



# op/ed

by corey johnsen

## SOUNDS LIKE HEAVEN

Most of you have never heard of Mike Mayo. When I tell you that Mike did as much for the sport of Thoroughbred racing over the last 15 years as any industry leader, I hope you will read his story.

Mike recently passed away after an all-too-short battle with a rare form of cancer, and I attended his memorial service outside Dallas on Thursday. So, you might ask how could this native Texan who owned nursing homes have such a profound influence on our industry?

Mike was a horseplayer. He had many opinions and was strong in his convictions. Mike had a passion and understanding for all participants in our great sport. He loved horse racing and worked tirelessly to improve it.

I have always described the horse racing industry as a three-legged stool. One leg represents the horsemen. Another is for the tracks. And the third leg represents horseplayers. If any leg is weak, the stool isn't any good. Too many times in recent years, decisions have been made that benefit one organization at the expense of others, especially horseplayers.

Not afraid to question established practices, Mike became an effective leader for that essential leg of the stool which stood for the backbone of the industry... the horseplayer. There are a number of recent accomplishments.

One of the true success stories in Thoroughbred racing over the last 15 years has been the development of the National Handicapping Championship. The purse for the tour and final tournament has gone from \$192,000 the first year to being more than \$2,500,000 this year. Mike was a 10-time qualifier to the NHC, the chairman of the NHC Players Committee for the NTRA and was the chief proponent of the new format which has gone to three days, with a "final table" concept much like the successful poker tournaments.

The NHC has created much needed interest for the sport as exemplified by the Esquire Channel reality TV show "Horseplayers" and the 1,700 "rookie" participants on this year's tour.

Mike was also the commander-in-chief of a one man crusade to have a horseplayer as a voting member of the NTRA Board. His determination was just as evident as Shared Belief's victory in Saturday's GI Awesome Again S. He never took no for an answer (you should have heard all the excuses some industry leaders made for this oversight) and continued to work diligently for many years.

Finally, on Aug. 8, Judy Wagner (accomplished businesswoman and regulator and even better handicapper) was unanimously approved to be a NTRA Board member as a representative for horseplayers.

In an industry full of personal agendas, egos and opinions, how was Mike able to accomplish so much for the sport? He understood the only way to produce innovation was to bring people together and build consensus. Mike was extremely patient while listening to everyone's ideas, but when it was time to arrive at a decision, he had no tolerance for those with self-serving agendas. And, last but not least, he never got frustrated and never gave up. Because of that leadership, the horseplayer part of the horse racing equation is in a better place.

Mike, thank you for everything you did for the sport I love, and God rest your soul.

(Postscript...At Mike's funeral he had the last word and made a video from "heaven"--as only Mike could do. He wanted all his friends to know he is doing fine. His new golf partner is Moses and just the other day they went to the racetrack in the sky and hit a 10-1 shot. Sounds like Heaven to me.)

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**Mike Mayo**