



McChump Change

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by Paul Demko

A day at the track with the P.J. O'Rourke of horseracing

At 6:30 p.m. on a Saturday night in August, McChump sets forth from Rockford, Illinois, in the McChumpmobile, a '96 Saturn the driver charitably describes as "cheesy." He is fresh from a company golf tournament, during which his team distinguished itself by drinking the second-largest quantity of alcohol. The official traveling tape of The McChump Racing Tour, the high-voltage novelty rock of the New Duncan Imperials, has been misplaced. So Wisconsin's radio wasteland must suffice. The road is draped in fog and rain as McChump heads northwest on Interstate 90. Every now and then he eases off the gas pedal for fear that a deer will bolt out of the woods. Somewhere near Eau Claire he finally locks onto a decent blues station.



Terry Bjork, better known as McChump, scrutinizes the *Daily Racing Form*

Internet Links:

» www.mcchump.com

The McChump Racing Tour
Horse Racing
Travelogues

This is the eighth leg of McChumpalooza, the whirlwind, two-month tour of 18 different horse tracks that has already taken McChump to such venues as Evergreen Park in Alberta, Canada, and Rockingham Park in Salem, New Hampshire. His destination this weekend is Canterbury Park in Shakopee. The occasion is the

Claiming Crown, the biggest racing day of the year in Minnesota.

McChump is Terry Bjork. Monday through Friday he writes computer programs for a pharmaceutical company in Chicago. On weekends the 45-year-old becomes the P.J. O'Rourke of horseracing travelogues. The Web site for The McChump Racing Tour (www.mcchump.com) bills itself as "a tireless tour of the racetracks of our land (and its territorial possessions, and some furrin' countries) in pursuit of cheap thrills, cheap beer, and some of the easssy money."

It is an amicable antidote to the *Daily Racing Form*, the solemn Bible of the horseracing set. McChump refuses to take any aspect of the sport seriously--with the exception of alcohol consumption. Instead, his travel essays are filled with quirky meditations on air travel, racetrack aesthetics, and bar cuisine. "This bag of animal crackers that passes for breakfast on Southwest seems a bit heavy on the elephants and rhinos," he recently wrote on an airplane somewhere over Toledo. "Not a single tiger. That really chaps me."

The site grew out of Bjork's posts to the Derby List, an online discussion group dedicated to thoroughbred racing. In September 1994 he posted a particularly long, outrageous account of a 1994 trip to Prescott Downs in Arizona. (Horses sliding across mud-ravaged tracks; a woman screaming at the simulcast screen, "C'mon, ya piece of shit! Ride that piece of garbage!") McChump's fellow Derby List-ers urged him to post this and other travelogues for posterity. "It wasn't anything fancy at the time," McChump says of the original site. "But as time went on I got all these other stupid ideas."

In his more reflective moments, McChump views the site as a way to document some of the smaller racetracks around the country that are in constant economic peril, such as the Woodlands in Kansas and Colonial Downs in Virginia. "I see it as a legacy sort of thing, because I don't think a lot of these little tracks are gonna be around for a lot of years," he says. "The way that racing's going,

it's more and more that the money is going to simulcasting, to the big tracks. A lot of the tiny, tiny tracks that I visit are just barely holding on by their fingernails."

McChumpalooza is the poor man's answer to "Handicapalooza," the *Daily Racing Form's* 12-day, 12-city tour of larger racetracks and casinos. It is largely an excuse for McChump to travel around the nation and play the ponies. His fascination with the game has its roots in summer nights at the state fairgrounds in Great Falls, Montana, where he first encountered the novel possibility of making money by simply picking a winning horse, and the "vague sleazery" of the racetrack. As he notes on the Web site, it was "a far cry from the Boy Scouts."

But there is also a philanthropic element to McChumpalooza. At each stop along the tour he is placing a five-dollar bet on a horse and donating any winnings to the United Pegasus Fund, a charity that provides comfortable homes for retired thoroughbreds. McChump is also offering to put up five dollars for anyone who flags him down at the track and wants to help out Pegasus. (This is typically only two or three fellow horse players per track.) After the first seven legs of McChumpalooza, \$152.75 had been raised for charity.

The Claiming Crown is a suitably modest destination for McChumpalooza. The recently resuscitated Canterbury bills the event, now in its second year, as the "blue collar Breeders' Cup." Claiming horses are the free agents of the horseracing world. Before the race takes place, any of the thoroughbreds can be purchased by another owner. These horses are not on anyone's short list for racing immortality, and they typically run for relatively tiny stakes of \$10,000 or \$20,000. The Claiming Crown is the one day of the year when they get to feel like they're running for the roses. The top purse in the seven-race event is \$125,000.

Minutes before Sunday's post time, McChump can be found loitering by the Leinenkugel's beer stand, looking

like a barfly on holiday. He's dressed in faded jeans, dark shades, and a brand-new T-shirt from the Finger Lakes Race Track in upstate New York. His hair is graying blond, and his slightly protruding belly offers evidence of an affinity for beer. McChump's nose sports a bloody nick, thanks to an errant morning razor. A camera hangs from one shoulder, a *Daily Racing Form* is tucked under his arm.

It's a gorgeous summer day, hot enough to occasionally send a trickle of sweat down your nose, but breezy enough that equilibrium can be restored with a cold drink. The occasional waft of cigar smoke punctures the air. Losing tickets are yet to litter the grounds. The rafters are packed with people, from ink-stained track veterans nose-deep in the racing charts to neophyte gamblers. Almost 14,000 people will attend the Claiming Crown today, easily four times the average Canterbury crowd and a jump of more than 20 percent over last year's attendance. They will wager more than \$750,000 on the Claiming Crown races.

As McChump makes his way trackside, the day's first horses are about to break from the gate. There's hardly been time to consult the racing form, but this has not dissuaded him from laying down a bet. It is a sin according to the theology of McChump to do otherwise. "Some horse has to win" is his guiding credo. The easy favorite in the first race is Kark's Ark, but McChump couldn't bring himself to bet on the lousy 2-1 odds. Instead he's opted for horse number five, Arizona Sunrise, at 5-1 odds.

At the first turn Arizona Sunrise is fifth, and despite occasional grunts of "Get up there, five" from McChump, the horse never gets any closer. "Looks like I got me a solid seventh," McChump cracks as the horses pound their way across the finish line.

He settles in the bleachers and begins attacking the racing form, wading through the chaos of numbers and names and enigmatic abbreviations in hopes of gleaning a few chunks of wisdom to guide his betting. He

scratches off certain losers with an "X" and circles peculiar characteristics. Scanning the entrants for the third race, McChump raises his eyebrows at the name of Cole Norman, a trainer from Lone Star Park, in Grand Prairie, Texas. "Horses of his that you don't expect to win tend to win at long prices," he notes. "I don't know if he's sneaky or just good, but at least at Lone Star he's a trainer you don't ignore." Despite ample time to soak up the statistical stew of the racing form, McChump fares no better in the second race. His horse is nosed out at the finish line.

It is time for beer. He finds succor in a Leinenkugel's Red.

The Claiming Crown races don't bring any better luck. By the fifth race McChump has switched to Leinenkugel's Creamy Dark and consigned himself to loserdom. He caps his bets with self-deprecation: "Well, since I bet on it, it's gonna lose."


For the eighth race, McChump places his Pegasus bet. He takes the favorite, Take A Left, banking on the fact that the horse has been running at the much larger Hollywood Park in California, and that Mark Guidry, already a two-time winner for the day, is in the saddle. But within 15 seconds of the start, McChump has given up hope. "He lost it already," he bellows. "He's too far behind for this race." As the horse lopes across the finish line, a useless fifth, McChump loudly chastises the jockey: "Guidry, that was the crappiest race I've seen in days!"

It's now the grand finale of the Claiming Crown, the \$125,000 Jewel, and go-for-broke time for McChump. There are two more races after this one, but he faces a seven-hour ride back to Chicago and the prospect of Monday morning in the office. McChump lays his final wagers on a 25-1 prayer, Norty Bernie. "If he wins, I will be the king," McChump declares.

Norty Bernie doesn't even show. He finishes sixth in the seven-horse field. McChump, \$65 in the hole, has lost

every bet. The only consolation is that two of his track compatriots hit their United Pegasus Fund wagers, bringing in \$50 for a better cause.

"I had a great day, so it doesn't matter," McChump concludes convincingly. "Drank some beers. Watched the races. Hung out."

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