

Recalling Clem Florio's matchless gift for life

“I got somethin’ for yuh.” Clem Florio’s words made the pulse go, like the fingers working nearby computer keyboards in *The Washington Post* newsroom. I firmed the phone receiver, marked the payoff. It was Preakness week, 1984. Clem had just filed his graded picks from Pimlico; maybe he had a good thing.

“A horse?” I asked.
“Nah,” he said. “A wedding gift.”

Anna curiously had married me 11 days earlier, Derby Day, the pared guest list excluding Clem and other friends. “Please don’t go buy a gift,” I told Clem. “I feel bad enough.”

“What buy,” he countered, the question mark gagged by New York dash. “I ain’t buyin’ nothin’. I just gotta find it.”

The Preakness went to Gate Dancer that year, then Tank’s Prospect, Snow Chief, Alysheba. By then, the spring of ’87, I’d forgotten about The Gift. Come fall, anyway, all bets were off.

For eight years I’d worked *The Post* sports department as a full time editorial footman, serving results to scoreboard pages, buffing others’ prose, tailoring headlines, refreshing Clem as handicapper for the Timonium meet, then six weeks. On off-days, I cobbled enough stories from enough

sports to coax the beat-writing burn to a wildfire.

Reward came unexpectedly that September with a call to the sports editor’s glass cage: I would become the everyday writer and handicapper for Maryland’s Thoroughbred tracks.

Replacing Clem.

It was tainted drink for the thirsty. Uttered terms swirled and vaporized. Could it wait? I was 29, Clem 58 and still in need of work. Could there be another way?

The result became official. Sure, Clem was a crackerjack handicapper, I was told, but the dawning Maryland Thoroughbred track ownership of Frank De Francis and Bob and Tom Manfuso drenched the local racing industry in a new and blinding light. *The Post*, I’d soon discover, wanted a beat-writer young, hungry and malleable enough to work six-day, 60-hour weeks, cover racing commission meetings on dark days, answer every phone call.

Still, it seemed a bad disqualification for Clem, a huge drop in class for *Post* readers. Clem had mucked stalls in 1955, briefly handling mighty Nashua for Sunny Jim Fitzsimmons; from a Belmont Park maiden race the summer of ’72, he’d proclaimed Secretariat the next Derby winner; for 30 years he’d chronicled and

handicapped races for newspapers from Miami to Baltimore and, in *The Post*’s very pages, foretold Deputed Testamony’s \$31 Preakness score in ’83. He was a proven, dynamic, illustrious horse-picker, a student of bloodlines, a titan of the turf; I had a flimsy notion a furlong meant an eighth-mile.

That knowledge Clem doubtlessly imparted. From 1980, he’d escorted me across the theoretical turf with avuncular care and a gardener’s patience, schooled me on the crafting and nuance of a graded race line, the importance of time, of changes in medication, equipment and stable, of workouts and training patterns, of breeding, track biases and layoffs.

Layoffs. For all Clem had done to bring me along, I was about to show my appreciation by taking his job.

When he didn’t enchant with vaudevillian flair, with lyrical tales of his impish youth in gritty Ozone Park, Queens, with moments from his bitter-sweet career as boxing middleweight, with vivid accounts of racetrack capers, Clem would wax liberal, railing against racism and union busting and any injustice. His reaction to *The Post*’s “new direction,” I feared, would be as inevitable as a walkover.

I fretfully called him the next day, spoke my true ambivalence, apologized for the moment, cringed at the pause. In one street-bunched word, Clem pruned the thorns: “Fuhgetaboutit.”

This was no blind-side, he said; he’d seen it coming, had time to work some angles for a horse racing show on Baltimore radio. He was feisty as always, his tone, remarkably, more lilt than dread.

“I’ve been hit with harder punches,” he said. He pledged to help me any way, finished with a playful jab. “I’m there for ya, Rock, you need a cut man.”

There it was. Sent overboard, Clem threw me a lifeline.

On May 23, 2008, a Friday morning, I thanked him one last time for his heart, his help, his wit, his ways. He was cancer’s host in a Florida hospice, mostly unconscious. His daughter Clemma put the phone to Clem’s ear, said his eyes opened. Two days later, he died at 78.

I thought about the impromptu song-and-dance routines Clem would work in the press box, in a restaurant, on the bocce courts of Baltimore’s Little Italy, and one of his favorites:

I don’t wanna get well

I don’t wanna get well

I’m in love wid a beau-tee-ful noice

He’d unleash that ditty on any sidewalk in any town, engaging a startled female passerby in a weightless fox-trot. Astonishment melted, the enraptured lady would dance as long as Clem led. She’d thank him, giggle maybe, and receive a gracious bow.

That was Clem, New York-born but Bawlmer-made. Charm City.

His theatrical form was sculpted early, buffed by time and offhand practice. Long before he hung out at Harry the Mole’s drugstore in hard-scrabble Ozone Park with side-kicks Big Louie, Freddie La-La, Diamond, Fat Mary and Vinny the Hook, Clem had gone to work. He was almost 3.

With another toddler actor, Vincent Gardenia, Clem starred on the Italian-American stage. He did comedy sketches, sang Neopolitan love songs in Neopolitan, learned to work a room. It was 1932.

The performance, in a sense, ran more than 70 years. On race days, Clem’s a-capella standards would lap the press-box air, tickle the most reluctant crowd. *Love is a many splen-dored thing!* soared the bold and even baritone, followed

by Clem's canned pronunciation: "What a voice!"

Between races, between restaurant courses, between bocce throws, he'd belt out Italian love songs—*Core 'ngrato*, *Torna a Surriento*, *Mala Femmina* and his signature *Non Ti Scordar Di Me*, as in Don't Forget Me.

Forget him? Clem cast too big a shadow too long. Stories abound of infighting and subterfuge and raging jealousy within race track press boxes everywhere. Not Maryland's. In my daily sampling, 1987 through 1997, the Laurel/Pimlico crowd's nest was one big playpen, full of laughs and characters and capacious goodwill. Clem saw to that, his generous spirit flavoring near-spooky racing insight, story, song and repartee.

At Pimlico one day he told me to take a boxing stance, so I squared and made two fists. Clem, jelly-legged with hysteria, considered the raised pinky on each fist and said, "Whadda those, fuddie eyes?"

Boxing, like acting, was a gift to his family, a way to pad the income of his barber father. An underage prizefighter at 14, Clem would take the ring under other names, some made known to him by the ring announcer's introduction. He won maybe 60 of 86 pro bouts, undercut by smoking, a poor diet and a fitful training regimen.

What roadwork he did took place at nearby Aqueduct race track, where teenage Clem would squeeze beneath a curl of chain-link fence and run laps. Years later, boxing gloves stowed, Clem moved on a neighbor's tip and took a job walking hots there.

"It made me feel like I was brave," he said.

With Big Louie, Clem began working for Fitzsimmons, trainer of Triple Crown winners Gallant Fox (1930) and Omaha (1935). This was 1954; age and time had put a crook in the trainer's back. One by one



the new 2-year-olds descended a trailer ramp to the barn without commotion, until a muscled bay swaggered down.

"Look at the old man," Big Louie nudged Clem, flicked a nod toward Sunny Jim. "He's straightenin' up." They asked the colt's name. Nashua.

Early workouts underwhelming, jockey Jess Higley showed up one morning with a prop unknown to Nashua: a whip. The young colt sizzled, and on May 5, 1954, Clem and Big Louie nailed a \$19 win mutuel at Belmont Park. Nashua, in hand, debuted by dusting 20 others.

As Nashua ascended through 1955, winning the Flamingo,

Florida Derby, Wood Memorial, Preakness, Belmont, Dwyer, Arlington Classic, Jockey Club Gold Cup, a match race with rival Swaps and, eventually, a horse of the year title, Clem too upped his worth. He went to Florida to handicap for the *Miami News*, then covered boxing and horse racing for the *Miami Beach Sun*. When John Steadman sought to fill such a void at the *Baltimore News-American* in 1965, the wise guys touted Clem. In 1978, Clem saddled up with *The Washington Post*; we met a year later.

More than anyone I've known, Clem had an air of invincibility—with his joie de vivre, his moxie, his physical

toughness, his blatant optimism, his spunk, his loose-reined zest for racing.

"I hope I never die," he'd say, and you thought, you know, this guy just might fight the grim reaper to a draw.

His uncanny pari-mutuel luck didn't hurt. A \$2 bettor in later years, Clem would shout last-second numbers to press box teller Cecil Coffman. "Ceece!" he'd bellow, "gimme a 1-4-8 triple!" Cecil would punch it, the gates would open, Clem would recognize his spoken error, then watch the mis-called sequence come to be.

"Oh, you baby doll," he'd exclaim, or, hands to hips, the diamonds playing in his horse-

shoe pinkie ring, “I am now a man of means.”

With people and concepts, Clem made connections. The years he trudged through the Aqueduct loam made him understand how toil and fatigue changed his gait, a principle he applied to racing horses. Clem relished the post parade, considered it one big tell, drew grand conclusions from its passage.

“They’ll letcha know,” he’d say of parading horses, their mind and body.

He studied race horse movement, the way a jogging Thoroughbred plants his feet, extends to a gallop, nuzzles the pony, moves his ears. And so the bugle call was Clem’s cue too: We’d flock like disciples awaiting The Word. “The five’s got a knee.” “The favorite’s sore in behind.” “The two’s screamin’ to run.” “Wait—the one just charged the gate! Cece . . . !” With that, a body-bumping sprint to the betting window.

It seemed a custom fit in 1993 when the Maryland Jockey Club made Clem oddsmaker for Pimlico and Laurel, a cherished job he held for eight years.

In the lightness of the Maryland press box, the races done, the story filed, the program odds determined, Clem would chime a comic tone. He and I would play knock rummy, a dollar a game, Clem predicting, “Somebody’s gonna catch a beatin’. A shellackin’.” He almost always delivered. If a second game were on, Clem would halt the shuffle, play a mock violin. “Wait a minute,” he’d say. “I gotta resin up the bow.”

“Right,” I’d tell him. “Go play your fiddle.”

“What fiddle,” he’d say. “It’s a Stradivarius.”

I fared as poorly pitching coins against him at Laurel. Visiting kids mysteriously did much better.

Clem’s robust generosity typically did not entail eating. Anna had sent to him at



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Pimlico a container of pasta and beans, and a few of us watched him proceed with all the restraint of a runaway truck. “Champeen-ship,” he apparently said, mouth full. Someone pulled the line from the movie *Animal House*: Just keep your hands and feet away from him.

Food aside, he shared most everything else—ideas, books, advice, gizmos, money—will-

ingly. After a race track score, he often wrapped the take in foil and mailed it off to family and friends.

What he did for friends. One night in 1951, at a bar called Louie’s on 101st Avenue in Ozone Park, Freddie Ardolino had a few swigs behind him and a few more ahead. A couple of neighborhood hotshots, Clyde and Red, were leaving Louie’s for an Irish bar in Rockaway

Beach. Clyde had a snazzy drop-top Cadillac, Freddie the itch to ride along.

Clem rarely entered Louie’s, but suddenly there he was, 22 and dapper as always. He took Freddie La-La aside, warned him about Clyde’s drunken recklessness, talked him into staying back. The next day’s newspaper had a front-page photo of a car turned mangled wreck, two fully draped bodies in the foreground.

These were the gifts Clem gave.

Close to 20 years ago, Anna and I invited the Maryland press box corps to dinner: publicists Ann Taylor and Rich Paul, trackmen Bill Brasaemle and Keith Feustle, photo-finish man Bob (Hawk) Noelte, teletimer Jack Harmon, Baltimore *Sun* correspondent Marty McGee, *Daily Racing Form* columnist Tom Atwell and, of course, Clem. We crammed into the dining room as the king and his court: Clem devoured rigatoni and gravy—no meatball was safe—and lavished us with the vivid facets of his kaleidoscope life.

Behind him, on the living room wall, a lamplight shone on a framed lithograph signed by noted artist Harvey Konigsberg. On a stormy day at Pimlico in 1988, six months after I’d unseated him at *The Post*, Clem entered the press box wet and windblown. From a black trench coat he produced without fanfare a naked off-white roll, three feet long, frayed and gray at the edges, bound by two twisted, cock-eyed rubber bands.

“This is fuh you,” he said, extending it like a baton. “Yuh wedding gift.”

I hesitated.

“Take it,” he said with mock hubris, “or I’ll start trowin’ punches.”

I unfurled a dazzling watercolor of a mystical racing scene, the sketchy riders down and thrusting, the wire deemed close, the horses at once real and mythic, full of life, giving everything. ✨