

Watching the Wheels



'Lucky' Larry

Beloved announcer appreciates industry support

I was on the phone the other day with Larry Lederman, for years the popular track announcer at Freehold Raceway and a friend of mine. The call was pretty much like every other one I've ever had with him—fun, disjointed, and filled with self-deprecating jokes and racing stories, some old and some new.

A conversation with Larry is like flying the fastest, brightest kite you've ever seen; you're not sure where it might go, but you just hang on because you don't want to miss a moment of it. And that was the case again this time, until Larry said something that, three days later, still stops me in my tracks.

Larry said that he was amazed at how lucky he was.

What makes his statement incredible

is that Larry has inoperable brain cancer. He has undergone two grueling rounds of aggressive chemotherapy and radiation, and while the tumor has not grown, it has not shrunk, either. The doctors have indicated that there's not much else that they can do. Surgery is not an option; the cancer is in such a location that any attempt to remove it would result in paralysis on the left side of his body—or worse. The tumor is malignant; he is stuck between a rock and a hard place.

"It's like having a bad tenant that you can't evict," he explained to me. "You just live with him for as long as you can. You try to keep him happy. You know that he's armed and dangerous, and you hope that you can co-exist with him. And that's what I'm trying to do."

"The strange thing is that the doctors told me that if the tumor was just a little bit more than three centimeters in either direction from where it is now, they could go in and get it. I'm 3.3 centimeters away from being totally healthy."

I've known Larry since the late 1980s,

when I met him in the press box at Garden State Park. To be truthful, I wasn't crazy about his announcing back then because it seemed like I was always on the wrong end of the photo finishes he called with such unbridled enthusiasm. I mean, OK, the other horse won—again. Did the guy have to be so over the top about it? So when a mutual friend introduced us, I was surprised to find him disarmingly irreverent and funny, and as much a frustrated handicapper as I was.

I think that's why fans love him so much. He's like the guy in the grandstand because he *was* the guy in the grandstand,

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and he's never forgotten that. He understands that racing is supposed to be fun, that it's a passion and an escape. That it's not life and death.

Which brings me back to that point in the conversation where Larry told me he was lucky. I asked him how he could say that.

"You wouldn't believe the kindness that I've experienced," he said. "Cards, letters, phone calls, unsolicited offers of support. Jeff Gural has been unbelievable. Barry Abrams, the former Standardbred trainer who now works with Thoroughbreds in California, the same thing. More big names from our sport than you could imagine, and many others who you might not know but who keep me going every day."

"I would say that 30-40 percent of those that I've heard from, I didn't even know beforehand. That's amazing, to be

told by that many people that they care about you and that the work you've done has meant something to them."

I didn't know how to respond to that. Perspective will make you speechless now and then. I asked him what he planned to do next.

"I'm flying to California next week to go see Barry [Abrams]. He's been a great friend. My doctor has cautioned me about traveling until I get my strength back up, but I don't want to say 'I should have gone here' or 'I should have done that,' and so I'm going. Might not be the smartest thing I've ever done, but you've got to keep living, right?"

Yes, I said, that's what you've got to do. But later, when I think about it, what kind of advice am I in a position to give? What can I possibly tell him except that, like many others, I'm so thankful for knowing him and proud to call him my friend? And that I'm praying for his recovery like I used to cheer on those last race, 20-1 shots that I absolutely, positively had to have to get me even on those frigid evenings at Garden State, and how great it would be if this time, the longshot came in.

If, just this once, the photo finish turned out the right way.

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