

Profile

Fred Nichols



photo imprint to
be removed

Into the Sunset

Fred Nichols retires this year after decades of service to Bangor Raceway and Maine harness racing

story by **Marvin Pave**

Fred Nichols, who is officially retiring in November as race secretary at Bangor Raceway, was the right man in the right place at the right time when the track was in jeopardy of closing in the early 1990s.

Nichols, who had moved to Maine a decade earlier, owned Standardbreds

that performed at Bangor, which is located in historic Bass Park.

So when the city council decided to stop operating the track, which opened in 1883, Nichols headed a 10-person group—Bangor Historic Track, Inc.—that bid successfully to take over.

Nichols, named general manager in

1993, had a lot of work to do.

“The place was dirty,” he said. “There was standing water in the barns, the roofs leaked, and many of the stall spaces were in disrepair.”

With expertise as a former small business executive, and former owner of minor league professional baseball

Profile: Fred Nichols

teams, Nichols' previous experience served him well.

"I operated Bangor then like a minor league baseball franchise, running promotions like a trip to Mexico or horse giveaways, because there was a lot of competition for the bettors' dollar, like scratch-off lottery tickets," said the Stratford, Conn., native. "But the track made a pretty good comeback for a few years."

Mike Cushing, president of the Maine Harness Horsemen's Association, said Nichols that first year "was wearing about six hats, everything from race secretary to custodian. If not for Fred's motivation to save Bangor racing, I'm not sure we would still have it."

There have been some important changes along the way and Nichols has been witness to all of them.

A percentage of the handle from an off-track betting parlor at Sonny Miller's restaurant, across from the raceway on Main St., was an initial revenue boost. Then Shawn Scott, a Las Vegas developer, bought out Nichols and his

ance is always difficult, but Fred always seems to find a way to make it work."

Mike Hopkins, manager of live racing at the raceway, called Nichols "a resource and a mentor," while general manager Jose Flores said Nichols' "dedication, determination and love for the sport" have been pivotal in the renaissance of downtown Bangor.

In 2010, Nichols was inducted into the New England Harness Writers Hall of Fame, and a new \$1 million barn at the raceway was dedicated in his name. The program for that ceremony noted that "in this way, we will celebrate a man who was instrumental in the preservation of Bangor's historic track as well as Maine's harness racing industry."

Nichols, a USTA District 9 (New England) director, has helped establish a program to assist Standardbreds in need. He has been honored twice as the Maine Harness Horsemen's Association Track Executive of the Year.

A 1961 graduate of Fairfield Prep in Connecticut, Nichols, while attending New York University, sold tip sheets

“Standardbreds are incredible athletes and they don't go out on strike; they don't hold out; they don't chew tobacco; and after a good season, they don't ask for more oats and grain.”

Fred Nichols

partners and funded a successful state referendum in 2003 to allow slot machines at racetracks, but kept Nichols on as general manager.

Scott then sold the track to Penn National Gaming, Inc., which subsequently opened the Hollywood Casino Hotel & Raceway. The track is a quarter-mile from the hotel.

"Fred has been our local guru when it comes to institutional knowledge," said Penn National Vice President Chris McErlean. "He has such a unique background in so many areas that every conversation with him, I learn something new."

McErlean praised Nichols for his "yeoman's work" to keep harness racing in Bangor afloat "in good times and in bad. He has a good business sense, but is also sympathetic to those who put on the show. Finding that right bal-

at Roosevelt Raceway and recalled, "I didn't know anything about harness racing. But I could hear the crowd roaring—they used to draw 30,000 fans on a Friday night—so I sold out my sheets and went inside."

While studying at the University of California at Berkeley as a graduate student, he sold another tip sheet at Golden Gate Fields "that picked one horse for \$10 and guaranteed it would hit the board."

Baseball was his first sports love.

As a youngster he played baseball, and his parents would take him to major-league games at the Polo Grounds in New York City, Ebbetts Field in Brooklyn and Shibe Park in Philadelphia. He was, and remains, a loyal Philadelphia Phillies fan and listens to their games on satellite radio.

From 1974-'81, he was a general

manager and owner of four Class A professional minor league teams—the Asheville Tourists, Utica Blue Jays, Butte Copper Kings and Daytona Beach Islanders, some of whose players made their way to the major leagues.

Nichols moved to Castine, Maine, with his former wife because “she was from Alaska and was homesick and I was from Connecticut, so Maine was our compromise.”

He rekindled his interest in harness racing, using a credit card to purchase a horse named B T’s Bonehead at the Cumberland Fair. The horse won three straight races at Bangor and several more lower claiming races at Yonkers Raceway.

B T’s Bonehead was claimed for three times what Nichols paid for him and was the first of about a dozen horses he owned before becoming general manager at Bangor Raceway.

Nichols now resides in Winterport on Kempton Cove along the Penobscot River, and he is far from alone because of his love for the animals who keep him company—many of whom he

found at the local humane society. His entourage includes a frog who suffered a stroke, guinea pigs, lizards, gerbils, a parrot and a raccoon.

“Otherwise, they probably would have been put down because they’re unadoptable and now they live in a predator-free environment,” he said. “Nothing is as uniquely rewarding as gaining the trust of a wild animal.”

He also noted he once pulled porcupine quills out of the snout of a raccoon to make eating easier for it.

Nichols is also known for owning a vintage 1970 burgundy Jaguar XKE and a 1989 red Jaguar coupe, the latter of which he uses to commute. He is also recognized for his kindness that extends beyond the animal world.

About 12 years ago, Mike Cushing’s barn in Farmington was badly damaged in a fire and much of his equipment was lost. He had 14 horses to provide for, and turned to Bangor Raceway for help.

“Fred called me and said that he would provide as many stalls at the track as needed and that he had already turned the water on for me,” said Cushing. “After about five weeks, I was

ready to return to my barn and asked what I owed. Fred said that there was no charge because everybody falls on hard times. I stop and take a breath when remembering that moment.”

Nichols said he is most proud of keeping racing at Bangor alive and that in doing so, he’s saved the jobs of ancillary people like the vet technicians and hay farmers while watching third and fourth generations of trainers carry on their family tradition.

“Racing has been very good to me,” he said. “Standardbreds are incredible athletes and they don’t go out on strike; they don’t hold out; they don’t chew tobacco; and after a good season, they don’t ask for more oats and grain.”

Long before Nichols was born, President Theodore Roosevelt visited Bass Park in 1902. If President Roosevelt was able to return to Maine today and cross paths with Nichols, he would probably have extended his hand and said, “Bully for you.” **HB**

Marvin Pave is a freelance writer living in Massachusetts. To comment on this story, email us at readerforum@ustrotting.com.