

Horse Race

Sometimes winning at all costs is everything, but can it ever truly be without consequences? A cautionary tale, perhaps.

Just so the record is clear on this, it wasn't my idea. K had all it takes to win the preliminary. There was no need to rig the race, but the backers weren't in the mood to take a chance. They'd put too much time and pretzels into K to risk being ousted before getting to the premiere event. So, there I was on the way over to do some horse-trading with C's handler.

D and I went a long way back. We were both handlers long before either K or C came along, and we both had a history of winning races. We also knew that you need hip waders if you venture into the stables. That's why we decided to meet at a suitably dark and mysterious bar known to be frequented by the horsey-set.

When we'd settled in and got the niceties out of the way, D asked "What do you want, N? We're in the middle of a race and here you are, fraternizing with the enemy."

"We need to guarantee a win." I said. "We both know that K's the one that will take the premiere event, so we don't want to get tripped up on this little qualifier."

"Why us?" He said. "We both know that C's a bit of a spoiler, but J's the one to beat."

"I know, but someone has to cast doubt on the vitality and capability of J. Create just enough uncertainty in the punters' minds to shift the focus a little bit."

"Answer the question, N. Why us? Why don't you do it?"

I waited. D's no fool. It clicked eventually. "So! You don't want to get your hands dirty. OK. What's in it for us?"

I looked around, just in case anyone was paying attention. I shouldn't have bothered. In here, everybody pays attention, and nobody does. Horse-trading is the name of the game. I put the paper sack on the bar, opened it and showed D. "My, that's a lot of pretzels." He said.

I pushed it across to D. He had one last look before closing it up. "I'll see what I can do." He said.

The show and tells with the punters continued. The buzz still had it pegged as too-close-to-call. Not much was coming out of the C camp yet. I gave it a day and called another meeting with D.

We met in the same bar. The preliminary was drawing a lot of attention now, so there was more glad-handing than last time. We took a back room; further from prying eyes and ears.

"What's up? You're dribbling out weak-ass crap. When are you going to get to the good stuff? The race isn't that far off?"

"I'm trying. Things came up. Our horse ate most of the pretzels. Did wonders for the training, thank you very much. We're going to need more, though, to make it look good."

I've known D for years, so this didn't come as a complete surprise. If the cow offers herself up to be milked, D is anxious to oblige. I came prepared. I opened the bag. "That'll do." He said.

We got our pretzel's worth after that. Lots of press about J's past, but really stressing how if he couldn't win against R before, when he was in better shape, why now? This was having an effect, but not enough. With the spoiler still in the race, things remained uncertain. I had one more play.

D was anticipating my call. I told him what I wanted. "I know." He said. "We'll meet at our stables." My least favourite place. Too much horseshit. "Bring pretzels - lots of them." He added.

I showed up with two sacks. It better be enough. I had on my mucking out boots - flotsam protection - and went in. It was like ours. I have no idea why I expected it to be different. D took the bags, not bothering to look inside. "This is a big ask." He said. "Bigger than a couple sacks of pretzels. If we're going to drop out of the race, we'll need something more."

The stench in here was getting unbearable. "No more pretzels. Take it or leave it." I said.

"Oh, I'm taking it. But. I'm looking for a little something post-race. C goes into your stable. I come onto your team." I nodded. Not sure if that would work out but I'd figure it out later.

"I'll make the announcement tomorrow." I nodded. There was no need for me to linger. I turned around and walked out.

The announcement caused quite a stir, especially with the added zinger of more disparaging comments about J's chances.

K went on to win the preliminary, and the big one, handily beating R, something that J couldn't have achieved. Everyone knew that, but weren't going to admit it.

The whole affair cost a lot of pretzels. After the preliminary, though, getting more was not an issue. Keeping everything under wraps was a different story. People started getting suspicious. Too many coincidences. Too many pretzels floating around a losing horse.

Nobody cared. It turned into a minor sideshow - at least for a while. K was driving too much excitement. We were riding high. The only people paying attention were punters for R or J. Sour grapes. They lost. We won. Let's go on.

Well, that was the way it was supposed to play out. K goes on to glory in the win, R and J fade into oblivion, and word of the misappropriated pretzels disappears from conversations. It didn't quite work out that way.

K was deposed and had the win taken away. J never recovered, but R was once again reigning supreme. D walked away and is working in R's stable - funny, that! Me? I took the fall. I'm slopping out real stables, cleaning up real horseshit. The only pretzels I see these days are real and arrive when my wife comes to visit. C'est la politique.