



Home The PAK Story Become a Member Let's Play News Donate Contact Members Only Followers



## From the Picklehood

April 2023

By Jack Hodges



The First Turn. I was on the track underneath the outside rail which is exactly like the inner rail just behind the horses.



[The PAK Story](#)
[Become a Member](#)
[Let's Play](#)
[News](#)
[Donate](#)
[Contact](#)
[Members Only](#)
[Followers](#)



people.

Over the past few months I have put some emphasis on each of us learning more about fellow players and their lives leading up to and outside of the game we love. I suggested going to lunch as a small group and casually finding out more about our pickleball friends. It might take more than one lunch.

As we move into the second year of this column, I hope I will be able to share a story or two about friends from our Picklehood. Our website does a great job with a monthly player profile. Excellent and mostly pickleball inclusive. My plan is to occasionally share interesting 'vignettes' on some of our players referenced on its own and separated from the rest of a person's profile.

So here goes.....

Be patient, this is just a front load. I'm a hobby photographer. Have been for most of my adult life. Started to get more serious as I got into teaching and coaching and found I loved sports photography. Would hone my camera skills capturing my teams in action. I and the players loved the 'hobby.'

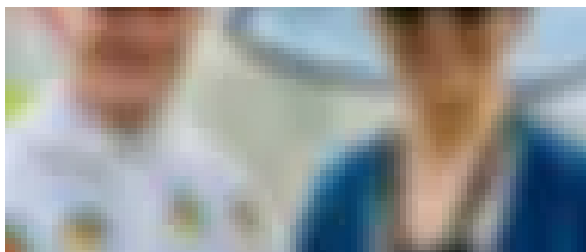
In May of 2011, I retired after teaching and coaching for 42 years. Three weeks later, my wife Stephanie, our immediate family, and our baseball family held a retirement gathering. It was awesome. The get together was held on our Saddleback College baseball field and close to 200 former players and members of their families attended.

One of my former players is the Senior Director of Media Services at Churchill Downs in Louisville, KY. He has held that position for the past 17 years. At the retirement gathering, he shared memories of his time playing for us. Ten minutes of 'roasting' the old coach. At the end of his sharing, he announced that Stephanie and I would be receiving an all expenses paid trip to the Kentucky Derby, courtesy of himself and many teammates. We would be the guests of his media services group and I, because of my photography interests, would be a guest member of the Sports Illustrated/Nikon photo team. I would be mentored by Pulitzer Prize winning photographer Bill Frakes.

We flew out from our home in California on April 27, 2012, looking forward to eight days in Louisville thoroughly enjoying the city, the people and Churchill Downs. Our credentials allowed us access to everything at the racetrack. The backlots, the paddock, the jockeys, the horses, the spectators, the restaurants, the Clubs, the Press Box and food services. A typical day for me would start with meeting Bill Frakes at 6:00 a.m. in the backlots of Churchill Downs. The heart of the racetrack. I would accompany him for the next 3-4 hours, talking about subject matter, composition, camera settings, best lenses and, of course, the horses. Bill had his own agenda, but was happy to share that agenda



The PAK Story Become a Member Let's Play News Donate Contact Members Only Followers



Stephanie and Hall of Fame Jockey Calvin Borel. Borel is only one of a handful of jockeys to claim over 5,000 victories in his career.

I would then meet him again at 5:00 in the afternoon to discuss my photos. Each day was awesome. I looked forward to his critiques. Stephanie was right there with me on the walkabouts, sharing her opinions and observations as well. Made each day even better. Breakfast, lunch and dinner were provided, as the press box, located six floors above the finish line, had a wonderful all day buffet. When not with me, Stephanie would spend a good amount of time in that press box. The track ran anywhere from 8-12 races per day, with the last one finishing somewhere around 8:00 in the evening. We would stay until 9 or 10 p.m. visiting with new friends, photographers and, of course, our host and his family.



Yours truly. Guest photographer with the Nikon/Sports Illustrated photo team.

I would then meet him again at 5:00 in the afternoon to discuss my photos. Each day was awesome. I looked forward to his critiques. Stephanie was right there with me on the walkabouts, sharing her opinions and observations as well. Made each day even better. Breakfast, lunch and dinner were provided, as the press box, located six floors above the finish line, had a wonderful all day buffet. When not with me, Stephanie would spend a good amount of time in that press box. The track ran anywhere from 8-12 races per day, with the last one finishing somewhere around 8:00 in the evening. We would stay until 9 or 10 p.m. visiting with new friends, photographers and, of course, our host and his family.

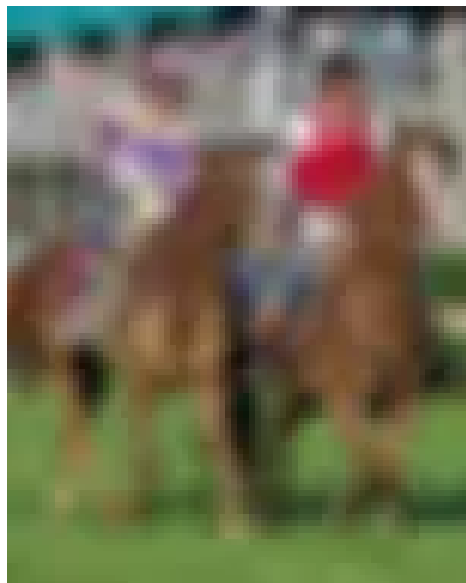


[The PAK Story](#)
[Become a Member](#)
[Let's Play](#)
[News](#)
[Donate](#)
[Contact](#)
[Members Only](#)
[Followers](#)



outside gate (number 19). In the photo, he is in sixth place (purple colors) at the first turn.

After the morning photo session, Mr. Bill Frakes told me to meet him at 5:30 p.m. at the tunnel entrance nearest the finish line. The Derby race would start at 6:37. I did so and he asked me this question. "Do you want the starting gate area, the finish line area or The Shot?" Seeing as though this might be the only time we would attend the Derby, I said 'the shot.' He smiled and said "Follow me." Here we were, 40 minutes before the start of the "most exciting two minutes in sports," walking down the middle of the racetrack in front of 170,000 people all singing "My Old Kentucky Home." It was my most memorable chicken skin moment. As we got to the first turn, Bill told me, "I figured this is what you wanted. Now, turn around." I did so and was speechless as I looked at the thousands of people in the stands, the iconic racetrack steeples, and a beautiful sunset in the making. "Now look back at the rail." I saw my name taped to the rail. "Position yourself under the rail and amongst these 50 or so automated cameras. You will be the only live person taking a photo from this location on the first turn. This is your shot. The Shot!!" Bill also mentioned that he would send around a senior member of the Nikon photo team just prior to the start of the race to check my camera settings. "Let's get this memorable moment right." At approximately 6:37, I was on the track, under the far rail, camera handheld and set to burst mode. Camera settings perfect. The roar of the crowd told me the race had started. Twenty bursts later I had 'my shot' and a story worth telling.



After the race. 2012 Kentucky Derby Winner "I'll Have Another." Backlot attendants say he was the happiest and easiest to manage of the 19 entrants.



---

[The PAK Story](#) [Become a Member](#) [Let's Play](#) [News](#) [Donate](#) [Contact](#) [Members Only](#) [Followers](#)



the country. We marveled at each farm's horse accommodations. Bigger and more extravagant than our very nice hotel.

....a parking pass that took us right up to the main gate VIP parking lot. I mention this because parking can be very expensive and hard to come by. Curbs were specifically marked with NO RACETRACK PARKING signs. You could park in people's yards and take the bus or shuttles. Five miles from the track it would cost you \$10. Half that distance, \$40. Within a mile, \$75-\$100 per car.

....the Susan G. Komen For The Cure Race. Always the day before the Derby. Last race that Friday. 160,000 people dressed in pink, honoring breast cancer survivors and those who have passed. One of my photography assignments. Very moving.

....I took close to 3,000 photos during those eight days. Maybe 5% were keepers. I was learning and had a great mentor.

....and finally, a brief story about Louisville pickleball. I took up the game in December of 2011. Five months later we were on our way to Louisville, Kentucky and Churchill Downs. I was hooked on pickleball, and whenever someone at the racetrack asked me what line of work I was in, I answered, "retired and playing a lot of pickleball." None of them had heard of the game. Their question was always followed by my 10 minute pickleball explanation. After our return home and for the next couple years, I would occasionally hear from friends in Louisville and from the track who listened to that 10 minute explanation and had actually started playing. They had found pickleball play in Louisville and were having fun. By early 2015, pickleball was rapidly growing all across the country.

So there you have it. A bucket list experience directly related to our love of photography and, for that week, in an indirect way, pickleball. We have more going for us than just perfecting the dink and drop shot. Our picklehood is growing and we each have a life away from pickleball and an interesting story or two to tell. Stay tuned.

Happy April, 2023.

Jack Hodges District Ambassador - State of Hawaii

Kaua'i Resident

---

## Previous Month's Articles:

[Jan '23](#) [Feb '23](#) [Mar '23](#)