

Tom Schwigen, Suffolk Downs starter and horseman

By Marvin Pave
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When Tom Schwigen, then 26, was hired at Scarborough Downs in Maine, he was the youngest thoroughbred racing starter in the country. At Suffolk Downs in East Boston, where he had held a similar position since 1992, he had the distinction of being the longest in years of service.

"You can't have a fair race if you don't have a fair start," said Tom Smith, Mr. Schwigen's friend and former New Hampshire state racing steward. "It's a team effort to get the horses standing correctly, and Tom had a great reputation for doing it right. He always wore suits and hats and . . . with his flowing beard and moustache was like a Mark Twain caricature. Tom had a keen sense of the world around him and was just an unbelievably unique individual."

Mr. Schwigen, who was invited to be an assistant starter last year at the prestigious Oaks Stakes and Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs, fulfilling a longtime dream, died of a heart attack Sept. 8 at his Man O' War Farm in Chester, N.H. He was 68.

"I first met Tom 35 years ago at Pocono Downs in West Virginia, and I knew then how hard he worked at his job," said Massachusetts state racing steward John Morrissey, formerly racing secretary at Suffolk Downs. "He was firm, but fair, one of the greatest storytellers about life around the tracks you'd ever meet, and a true friend."

After the news of Mr. Schwigen's passing was received at Suffolk

Downs, a small gathering of track officials, jockeys, and trainers held a memorial observance Saturday in the winner's circle conducted by the track's chaplain.

Among his many stops along the way, Mr. Schwigen was also starter at Rockingham Park in Salem, N.H., from 1986-2002.

"Our track has its share of colorful characters, and Tom was clearly one of them," said Chip Tuttle, Suffolk's chief operating officer. "He set a very high standard for his own professional behavior, and he expected the same of the people around him, which is why he was so refreshing to work with. Tom definitely had his own style."

Yasou Stable owner John Assimakopoulos and his father, Charlie, had great respect for Mr. Schwigen's evenhandedness.

"He had a certain way of doing things, and everybody had to conform, and I liked that," said John Assimakopoulos. "He never showed favoritism to a trainer or owner and got his point across, usually with a dry sense of humor. He will be missed by many people."

Born and raised in Kewanee, Ill., Mr. Schwigen, who arrived at Suffolk at 8:30 a.m. to help school horses at the starting gate, did not mince words when it came to the qualifications for his profession.

"You don't get Harvard grads coming out here applying for this job," he said in a 2005 interview with the Globe. "There's a moment in there where you're just in God's hands. You've got 12 horses, 12 jockeys, and nine

assistant starters. That's 33 live, wiggling, moving things, and everyone's got their own ideas. . . . And I'm out there, trying to figure out all that to know when to start the race."

According to a 2010 profile in the publication New England Horse Talk, Mr. Schwigen got his start by walking hots, horses who need to be cooled off after a race or workout. He also galloped, exercised, and groomed horses for his father, Ray, who bought and sold thoroughbreds.

He said in the article that the most rewarding part of his job took place early in the morning, hours before race time.

"That's where all the action is," he said. "I watch the young horses who are just learning about entering the gate and the older horses who still have some difficulties. I deal with each of them individually, according to what their quirks may be."

"All horses are different," Mr. Schwigen said. "Some take to the gate and some don't. The main thing with young horses is to do it right the first time. Patience is very important, and if you don't have patience, you can mess up a horse."

That patience and experience paid off for Mr. Schwigen, according to Sam Elliott, Suffolk's vice president of racing. "Tom was not only the best starter I have ever seen," said Elliott, "he was a gentleman, a storyteller, and a great guy."

Mr. Schwigen's invitation to the Oaks and the Kentucky Derby was initiated by one of his former assistant starters at Rockingham, Curtis Disbro, who had moved to

a similar position at Churchill Downs. He hosted Mr. Schwigen at his Scottsburg, Ind., home during his weeklong stay.

"Tom got me started in the business, and I respected him so much," said Disbro. "He had those smooth hands with a horse, and he had his rules. When you worked for him, you had to wear clean khakis and a white shirt."

"If you were down on your luck, he made you feel better about yourself, and working at the Oaks and the Kentucky Derby was a dream of his. It was one of the happiest times of his life."

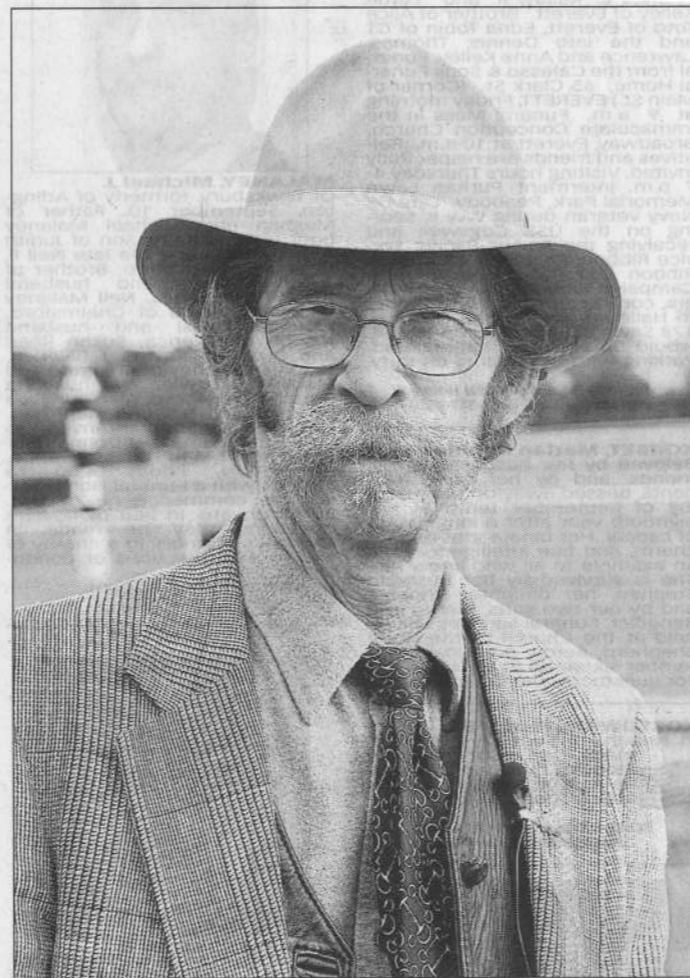
Churchill Downs starter Scott Jordan recalled how he enjoyed his time with Mr. Schwigen. "We shared a lot of great stories," he said, "and I know being here was a just reward for what he had done for the thoroughbred racing business."

According to Mr. Schwigen's son Mark of Collinsville, Ill., his father was "a straight-up, by-the-book guy whose favorite expression was 'an ounce of loyalty is worth a pound of cleverness.'"

His other son, Justin of Alton, Ill., said Mr. Schwigen was a Damon Runyon character who liked track people and made them his second family. "Dad always told me to take care of business while I had business to take care of, and that's how he lived," said Justin.

Veteran jockey Tammi Piermarini said Mr. Schwigen had one of the toughest jobs in racing, did it superbly, but never drew attention to himself.

"He took the blame if a horse didn't break well," she said, "but



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Tom Schwigen was noted for his high professional standards

if the race went off smoothly, he gave credit to his gate crew."

An animal lover who owned three Jack Russell terriers and a black Labrador, Mr. Schwigen was close to his late half-brother, Keith Schubert, a horse trainer and official at Rockingham who lived at Man O' War Farm in his later years.

In addition to his sons, Mr. Schwigen leaves his first wife, Ruth Huskey of Collinsville, Ill.,

two grandchildren, and his companion, Joey Carr of Chester, N.H. His second wife, Sharon (McCarty), died two years ago.

A memorial service for Mr. Schwigen will be held Sept. 24 at Suffolk Downs at 11:15 a.m. at the 6-furlong chute, where Mr. Schwigen worked the starting gate.

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