

# The Daily Item

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## Lynn's Werner reflects on over 50 years at Suffolk Downs



ITEM PHOTO / REISA M. SALDANHA

Suffolk Downs employee John Werner poses in his Lynn home Thursday.

By PAUL HALLORAN  
FOR THE ITEM

Meaghan O'Malley may not realize it, but she has John Werner to thank for that Cabbage Patch doll she got from "Santa Claus" when she was a little kid.

Werner - who starts his 52nd year at Suffolk Downs when the track opens for live racing Saturday - was in a meeting with Robert O'Malley, then the general manager, in the early 1960s. O'Malley told him he was desperate to get the Irish edition Cabbage Patch doll for his daughter for Christmas.

After asking everyone he knew and striking out, O'Malley was prepared to fly to London to

buy one. E.J. told Werner the story, adding, "I know you can't help me, John."

Don't be so sure, Werner told him. Within a half hour, Werner had called his wife, Hester, who called their daughter, Karen, an assistant manager at Ann & Hope in Danvers. Wouldn't you know, she had one. O'Malley was so excited he insisted Werner pick it up and bring it back to the track immediately. A Merry Christmas indeed.

That's just one of a million memories John Werner has after a half-century of working at Suffolk Downs, including 49

See **WERNER**  
PAGE 84

### WERNER

FROM PAGE B3

years as a mutual clerk. And he cherishes every one of them.

"I loved my job," he said, using the past tense for nostalgia purposes, even though he is still active. "My friends were at the racetrack. My whole life was at the racetrack."

Let's you get the wrong idea, Werner has lived a very fulfilling life away from the track. He and Hester will celebrate their 54th anniversary in September. They have eight children, 11 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. But that doesn't change the fact that for 51 of the 75 years he has been alive - Werner was born 100 days before Suffolk opened in 1935 - much of Werner's life has revolved around Suffolk Downs.

Sure, Werner worked plenty of side jobs - driving a coal truck, filling vending machines at GE overnight, taxi driver, courier - but if you ever asked him what he did for a living, he would proudly tell you he worked at the racetrack.

"That was my primary job," he said. "It's what I loved to do.

It was always an exciting job. I was going to work, but I was always anxious to get there. When I was young and starting out, I learned everything I could about the job. I didn't want anyone to know more about it than I did. I always took it seriously."

Between Suffolk and the part-time jobs, Werner was able to support his family though he admits there was the occasional photo finish with the bill collectors. He recalled one such time.

Werner was on the way to work when he spotted trainer Clyde Locklear walking to the track from his home in Point of Pines. He would frequently pick up Locklear, and they became good friends. In order to keep it that way, Werner never asked Locklear about any of his horses and the trainer never volunteered any information.

On this particular day, Werner was a man with conflicting emotions - ecstatic that Hester had given birth to their eighth child one day earlier, yet worried about where he was going to come up with the \$300 he owed the hospital. He shared

that information with Locklear:

"I've never told you about any of my horses," the trainer said, "but I'm running a 2-year-old tomorrow that I think you can bet a few dollars on for that little guy in the hospital."

Werner scraped together enough for a \$20 win-place bet. The horse won and paid \$47. Cigars for everyone.

A lifelong Lynner, Werner graduated from Lynn Trade and spent four years in the Air Force during the Korean War. Shortly after he got out, he was recommended for a job at the track by Gov. Foster Furcolo, who was a Nahant resident. Werner got a job as an usher in 1959 and became a mutual clerk two years later.

"I'm grateful God has looked out for me and given me this job I love for so long," said Werner, who also worked at the old harness track in Foxborough as well as the fair circuit - Marshfield, Northampton and Great Barrington - for three decades. "I've been treated well."

### Memory lane

July 10, 1935: Suffolk Downs opens.

1937: Seabiscuit wins the Massachusetts Handicap.

1945: Daily attendance averages 18,388. Aug. 18, 1968: The Beatles make their final Boston appearance at the track.

1990-91: Track is closed.

Jan. 1, 1992: Track reopens under the ownership of James Moseley of Hamilton.

1995-96: Horse of the Year Cigar wins back-to-back MassCaps.

2007: Richard Fields become majority owner. Sept. 22, 2007: 19,191 fans watch Brass Hat win the MassCap, biggest crowd in 12 years.

May 15, 2010: Track opens for live racing. Schedule: Wednesdays and Saturdays in May; Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday from May 31-Nov. 13. Post time: 12:45 p.m.