

**FROM THE STABELL VAULTS,  
PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED  
FEATURES & ARTICLES**



**CHICAGOLAND RACING,**

**AL CAPONE,**

**THE FIGHT FOR  
THE GAMBLING BUCK**

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**By GEIR STABELL**

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**When I first found myself in Chicago**, back in the autumn of 1987, it was by pure coincidence. The first of many on my racing travels. I visited Hawthorne Racetrack in Stickney / Cicero on the south side of Chicago. I soon got to know the owner, Mr. Thomas Carey. That he and his wife Sue invited me to stay with them rather than in the cheap hotel I could just

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about afford was probably no coincidence. The Careys are Irish Americans and, in running the oldest family owned racetrack in the States, genuine hospitality is a way of life.

I was there visiting, curiously observing US racing for the first time, and hoping to sell an article or two about my experiences when I returned back home. My first job as a racing journalist in the Windy City was another coincidence. One day Mr Carey came up to the press box to fetch me, "I think I have small job for you", he said. Back down in his office, Mr Carey introduced me to his racing secretary and handicapper, Mr. Frank Arsenault. Frank was as laid back and easy going as the Careys but he did give me a strange look as he glanced up from his handicapping sheets. I later heard that he had been a bit concerned, thinking I was after his job. Perhaps I should have been but I wasn't.

"We have the Hawthorne Derby here on Saturday", Carey said, "and a horse is coming over from Europe, I believe his name is Z-something, do you know this horse?"

I pretended to be effortlessly searching my brain, as one does in these situations, and said that "Yes of course, sure Mr Carey, I know the horse". He smiled and said, "you called me Tom over dinner at my house last night..."

Then he turned to the in-house form expert: "Frank, I think we should have Geir write a press release on this horse, and give an assessment, how do you assess a horse like that, by the way?" Frank didn't really answer that last question but he agreed that I could do the job. "The name of the horse is Zaizoom", he added and returned to looking busy.

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“What do you know about this Zaizoom”, Carey wanted to know.

“He has been imported from England and I believe he won the Italian Derby back in May”, I replied.

“Is that right?”, Tom chuckled, “we have an Italian raider on the grounds, well we are used to those here.”

Mr. Carey was of course referring to a more famous Italian, the mafia boss Al Capone, whose interest in gambling and horseracing made lasting marks on the sport in the Chicago area.

I wrote my press release, gave Zaizoom a rating comparing him to the local runners, concluded that he would probably win the race, which he did, and returned to Chicago as a freelance journalist for their autumn racing every season for the next ten years. This was pre internet days and I specialised in providing information on horses visiting from, and imported from Europe. I also learnt more about Al Capone's involvement in racing. And, no, before you ask, there is no “Al Capone Memorial Stakes” staged at Hawthorne.

When you hear that the two racecourses in the area, Sportsman's Park and Hawthorne Park are just a stone throw apart, do not believe for one moment it is an exaggeration. The two tracks were literally built so close you could hear the sounds of farriers working from both tracks. But which track barns did the sound come from, Hawthorne or Sportsman's? When horses stable at Sportsman's raced at Hawthorne, they were simply led across to the other venue, a walk that would take no more than two to three minutes.

## **IF YOU CAN'T JOIN THEM, BEAT THEM**

Sportsman's Park, operating horseracing from 1923 to 2003, was built so close to Hawthorne for a reason. The reason was a man called Al Capone. Capone first turned up on the scene when he was 21 years old and he controlled the Cicero and Stickney areas already at the young age of 25. His decision to run his illegal operations from Cicero and Stickney was quite simply since out there he could buy off most of the politicians and police forces. Something that was not so easy inside the Windy City itself. Despite the fact that Chicago's nickname as the windy city originates from the times when politics in Chicago were known to work somewhat differently to other big cities. It was well known that it was rather windy in the political circles. Today, most of us think of it because Chicagoland is such a flat landscape by the huge Michigan Lake and often very windy. Which is also true.

Working his way up to become the czar of organised crime in Cicero, Capone he soon set his eyes on Hawthorne racecourse. Several recollections of his life says that he did in fact control racing at Hawthorne, but official history on the Al Capone era has always been a bit flawed, since too many local historians were not interested in writing about Capone. When he was finally gone, they were more interested and closing that chapter.

In racing circles, the tales paint a picture which seems, if not totally accurate, somewhat plausible. Racing historians say that Al Capone tried to buy Hawthorne, or at least become a partner in the racecourse, but the owner Tom Carey Senior, originally a builder of Irish blood, was reluctant to sell to the mobster. Carey was determined to run the racecourse himself,

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though in fact he had become the owner of the course much against his own will in 1909. Carey had done extensive work for the founder of Hawthorne, but he was never paid. In the end he was handed the racecourse as payment. It was the track or nothing. The value of the settlement must have been debatable, as they did not have a licence to race. Carey managed to stage a race meeting without a licence, running a 16-day race meeting in 1916.

Legal racing did not reopen until six years later though, and that was also when Al Capone surfaced and wanted to take over. Being heavily involved in the illegal gambling in Chicago, he wanted to take charge of the legalised gambling as well. That made perfect sense. To Al Capone. For a change, he came to a closed door. Whereas his rise of power in the area had been going generally unopposed, he could not get his hands on the racecourse. Quite who controlled the actual races staged in Chicago in those days is another question, however. Many of the races were almost certainly controlled, or fixed, by Capone. There was always talk of “the fix”, and when Al Capone was involved the fix never went wrong.

Looking back on this era, it is not at all hard to understand why horseracing has been, and still is, struggling with a poor image in North America. To the man in the street, horseracing, gambling, criminals and dishonesty were pretty much synonymus words. We have all seen Robert Redford and Paul Newman in the brilliant film “The Sting” and to believe that the plot in this winner of seven *Oscar Awards*, including Best Film, was far from reality is naïve at best. It was set in 1936, when corruption and illegal gambling raced neck and neck in the Mid-West. There were con men everywhere, small and big, not least on the racetracks.

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Even the publishers of tipping sheets in Chicago, two-paged A4 publications with previews and selections that are still very popular, were often crooked. "They never work for me", Al Capone allegedly said when challenged on the subject. And they probably never did. Tipping sheets giving out false information was undoubtedly too small a con for Al Capone. That he had inspired these guys, however, is more than likely. One con they pulled off was to print thousands of sheets after the sixth or seventh races had been run. Naturally, on these sheets, they had "tipped" just about every winner and exacta in the first seven races. Since the racedays had 10 to 12 races, it gave them time for a quick print-run and spreading of the false sheets. How? They simply got "runners" to jump on and off the trains and buses that would be taking horseplayers back home from the track - and leave the sheets on the seats they would be occupying. For the tipsters, this was an easier way to make money than backing their selections. Over the next few days, everybody wanted to buy THAT fantastic tipping sheet. Not Al Capone, however. He did not bother with reading any tipping sheet or studying the form. He was not interested in what the horseracing experts thought would win. He was interested in what horses he could make sure would win, or, in most cases, what horses he could make sure would not win. He liked to bet. Did he need the money? Probably not. Was he hooked on gambling? Probably not. His way of betting wasn't really gambling was it. So why go through all this trouble, to fix horseraces. Well, it did make money of course, and just as importantly, he enjoyed the feeling of being in control. That was all that mattered. And he didn't mind letting people understand that he was in control of the horseraces. So the answer to the question whether it was Capone or Carey who controlled racing at Hawthorne was purely a matter of definition - and most certainly dependent on who you asked.

## **\$300 BRIBE COST FIVE BUCKS**

In his book *Capone, the Man and the Era*, author Lawrence Bergreen quotes Joe Berardi, a photographer working for the "Evening American" at the time. Berardi was covering the Hawthorne races, and to his surprise he found that Al Capone was himself at the track that day, accompanied by his usual squad of five to six bodyguards.

"Hey, Berardi, how you doin' today?", Capone said when he saw the man with the camera, always keen to be friendly with members of the media of course. "I'm doing just fine", Berardi replied.

"Why don't you bet on the six-horse in the next race", Capone said.

Berardi looked at the tote board and could not believe Capone was serious, as horse number six was showing at 99-1.

"Before I knew it, one of Capone's men came over to me and slipped a piece of paper into my jacket pocket", Berardi recalled, "and when they walked away I looked at it. It was a \$5 win ticket on the six-horse. Well, horse number six broke out in front and stayed out in front, and I don't think anyone dared catch him. The goddamn horse won by a block....Capone didn't bribe me; he just put \$300 in my pocket."

In other words, the horse had been bet down from 99-1 to 60-1 just before the start. No prizes for guessing who placed that gamble on the six-horse, a no-hoper who was allowed by the other jockeys to lead all the way... Oh, and don't forget Capone had just also paid just \$5 for a \$300 bribe. He was having a good day at the races.

## **GOING HEAD TO HEAD, SITTING BACK TO BACK**

Al Capone and his friend and partner, the infamous attorney Edward J. O'Hare eventually gave up on acquiring Hawthorne racecourse, and we can safely assume that Thomas Carey Senior was himself a strong and powerful man. Carey's persistence paid off, as he eventually did get permission to conduct race meetings and a decade later Hawthorne had been turned into a highly profitable business, though Carey soon also found himself in direct competition with Capone and O'Hare.

They built their own racecourse north of Hawthorne, but it was a course for greyhound racing, called the Hawthorne Kennel Track. Soon after, greyhound racing was made illegal in Chicago. The authorities were not at all keen on gambling, and even less so when Al Capone got involved, and this was their way of giving the man broadside opposition on the gambling field.

One morning O'Hare was summoned to Al Capone's office.

“We shall move that Hawthorne Kennel track”, Capone said, “How about outside town, I mean somewhere way outside city borders?” He felt he had a simple solution to the new challenge, the new problem that had arisen from political corridors.

“No”, was O'Hare's blunt answer, “won't help us Al, a bill is about to be passed making greyhound racing illegal throughout the state of Illinois”.

It was never easy, but politicians in Illinois clearly did try their very best to stop Capone. And this time, they were one step ahead of him. Capone



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wasn't used to that. The man who had been expelled from school at the age of fourteen for having hit a female teacher, and never went back, was in no way comfortable with being restricted by others.

Capone was furious about not winning the battle over the gambling dollar, and what he still wanted the most was Hawthorne Park. After all it was right in the middle of Stickney / Cicero, that was his patch, his backyard. Horseracing was about to take off, the future for racetrack owners was rosy. And this track was right next to one of his brothels, damn it. He was not happy about it.

“We buy the land next door”, he said to O'Hare one day, “we buy that worthless piece of land and build our own track. That's gonna show them!”

So they did. The two men purchased 79 acres of land right behind the Hawthorne grandstand and built Sportsman's Park, another thoroughbred racecourse. Talking about going into competition head-to-head. Then again, as the Americans would call it, the two racecourses were located back-to-back. Sportsman's Park also conducted harness racing, as does Hawthorne through the winter months today. The course was home to the famous Illinois Derby, inaugurated in 1923, a race that is today staged at Hawthorne and one of the most important prep races to the Kentucky Derby.

Sportsman's Park was even arena for speedway racing, and only one of two tracks in the USA to race both horses and speedway cars, alongside Dover International Speedway. The venue eventually closed in 2003, and Hawthorne went back to being the only racing venue in the area. Like it

had been before Al Capone came along. It has been a long haul. It took 80 years for things to return to normal for Hawthorne – and during these years the financial climate in thoroughbred racing had gone through several phases. The bottom line of these phases has, unfortunately, been a relatively consistent and marked decline.

The Carey family's course once staged the American Derby, the second most valuable race in the States, but it is now one of the lesser tracks on the North American circuit, with rather ordinary day to day racing and moderate purses. It was quite different in the good old days.

## **WAR-TIME, HORSERACING BOOM-TIME**

Arlington Park, the premier racecourse in Illinois and best known for its Arlington Million day, and Hawthorne managed to stay open during the years of World War II. Racing and betting at the family owned venue thrived during these turbulent years. Tom Carey and his team were also forward thinking operators, often ahead of their time. They realised that consistent success was reliant on local support and introduced valuable races for Illinois bred and owned horses. These days, virtually every course in North America put on valuable stakes races restricted to state-bred horses.

Already in the 1940's, Hawthorne staged meetings with a \$1,000 minimum purses per race. Today, that would equate to about \$12,500. Hawthorne also recorded their first \$1 million raceday betting turnover as long ago as in 1943, and the following year the average daily turnover was a

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staggering \$943,000. The average daily crowd was well over 14,000. To put these figures into perspective; the first \$1 million plus handle at Hawthorne was not achieved until in 1966 and it took all the way to 1992 before Hawthorne's average daily turnover exceeded \$2 million.

On Illinois Derby day in 2004, a record \$5,5 million was wagered at Hawthorne. That is a healthy figure, but in real money value it is only 50% of the daily average in 1943.

In today's world, the 1943 average of \$943,000 would be almost \$12 million. Was the horseracing business lucrative in Chicago in 1940's? I just think we can all agree it was.

Seeing these figures, one can understand why Al Capone wanted so desperately to get a slice of the action. Wanted it so much that he built a track next door to another.

Horseracing men and women in Chicago can today be proud of the fact that it is Hawthorne Park, not Sportsman's Park, that is still in operation.

**GEIR W. STABELL**





## **AL CAPONE, A TRUE AMERICAN**

Contrary to popular belief, Al Capone (or Alphonse as was his real name) was not an Italian by birth. His father Gabriele Capone, a barber, and mother Teresina immigrated to North America in 1894 - from the small village Castellmarre di Stabia, some 16 miles south of Naples. Along with 43,000 other Italian immigrants that year, the Capones arrived with their two sons Vincenzo (who was renamed James) and Raffaele (he became Ralph). Teresina was pregnant at the time and soon after their arrival in the Land of Opportunity she and gave birth to Salvatore (Frank).

Most Italian immigrants ended up as basic labour workers, due to their lack of more sophisticated skills. This was not the case for Al Capone's father, as he was able to both read and write his native language. Settling in Brooklyn, New York, Gabriele found a job at a local grocery store and worked there until he was able to open his own barbershop. Gabriele and Teresina's fourth son, Alphonse Capone was born on January 17, 1899. The family expanded further with later arrivals Amadeo (John), Ermino (Mimi).

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