

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

LENS PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO
AND VISUAL JOURNALISM



Many Days at the Races

By: Joe Sexton

May 4, 2016

The concrete grandstand at Belmont Park was moving under my feet. It was hard to hear the track announcer. But still possible.

“He’s moving like a tremendous machine,” Chic Anderson roared.

It was June 9, 1973. The race was the Belmont Stakes. The “tremendous machine” was Secretariat. The margin of victory in the final leg of the Triple Crown was an unheard-of 31 lengths.

“A miracle horse,” Anderson declared after Secretariat hit the wire.

Thus began my love affair with horse racing — a lasting, intoxicating relationship involving much wonder and way too much wagering. It could be thrilling to watch. And it could be dizzying to then cash a ticket.

Over the years — I was 14 that day at the Belmont, my dad at my side, a \$2 win ticket in my hand — the relationship, like all love affairs, had its ups and downs. The wagers could occasionally feel more important than the wonder. My devotion could feel cold, remote, cynical. The horses could come to be just numbers — “Get up, 6! Get up, 6!” When the 7 horse at Penn National broke down at the wire one night, most people at the Winner’s Circle bar gasped. The horse having tumbled gruesomely across the finish line, I instead asked if my \$20 win ticket was still good. The relationship, in truth, could be worse than sterile. It could be downright unhealthy. When you are delaying going to visit your premature twins in the neonatal intensive care unit until the eighth race at Santa Anita has gone off, you have to take some serious personal stock.

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY



For all that, I never lost complete touch with the magic and majesty of the animals. I've taken all four of my daughters to the track, to hear the sounds of the homestretch, to see the steam rise off a sweaty winner's back, to smell the perfume of the paddock. And then, of course, there was Secretariat's final physical wonder, to savor and share and pass on. Here's Sports Illustrated's William Nack upon Secretariat's death:

Just before noon the horse was led haltingly into a van next to the stallion barn, and there a concentrated barbiturate was injected into his jugular. Forty-five seconds later there was a crash as the stallion collapsed. His body was trucked immediately to Lexington, Kentucky, where Dr. Thomas Swerczek, a professor of veterinary science at the University of Kentucky, performed the necropsy. All of the horse's vital organs were normal in size except for the heart.

"We were all shocked," Swerczek said. "I've seen and done thousands of autopsies on horses, and nothing I'd ever seen compared to it. The heart of the average horse weighs about nine pounds. This was almost twice the average size, and a third larger than any equine heart I'd ever seen. And it wasn't pathologically enlarged. All the chambers and the valves were normal. It was just larger. I think it told us why he was able to do what he did."



STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

How could one not be enchanted and enthralled by such a moment, such an appreciation? And thus how could one not be full of similar wonder upon seeing “American Thoroughbred” (Twin Palms, 2016), Neil Latham’s gorgeous monograph? Mr. Latham, his admiration seemingly untainted by lost fortunes or misplaced priorities, does breathtaking justice to the physical specimens that race at our tracks and grace our imaginations.

Mr. Latham had access to pricey racehorses at all hours and at a variety of venues. He slept in the groom dorms at Saratoga Race Course and camped in a tent in Kentucky. Along the way, he photographed A.P. Indy, Curlin, Tapit, Rachel Alexandra and Ghostzapper, famous racehorses all. The rare proximity allowed Latham to capture the behavioral and attitudinal flourishes of his subjects, including their mix of pride and arrogance. Mr. Latham, his work makes clear, experimented with photographic equipment, light, exposure and large-scale sets to gain his lasting and often radiant images. He shot only on film, and often with large-format cameras.



His aim, in the end, was to capture “pure essence.”

Mission accomplished, to my eyes. Examining Mr. Latham’s photographs most reminded me of ESPN the Magazine’s annual Body Issue. Watching athletes in real time, at full extension, sometimes blinds us to the simple magnificence of their core blessings: their cut quads, their etched triceps, their supple shoulder blades. At rest, they are just as jaw-droppingly impressive.

Mr. Latham says, “As an artist, I’m intrigued by the juxtaposition of strength and power with beauty and fragility.”

“American Thoroughbred” made me a 14-year-old again, the ground under my feet moving, the “miracle” of a racehorse unspoiled by gambling. The \$2 win ticket in my hand that day in 1973? Never cashed. It would have paid next to nothing. And instead, if just for a time, it felt like the world.

Photographs from “American Thoroughbred” will be on display at Steven Kasher Gallery from June 9 through July 30.