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by barry irwin

THE LITTLE BLACK BAG

While researching a book I wrote a dozen years ago about Swaps, I chanced upon a curious euphemism uttered by the late Southern California veterinarian Dr. Jock Jocoy.

Answering my questions about what type of medical treatment he used to treat Swaps, Doc Jocoy went into an elaborate explanation of the innovative modalities he employed to keep the multi-world-record-holding Champion at peak performance levels.

All of the stuff the vet employed was cutting edge at the time and is still used today. As he finally got ready to wrap up his soliloquy, Doc Jocoy slipped in this final comment: "Of course, I had my little black bag, too."

What he meant was that although he used standard veterinarian practices in his work, he intimated that he also was capable of providing a little extra help when required from the contents of his "little black bag."

Earlier in the conversation, I had introduced the specter of the notorious Louisville veterinarian Dr. Alex Harthill into the discussion. These two vets were rivals for the attention of some of the most famous trainers in America, including the nonpareil conditioner Charlie Whittingham.

Jocoy and Harthill were cordial, but they were not friends, and I got the impression neither had much respect for the other, as Jocoy thought Harthill was an unethical rascal and Harthill thought Jocoy was a poser.

There was one famous incident in which Dr. Harthill wanted to give a Lasix injection to a horse on the Churchill Downs backstretch during Kentucky Derby week. Knowing that security was keeping close tabs on his comings and goings from his office directly across the street from the main backstretch gate, Doc Harthill handed a filled syringe to Doc Jocoy.

"The gendarmes will follow me when I drive in the gate," Dr. Harthill told Dr. Jocoy. "I will turn left. You turn right."

Dr. Jocoy followed Dr. Harthill's instructions to the barn and stall of a Kentucky Derby entrant Doc Harthill wanted treated, Doc Jocoy duly injected the horse and went on his merry way.

Anybody familiar with the history of Dr. Harthill knows exactly what motivated him to take an edge. But exactly why Dr. Jocoy elected to be part of these shenanigans is quite another matter.

Only Doc Jocoy knew for sure and he is no longer with us. Neither is Doc Harthill for that matter. But I suspect that Doc Jocoy only played along to show Doc Harthill that he was just as bold, devious and clever as he was. Doc Jocoy, of course, was not, but as a matter of professional pride, he did not want Doc Harthill to think he had the edge over him.

As far as the contents of Doc Jocoy's "little black bag," I seriously doubt they were anything along the lines of the array of products Doc Harthill had at his disposal. Dr. Harthill had stolen a several-length lead in the race to discover drugs that would move up a racehorse, as he pored over journals for human medicine before other horse doctors came up with the idea. And, unlike the others, Doc Harthill had no hesitancy in using whatever was available that would not test.

I would bet money that Doc Jocoy did not even know what was in the syringe given to him by Doc Harthill. And as for his "little black bag," I think it was a metaphorical bag, not an actual bag of the type that physicians used to bring with them on house calls.

Furthermore, I offer this thought: the properties and use of these contents also was more mythical than real, because I think Doc Jocoy only brought up the "little black bag" to show that he had some secret sauce of his own and that Dr. Harthill was not the only magic man practicing the dark arts of racehorse manipulation in these United States.

But again, in reality, Doc Jocoy was not a juicer or an enabler. And I will go on record as saying that the vast majority of legitimate equine practitioners that work the backstretches of America's major racetracks today are exactly like Doc Jocoy and unlike Doc Harthill.

Yet, as it was back in the 1960s and 1970s, today's vets still feel the need to mention or hint at their own "little black bag." For reasons sufficient to these equine practitioners, they think it is necessary to project this image to trainers based on a real fear that unless they sell themselves in this manner they will lose clients.

Just as a small group of jockeys will bring a buzzer to the barn of a trainer in the morning to suggest or promise they will plug in their horse in the afternoon yet never do, so do veterinarians hint or suggest they can help a horse at the races.

It is all part of the pressure vets feel to promote themselves in this day and age.

Funnily enough, what happens even more frequently nowadays on the backstretches of major racing circuits is that trainers are actually looking for squeaky clean vets, as a means of deflecting attention from their own nefarious actions.

Today, when a trainer wants to cheat, they do not even want their vets to know what is going on. These trainers rely on other enablers to acquire and learn how to administer illegal performance enhancing drugs.

Bottom line: until racing administrators at the racetrack and governmental levels truly start cracking down on drug abuse, these silly little shell games and use of bravado will continue to be played on and off the backstretches of American racing.

And I think the legitimate equine practitioners will welcome the day when they can stop all of posturing and just get down to the business of caring for Thoroughbred racehorses. [CLICK HERE TO SHARE THIS STORY](#)

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