three-quarters of a length. . . . A magnificent victory. An exquisite filly. And a THRILL to see!"

Borel wagged his right index finger in the air and gave Rachel Alexandra one congratulatory clap on her neck as the pair continued to glide around that oval.

She became the first filly since 1924 to win the Preakness, this after she handed her own sex a 20¼-length sock-to-the-stomach in the Kentucky Oaks, a race for three-year-old fillies run the day before the Kentucky Derby.

The rumble of hooves and the effort with which Rachel Alexandra crushed her feet into the dirt signaled that someone new was at the door, an equine figure trampolining her profile to the pages of every racing periodical in North America.

She banged, she knocked, no, she smashed down the door, this very door.



Snow blankets Saratoga Springs, New York, and Saratoga Race Course. It buries memories to create geologic striations, each layer an epoch, each a season of racing. Plows leave banks of crusted snow trash as tall as a high school point guard. Salted streets smear with sludge, an unappetizing, slushy gathering by the curbs and on the hidden yellow line dividing lanes of traffic on Union Avenue. Trucks spray sand and salt in fans, like the expanding V behind a swimming duck. Cars purr by with snow tires clicking on the exposed tar.

An afternoon walk in the skin-cracking weather reveals a barren landscape, as if an apocalyptic event took place on Saratoga Race Course. Lone trees that withstood the blast sway but are no less daunted. The wind is eye-squinting sharp. Saratoga Race Course, first erected in 1864, creeks and moans as it endures yet another winter, weathering an off-season of forty-six weeks. There is still time to thaw and have this track perform its calisthenics, to cast off the crust of ice and age.

Snow and ice weigh down the barns' roofs. Plastic window insulation—or something similar—partitions the track's grandstand from the elements. Some of it is torn and frayed, as if it quit and let the air have its way. The fans that circulate air for patrons hang like icicles, barely moving, still months away from work.

The track is indiscernible. It looks like a desert, a tundra, images of racing's past hibernating somewhere below. Now with winter fully upon Upstate

New York, when racing seems as distant a thought as Benedict Arnold's battle against the British here in 1777, one wonders what 2009's meet will bring and what 2009's Travers Stakes—Saratoga's feature race—will leave in one's memory for years to come. Perhaps the Travers will play bridesmaid to the 56th running of the Woodward Stakes. It was a year ago that 2008 Horse of the Year, Curlin, charged like a locomotive down the track in the Woodward, adding to his bankroll and legacy. The city of Saratoga Springs celebrated this horse like Funny Cide before him, lining its streets with maroon-and-gold banners brandishing the name CURLIN up, down, and around Broadway. To match his feat would be spectacular: the thought of surpassing was positively ludicrous! But this is, after all, Saratoga.

Now, skin turns pink, limbs go numb, and you ask yourself, "How is this so wonderful a place for six weeks from the end of July to Labor Day?"

But the winter visions fade. The snow drifts and moguls of slush shrink, and the once-smothered grass stretches to the sky. The rivers roar, fierce with mountain snow. The days lengthen, and the air forgives. Picnic tables of previous seasons rest in stacks of three or four and wait to be scattered like seeds all over the property.

The trees remain skeletal, branches clicking and chattering like shivering teeth. Soon the red oaks start teething buds, which blossom into leaves, feathering together in a hushing swish. The weeping willows cry and moan again.

Soon after the Oklahoma Training Track, opposite the main track across Union Avenue, opens for training, weeks before Season 141 readies to etch its name alongside its 140 predecessors. That horsemen's cologne of hay, feed, and manure wafts through the air as truck after truck buses in body upon body of horseflesh.

Downtown, motorists hurdle from traffic light to traffic light at a slug's pace. The horse statues come out of storage, showing off their designs of jazz musicians or the local leading realtor. Restaurateurs power drill their patios into the sidewalks for the summer.

The shops put their horse paintings on the sidewalks, Putnam Wine Shop's glugs wine for free tastings, and when one looks down at one's watch and sees that it is 9:00 p.m. and the sky is still bright, one says, "Yep, track season is right around the corner."



She looks positively stunning, turning this way and that, ceding to *Vogue* photographer Steven Klein's whims and commands. Her legs are roped in muscle, her gaze both haunting and inviting. She stood in size 6 Silver Queen shoes with white socks on two of her feet. The shutter to his camera purrs

and clicks, and his lamps cast a shine on his model. She turns her head; her ears, oddly enough, fan out in a surfer's "hang loose" hand signal. Then, there it is, the winning shot exposed when she cranes her neck over her right shoulder, as if annoyed, putting down an all-too-eager chap who might have been checking her out for too long at a bar, slaying him down almost as if to say, "*You?*" It's quite the attitude for a three-year-old.

Rachel Alexandra, a filly as brown as dark chocolate, stood, her knees locked, in the gravel outside her barn at Churchill Downs. Just days prior to her photo spread in a female-style magazine for humans, this horse defeated three-year-old colts—including the Kentucky Derby winner, Mine That Bird—in the Preakness Stakes, the second of three Triple Crown races usually reserved for males.

Up until this point she had proven much, but she would need to do more still in America's "What have you done for me lately?" landscape. In these terms, she hadn't done anything, save pose for a magazine. It's safe to say that even with her celebrity and her magnetic pull, she would not find herself taking hits from a bong like Olympic champion Michael Phelps, or philandering like Tiger Woods. All she could be guilty of was spirited bucking in a round pen or eating her fill—four quarts of sweet feed for breakfast, six for lunch, and ten for dinner, with four quarts of cooked oats stirred in. For the remainder of this year, though, she'd have to do more if she wanted to be more than just a flash in the pan, a one-hit wonder. Scott Blasi, assistant trainer to Steve Asmussen, who trained Rachel Alexandra, said, "After all, they call it Horse of the Year, not Horse of the Six Months."

This being, as Blasi said, just halfway through the year, they had a long stretch ahead, many furlongs, where anything could happen, both good and bad, leaving Rachel Alexandra, and the sport of horse racing, shy of goals and heroes. And with his words it became clear that the goals this horse and her connections sought were not unlike the fruits of Tantalus, impossibly far away, but then again, Rachel Alexandra was no Tantalus, and she just might reach the grapes.

She certainly would if the man in the irons had his way.



Calvin Borel won the Kentucky Oaks on Friday and the Kentucky Derby on Saturday. Everyone wanted a piece of Calvin Borel—*The Tonight Show*, *The Late Show*, and *Pardon the Interruption*, not to mention all the print outlets that gave his phone insomnia. It had yet to reach the point of nausea, though that would come. Borel was the rock star of a dying sport.

Back when Rachel Alexandra was simply an impressive female horse lacking the crossover appeal that turned the filly into an icon, Borel rode her to five straight victories at a slew of tracks in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Kentucky.

Rachel Alexandra was so good, so swift and fast, that Borel would often showboat on her back, much to the chagrin of her owner, as well as of those who hate basketball players who flex after a dunk, football players who dance excessively after a touchdown, and baseball sluggers who stare too long at that magnificent parabola. The consensus is, "Act like you've been there before." He had, and he hadn't.

When he won the Fair Grounds Oaks, Borel peeked back at the field, steered Rachel Alexandra in a hand ride, and celebrated from the sixteenth pole, indicating that they were a sixteenth of a mile from the finish line. Dolphus Morrisson, then the owner of Rachel Alexandra, clouded more by rage than jubilation, roared up to his jockey, and said, "Borel, if I ever catch you doing anything like this on a horse of this caliber, anything at all that would've caused her to swerve a little bit, you would've been face first in that mud out there."

Borel was no stranger to the winner's circle, and at the time Rachel Alexandra's first trainer, Hal Wiggins, was giving Borel a leg up on her back, Borel was near five thousand wins. In horsemen's circles Borel was well known, a jock who woke in the mornings to darkness, whose early days on the Louisiana bush tracks hardened his ethic and calloused his hands while he mucked stalls and rubbed horses. But with a near last-to-first ride on Street Sense in the 2007 Kentucky Derby, the world soon met Calvin Borel and, it seemed, was better for it. So it was, in this instance, that yes, he had been there before.

Out of his near-five thousand wins, he had never been on a horse as good as Rachel Alexandra, and until a jockey has sat on a chest of buried treasure like her, he'd best keep his tongue tied about at-the-wire antics. Already comparisons had been made to Ruffian, regarded as the greatest filly in the history of horse racing. Ruffian's only defeat came when she catastrophically broke down in a match race against Kentucky Derby winner Foolish Pleasure. Comparisons have been made to the late-great Secretariat, namely because he and Rachel Alexandra have such long strides, freakishly long. When in full gallop, Secretariat could cover nearly half the distance between home plate and a major league pitcher's mound. Rachel Alexandra possessed that stride, the way a certain measure of afflatus is dolloped on the most fortunate of athletic specimens. She was in that company.

Which is why Borel, who normally takes the summer off, turned the ignition, shifted into "D," and motored east to Saratoga Springs to ensure that she wouldn't get away. His fear was that if he was out of sight, then out of mind would follow, and he'd be damned if he were both. Not with this filly. Not ever.



Trainer Nick Zito finally made it, at least in his mind. Until 2005 his struggles and his grind were ubiquitous, they were everywhere and anywhere, and until

2005 Zito would never admit to anyone or to himself that he had made it in this game of thoroughbred horse racing. In 2005 Zito was inducted into the National Horse Racing Hall of Fame, just across the street from Saratoga Race Course.

Sure, he admitted, being elected into the Hall of Fame after winning two Kentucky Derbys with Strike the Gold and Go for Gin, a Preakness with Louis Quatorze, and two Belmonts with Birdstone and Da'Tara was the moment he had felt like he had made it. But those visions faded. The old New Yorker in him, his voice crackling like radio static between frequencies, never settles into himself, never rests. This game kills the complacent, so he entered the 2009 Triple Crown season with a handful of sophomores that were far from brilliant. Yes, 2009 for Nick Zito was going to be a long-shot year, and with the horses he had coming to Saratoga, a long-shot meet. "But that's why they run the races," he said.

Coming out of the spring and into the mid-summer, Zito had a smattering of three-year-olds that one may have noticed, at least on the surface, as his contenders for the Saratoga meet and the Travers Stakes. They were horses like Nowhere to Hide, Miner's Escape, and Brave Victory. He was also quick to say, "Or some horse you don't know yet." A late bloomer, no doubt, and there the colt galloped around the Oklahoma Training Track. He breezed by with a red-haired exercise rider mother of one straddling his bay back with that distinctive Nicholas P. Zito saddlecloth, NPZ. A long shot, yes, but the old New Yorker seemed to have an ace up his sleeve if the events-that-be should work in his favor.

Also not to be ignored was the George Foreman of horses, Commentator. This gelded son of Distorted Humor had been racing for five years now, something unheard of in racing at this level. He possessed no shortage of speed, and younger horses around the barn should be so lucky as to pop off the quarter mile fractions he still registered from pole to pole. He won the Whitney in 2008, going right to the front, never looking back. This was after he won the same race in 2005, defeating eventual Horse of the Year, Saint Liam. Zito inked him in for this third Whitney. Should Commentator win, there was a good shot that he would retire a winner, like John Elway, or Michael Jordan . . . the second time.

To hear Zito talk about Commentator is to hear a father talk about his most accomplished son. To Zito, his horses, and he has quite a bunch, are more than just race muscle. He'd point down to his horses getting their hooves treated and say, "That's old school." He appreciates their sacrifice and respects them fully as athletes and as colleagues. Under the NPZ banner, they are all a team, and Commentator would be the captain, the one with the most stripes, the most wins, the most moxie, and the most money, over \$2 million earned.

The two look at each other, warped reflections emblazoned on each other's corneas. Zito may also love Commentator the way he does because he may see himself in him, a horse who works hard, loves the grind, whose efforts in this unforgiving game have seen its share of reward, but only after struggle and pain. To see Commentator off may be to see a part of himself forever gone.

Not yet. In the meantime there was one more race and one more crack at history with a legacy written in ink still wet.



After yet another long and barren winter at Aqueduct, the New York Racing Association chief executive officer (CEO) and president, Charlie Hayward, leaned back in his leather recliner in his office, as he was wont to do, and eyed the calendar. In spring the air still had bouts of temper lashing at outsiders who so dared to tempt the elements. Still some three months away from the start of the 141st running of the Saratoga meet, Hayward took note that Labor Day would fall late this year, September 7, 2009. This, he thought, could be devastating. The last week and the last weekend were always ravaged by people who stayed home for Labor Day cookouts, choosing instead to wear white for the final time in backyards under the banner of grill smoke and sizzle. Not to mention that children would be going back to school, buying supplies, new shoes, and new outfits. *Monies were responsibly going elsewhere instead of the late Pick 4.* This, after all, was understandable, but with the meet diving deep into September, Hayward's apprehensions were further exacerbated. It also signified his one day off during the meet, a day where he would cast aside his silken noose, buttoned shirts, pleated pants, and matching suit jacket for shorts, a polo shirt, a cap, a beer, and a *Daily Racing Form*—the same form he helped resuscitate some ten years prior. Handicapping was always an escape, but whenever he threw his traditional garb into the flames for this one day, it took on new meaning, recharging his battery and basking in the near six weeks of racing and the months of preparation that went into that final brushstroke.

Now it was late May 2009, and Hayward left his office at Belmont Park, his black shoes clicking on the pavement. Next he slid into his car for a trip north to Saratoga Springs for what he thought would be a breath of fresh air.



With the 141st running of the Saratoga meet still two months away, much was anticipated when Charlie Hayward planned on being the special guest at the Parting Glass Pub and Restaurant. Tom Gallo, racing manager for Parting

Glass Racing, hosts monthly meetings for his clients who buy shares of horses in partnerships and provides them and others with this gathering, free for all.

Like most of Saratoga Springs, the Parting Glass pays homage to the thoroughbred racehorse, an animal rooted in the Upstate New York economy: just drive through the farms here where countless horses run and graze, grow and race. The Parting Glass's walls are tattooed with framed photographs of winner's circle triumphs and newspaper clips from champions past and paintings of jockeys standing with arms folded. Fresh pictures rest there too: photographs of Mine That Bird winning the Kentucky Derby and Rachel Alexandra throwing down the hammer in the Kentucky Oaks. All this was further evidence, as if one needed more, that racing is embedded like cabinet inlays in the culture of Saratoga Springs.

These meetings garnered the same clientele, owners of various percentages, some in their golden years, others fresh from work, still in suits with suspenders and tie knots loosened just so. But this meeting was different. Voices hummed in the cavernous backroom punctuated with the familiar sound of forks and knives tapping and scraping on plates once filled with salad, shepherd's pie, burgers, and fries.

The backroom became stuffy as the recesses of its cavity swelled and swarmed with more people. Tom Gallo paced around the stage, giving handshakes to clients, making sure the LCD television was in good order so that he could replay races of two Parting Glass horses hitting the wire first downstate at Belmont Park.

Outside the sun still shone like burning magnesium while it remained dark in the pub. Any moment now people expected to see Charlie Hayward walk by outside, framed by the windows, a motion picture show highlighting the sun shimmering on his white hair. The windows, however, failed to broadcast this image: instead, it was just advertisements, the static picture of Henry Street and the Tiznow restaurant across the way.

Light rudely reflected off the buildings and glass across Henry Street, highlighting the placard that rested on every table:

Parting Glass Racing invites you to our:
MONTHLY MEETING
THURSDAY, MAY 28
CHARLIE HAYWARD

NYRA President & CEO, will discuss NYRA plans for the 2009 meet
and take your questions.

7:00 p.m. at The Parting Glass Pub
FREE & OPEN TO THE PUBLIC—
PLEASE JOIN US!

SARATOGA!

Don't just watch it . . . be part of it!

Dinner plates emptied and Guinness, Smithwicks, Killians, and Coors Light refilled glasses. It was already past 7:00 p.m. Reporters from several local newspapers, the Glens Falls *Post Star*, the Albany *Times Union*, and the *Saratogian*, stood in the back, swaying impatiently, deadlines creeping ever closer. When will this meeting get under way? And, more importantly, where was Charlie Hayward?



The day had started off just fine, typical work for Charlie Hayward downstate on Long Island. Spirits were high as he and Hal Handel, New York Racing Association's (NYRA's) vice president and chief operating officer (COO), had a meeting with the soon-to-be-named chair of the New York City Off-Track Betting, Meyer "Sandy" Frucher. The meeting went as well as it possibly could have, with both parties walking away feeling like they had accomplished something, walking away energized, something that is hard to say and feel in horse racing circles.

Before Hayward could think about heading north to Saratoga Springs for his prescribed meeting with horse owners at the Parting Glass, there were still some administrative matters to tend to. He met with the NYRA franchise oversight board, and this had not gone as well as the previous meeting. Up until this point, his afternoon was book-ended with feelings of joy and the typical frustrations of politics. At this point what he needed was to feel rejuvenated by racing fans, passionate people waiting for him in Saratoga Springs, planning their evenings around pub food and horses.

At 1:15 p.m. Hayward got inside his 2008 Volvo S80 and headed north toward the Thruway and Northway, Interstate Route 87, a road that runs like a spine the entire length of New York's eastern border, connecting New York City to Montreal.

Hayward flicked the dial of his radio to WFAN and listened to New York sports talk with Mike Francesa, gibbering on about the Mets' or the Yankees' early struggles without Alex Rodriguez. Hayward's Red Sox still had a solid grasp on the American League East division and were still unbeaten against the Yankees this season. The hope would be that the Sox could hold off a Yankee lineup that was soon to be re-energized by the return of Rodriguez, thus cutting loose the newly signed Mark Teixeira, the same Teixeira who had previously balked at signing with the Red Sox. Before long, Hayward was on the Tappan Zee Bridge, traffic busy but moving at sixty-five miles per hour.

A stone-fisted uppercut—something blindsided him from the southbound traffic on the other side of the median. Hayward was shocked and startled, jarred by an object that smashed into the hood of his car, peeling back a strip of metal as if it were a piece of string cheese. *Was it a rock? A brick?* Whatever it was, it ricocheted off the left side of his hood and tumbled into

the median. Had Hayward seen the projectile, he might have swerved his car into another, creating a wreck in the afternoon traffic. Or, worse, in swerving to the right he could have put himself in the crosshairs of the missile. Even his days as a competitive downhill skier could not have prepared him to move from the projectile's belligerence.

Hayward steered to the right and off Exit 9. He cut the engine and stepped outside to assess the damage. Since the car had been running without a sputter, he figured he could peel down the hood, make his appointment at the Parting Glass, and worry about getting his Volvo fixed once home. He folded down the strip, but when he looked under the hood, the computer box with its Chiclets circuitry had absorbed most of the shock from the impact, its pieces scattered like Legos. Hayward knew then that this little computer deflected the object. He didn't want to think about what could have happened.

Hayward thought to give the car a try, but despite his urgings, it wouldn't start. After seeing the scattered remnants of computer bits, he understood that he had to arrange to have the car and himself brought downstate, away from Saratoga Springs.

After his latest meeting with the franchise oversight board, it would have been nice to greet racing fans "who have some skin in the game." He was deeply interested in their inquiries and insights, a fresh and passionate outlook on this game that he has come to love in all his years, and certainly in his nearly five years since he was hired to run the New York Racing Association.

At first Hayward had his assistant, Maria Diaz, phone Tom Gallo at the Parting Glass to clue him in. After some time had passed, Hayward realized he had time to call Gallo himself and to prepare an announcement for the people eager to attend this gathering.

He promised to reschedule, but he would have to wait until sometime after the 141st Saratoga meet or until another window might open up elsewhere. For now there were other matters to tend to, most notably his Volvo.



Tom Gallo, in a tan blazer, his mood ever light, given that his star guest would not be arriving, took the mike.

There was a collective groan when the audience heard the news, as many racing fans had eagerly awaited Hayward's talk. They tossed their heads in a way that illustrated disappointment and frustration, another public figure letting down the audience, the headliner skipping out on the main act.

It was only a year ago, at about this time, that Hayward came to the Parting Glass for a meeting and spoke about the video lottery terminals (VLTs)—slot machines—that promised to give the state millions and to bolster the purses of all of New York racing at Aqueduct in Ozone Park, Belmont

Park in Elmont, and Saratoga Race Course in Saratoga Springs. He also spoke of track safety and how he thought that Big Brown would probably win the Triple Crown. The jury is out on racetrack safety, and Big Brown laid an egg.

Afterward, having satisfied the crowds, Hayward hung in the back and spoke with fans one on one, answering their questions and appeasing their concerns. One such man went up to a reporter, put his finger on his chest, and said, "Hayward's an honest man. He tells it how it is. I better not read a bad story tomorrow."

So naturally it was with much disappointment that Hayward was stuck downstate, but he made sure to pass along a press release of sorts to Tom Gallo. Gallo stood before the crowd, some still eating, most slamming back pints, and read from Hayward's statement, where he touched upon Saratoga's horse population (strong) and VLTs (stalemate).

Gallo continued reading, projecting his voice as best he could since the mike was no longer working. Of course, those privy to the VLT debacle have heard the word "delay" so often that some may wonder which will happen first: the end of the war in Afghanistan or the installation of slots at Aqueduct.

The kicker and the moment all people waited for was Hayward's words on the Saratoga meet itself, an entity that is every bit Saratoga Springs as Fenway Park is every bit Boston.

Horses are the culture, with restaurants named the Grey Gelding and the Tiznow. Horse statues stand tall down Broadway. Every shop has paintings and photographs of horses running and images of past Travers Stakes winners, often called the Mid-Summer Derby, the feature race of North America's premier racing meet.

The wait staff cleared away the plates and pint glasses and hustled into the kitchen. Patrons stood up and left the Parting Glass. Perhaps this statement by Hayward appeased the crowd, perhaps not. Given the unsteady nature of horse racing in other jurisdictions, it was a warm thought for patrons to know that their treasure would remain rooted to its tradition, unstained and untainted. Still, with two months to go, there was an incredible amount of work to do.