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The OTB Parlors, Limping Along

By ARIEL KAMINER

The Off-Track Betting Corporation has just survived the latest of its many brushes with death, but on Monday at the Yankee Clipper, its South Street Seaport outpost, rumors of the institution's demise seemed, well, just about accurate.

The Yankee Clipper had been conceived as an upscale alternative to OTB's usual street-front betting parlors, with a restaurant and bar and \$5 admission. But at some point during its parent organization's long slide into the red, those amenities fell away, leaving only the cover charge, in return for which OTB takes a smaller cut of the winnings.

Now horse-racing fans who choose to visit the Clipper (and there are not many) place their bets in the ghostly shell of a restaurant or from the empty bar, which, with its nautical motif and its lack of windows, might as well be on a lower deck of a sunken cruise ship.

Two days after OTB's board of directors voted, despite losses of tens of millions of dollars, to keep at least some of the 66 state-run betting parlors alive for another year, I sat there alone, puzzling over the daily program.

Three young guys in the corner booth bemoaned a race that had cost them \$208, which they calculated to the last expletive. Yen, an older regular who preferred, like every gambler I met, not to give his full name, scanned the television screens for clues about the horses. And Neil Dachille, an OTB employee of 11 years who had expected to spend the afternoon at the unemployment office, contemplated the future of his job.

On the face of it, horse racing is the most basic of sports. The horses run very fast; the one that runs fastest wins. But the statistical apparatus that surrounds it is almost impenetrable. On the screens, facts and figures often relegate those beautiful animals to a corner. OTB's daily racing program reads like a cuneiform phone book. Unsure how even to begin, I put \$2 on each of the seven horses in a random race. Sure enough, one of them won; I made \$6.41 — or, lost \$7.59.

The Winner's Circle, the restaurant on the second floor of the OTB on Seventh Avenue between 37th and 38th Streets, does serve food. White tablecloths and name-brand booze, it's all very civilized. But downstairs, in the street-level betting parlor, it's another world. At 10:30 one night last week, about 50 men were either shouting at the screens or pacing and muttering or dozing off on the metal benches or heading off to the far corner, where things were getting good and rowdy. Periodically the crowd would converge around a television set for two minutes of intense focus, then disperse again until the next starting gun. Amid all this, one short redheaded fellow wove his way around, getting in people's faces and daring them to respond.

A large and filthy room with bulletproof teller booths, it could pass for a bus terminal in a particularly blighted locale, but the air of nervous torpor makes it a closer match to a psychiatric ward. It's no place to make small talk. Eventually the mere presence of a woman proved too destabilizing. The redheaded fellow started calling everyone's attention to the outsider in their midst, and it was not by way of welcome. I left.

The aesthetic is largely the same on Park Place, in a dingy OTB branch that still smells of the cigarettes smoked there sometime in the 1970s, but the mood is much friendlier. It's an old haunt for Jessica Chapel, 36, a racing expert and blogger who accompanied me there on Wednesday.

In the middle of a bright, sunny day, about 75 people were cursing their last bet, plotting their next, or shooting the breeze. "My wife left me today," one regular announced. "Took the two kids and left me." A friend replied, "That's the best thing she ever did for you."

Taking in the scene, Ms. Chapel said: "It's easy to say that technology is going to save racing and everyone needs to get online. But these guys are still pushing a lot of handle through" — betting a lot of money, that is, about \$1 billion a year. "If you shut this down, where do these guys go? But also, where does that money go?"

Across the screen flashed the news that someone who bet just right on the fourth race at Keeneland Racetrack

in Kentucky could have turned \$2 into a \$152,000 Superfecta payoff. A guy named Ray — black baseball cap, several missing teeth — could hardly believe it: “That’s retirement money!”

To me, that flash of good fortune, as bright as a comet and about as easy to catch, is anything but inspirational. If I were in the bad spot that many of the guys there seemed to be in — broke, in ill health, separated from family — I think a glimpse of that kind of long-shot payout would feel like fate mocking me.

But none of the guys at the Park Place OTB won the Superfecta, and they were all shouting with glee.

The crowd reassembled around the television to watch Race 6 in Tampa. Purely Precious had the lead, and everyone’s attention. From his perch in the back, Ray called out, “He’s dead as a doornail,” just to mess with them. Then, at the last moment, a 4-year-old gelding named Thief stole the race. Everybody stared in disbelief. Except Ray. “You see?” he said with a smile. “He’s dead as a doornail.”

I asked Ray what he would do if OTB closed. “Wait for Saturday, go to the track,” he said. With a shrug, he added, “The track was there before OTB, it’ll be there after.”

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