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Inside a Very Surreal, Very Symbolic Belmont Stakes, as a Sports Crown Jewel Returns



Jockey Manuel Franco rides atop Tiz the Law #8 crossing the finish line to win during the 152nd running of the Belmont Stakes at Belmont Park on June 20, 2020 in Elmont, New York. Al Bello—Getty Images

BY SEAN GREGORY/ELMONT

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he crowd is what I'll always cherish at the Belmont Stakes. Especially in a year

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Yorkers in various states of insubordination, crammed into the grandstand,

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at the betting windows, spilling into the saddling paddock. After

g two Triple Crown letdowns— **Big Brown**, who won the Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes in 2008 but failed to finish the mile-and-a-half Belmont, and **California Chrome**, who in 2014 finished the Belmont tied for fourth—I had the good fortune to be standing near the backstretch rail in 2015, when **American Pharoah** broke the 37-year Triple Crown drought. I'll never forget that 90,000-strong cathartic roar, as American Pharoah galloped toward history. I felt the noise move through my system.

That euphoria could not seem more distant this year.

In a scene that felt surreal as it was sad, Tiz the Law won the 152nd running of the Belmont Stakes on Saturday, which this year counts as the first leg of the Triple Crown, as the Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes, which usually run in May, were postponed until September and October, respectively. The favorite, Tiz the Law won in near silence, as fans were not permitted to attend the race. Tiz the Law will be remembered as the horse who won the first American crown jewel sporting event to return since **COVID-19 shut down sports**. But sitting in the empty prime box seats near the finish, surrounded by a few reporters, New York Racing Association officials wearing “NYRA Bets” face masks and a sea of empty chairs, I couldn't help but feel I wasn't watching such a jewel.

As Tiz the Law—the first New York bred horse to win Belmont since Forester in 1882—crossed the finish, you could hear a smattering of applause and exhortations. “Yeaahhhhh,” screamed jockey Manuel Franco, a sound usually drowned out by the roar, eerily audible now. “Way to go Manny,” someone yelled to Franco from back in the stands as the jockey took his spot in the winner's circle, another sentence that he'd never hear on a normal loud Belmont Day. “Thanks Andy,” Franco yelled back.

As the TV crews awaited a return from commercial break, Franco and Tiz the

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Someone told the cameraman: “You know how it is? It’s like we’re filming a



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He was right: post-COVID sports are a video production. I just
ed to be standing on set.

Tagg, the trainer, didn’t mind the silence (especially after a night in which he said he heard fireworks at 2 a.m., part of a **larger documented nationwide trend** of random fireworks usage).

“Actually it’s very nice,” said Tagg, who’s 82, afterwards at a socially distant winner’s press conference, about the dearth of fans. “I can’t complain about that. I’m not trying to be a jerk about it.” Why did he appreciate the quiet? “Because when they’re all there, your horse gets really nervous,” says Tagg. “Most of them do. The ones that don’t might run a little better than they usually do that day. But it’s just nice to see no commotion for a change. You work, and work, and work on these horses, then you bring them you bring them over on Saturday afternoon and you feel like everything is falling apart because everyone is screaming and hollering and stuff like that.”

Tiz the Law was clearly nonplussed and Tagg might have another Triple Crown contender; he came heartbreakingly close to ending the Triple Crown drought in 2003 with Funny Cide, who finished third at Belmont. Tiz the Law more than lived up to the hype, sitting in third for most of the 1 and 1/8 mile race—Belmont is usually 1.5 miles—before kicking away down the stretch to win by 3 and three-quarter lengths.

“This guy makes it easy,” says Tagg. “He’s about, ‘all right, let’s go.’”

That America’s first major sporting event took place on the border of New York City, which as been decimated by COVID-19, with **over 17,000 deaths** due to the disease, is lost on no one. It’s a satisfying psychic win for the city and state. Belmont also signaled how major sporting events will change as they

gradually return from the coronavirus shutdown. The empty seats. A group of

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wave of athlete activism). Sports media coverage will also evolve. The rickety



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at Park press box, where reporters from around the country typically sit

er to shoulder on a Triple Crown Saturday, had about a dozen of us comfortably spaced more than six feet apart. I usually arrive five hours before post-time to grab a seat: today, with NYRA wanting to keep bodies at the track to a bare minimum, I had my own table. A parking attendant took my temperature before I was allowed in the facility.

Typically, I roam around the barn area for a few hours before the race, sneezing and wheezing along the way (I'm allergic to horses). I pay particular mind to the barn of the Triple Crown hopeful: there, you can try to get a sense of the horse's mindset a few hours before the race. (A fool's errand for an allergic lay person like myself, really.) Sometimes, a trainer or exercise rider will emerge to offer some quotes. Mostly, you're just standing around sweating in the June sun.

It's still so worth it.

Then as the horse emerges from the barn and trots to the saddling paddock, and then through the tunnel to the track, a scrum of reporters usually follows behind, sometimes popping up in the background of the TV shots. You have to slither through throngs of revelers to keep up.

Today, no deal. A press rep told me to stay away from the barn. Just watch the race from an observation area, or stay in the press box. We don't want reporters to pop on the TV show, and give the impression we're letting extraneous people hanging around in a pandemic.

I respect and understand the precaution. Such restrictions, however, might last longer than we may like. I can't imagine us returning to a day where reporters crowd, dozens deep, into, say, an NBA locker room to toss questions at LeBron James. Before the pandemic, it was hard to argue that such practices were in the best interest of public health: let's allow potentially sick and germ-y

reporters to crowd around one of the most valuable athletes in the world, to

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may not be able to bring athletes as close to the public as before. But, safety first. At the very least, temperature checks for media at the stadium, arena, and track seem wise to implement in perpetuity.

At least I felt some familiarity today. On the drive from my home in the Bronx, I got stuck in Saturday afternoon Long Island traffic. Was it nice to see people traveling to and fro after all those weeks of quarantine? Kinda. But I thought I would breeze to Belmont: I admit feeling a bit ticked, another cranky New Yorker stuck on the Grand Central Parkway.

Guess I'll take that dose of normalcy, though, any way I can get it.

WRITE TO SEAN GREGORY AT SEAN.GREGORY@TIME.COM.

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