

# Final Turn

HOPE REMAINS *By Tom LaMarra*

**S**afe Place was a big, lumbering gelding who, after seven starts, was still learning the ropes. He had broken his maiden in his second start, but then registered several frustrating near-misses.

Then, on a warm June afternoon at River Downs, the 3-year-old Ohio-bred took the early lead in a six-furlong allowance test, lost the advantage for two calls, and battled back to win by a head. It wasn't pretty. It took everything jockey Chris Herrell had—and Chris could be rather animated in the lane—to get the goof to the wire first.

Next came a second-place finish—the winner was too tough—and then Safe Place returned July 28 to win in state-bred allowance company, this time by 1½ lengths. Again, he needed more than a little urging. It appeared as though Chris had more than two arms as he got after the son of Devil's Bag in the final sixteenth of a mile.

After Safe Place's third win, Chris came back to the winner's circle with a big grin on his face. Members of the partnership couldn't help but get excited when he described the race, and then told trainer Billy Denzik he thought Safe Place might be worth a shot in an Ohio-bred stakes.

Talk about a group of excited racehorse owners. One goal for Safe Place was the 1¼-mile Best of Ohio Endurance in early October. It would have been our version of the Kentucky Derby (gr. I), and a \$75,000 pot isn't too shabby for an Ohio-bred. The gelding had broken his maiden at a mile and was bred to go longer.

Things didn't go as planned. After the July 28 race, Chris also told the trainer something didn't seem quite right as Safe Place crossed the wire, so he suggested X-rays just in case. Two days later, we discovered Safe Place had broken sesamoids and would never race again; a few weeks later, Chris broke his collarbone and was on the sidelines for about two months.

The "Derby" dream was over, and Chris' October comeback was short-lived. On Nov. 12, Chris was having lunch at his Louisville apartment with his fiancée, apprentice jockey Christin Landrum, when he collapsed and never regained

consciousness. He was 31.

It was common knowledge on the backstretch that Chris, an aspiring chef, had trouble maintaining his weight. He was 5-foot-8, and whenever he missed time from riding, he'd gain and then have to reduce, sometimes more than 20 pounds. Whether the rollercoaster ride was at least in part to blame for his death remains unanswered; the coroner has yet to release his report.

I didn't know him well at all, but that was the beauty of the guy. You didn't have to know him well to experience his enthusiasm and love of the game.

"Memory basket" notes read at his funeral touched on his sense of humor, ability to mentor, his big smile, and his blue eyes. Nicknamed the "Gallop Gourmet" and "The Glow," he was said to have an "innate way of making people feel special."

Chris was a racetrack publicist's dream. At River Downs, he regularly assisted with the riding program for the handicapped and made an eight-course dinner to be raffled off for the Don MacBeth Memorial Fund. He was a ham, too; if public relations director John Engelhardt or track photographer Pat Lang were walking around with a camera, Chris found the lens.



Chris Herrell

JOHN ENGLERHARDT/LONGSHOT PHOTOS

It seems life as a jockey wasn't easy for the guy, but it was something he absolutely wanted to do since the age of 16. Chris rode his first race in 1991 and won 353 races in his career. He spent most of his time in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana. Family members said he was a free spirit, so they allowed him to seek what he wanted to seek despite their reservations.

Some would argue he went too far to make weight. Others would claim the current scale of weights is a health hazard. I believe it was simply his time.

No matter the reason for his death, Chris was a gifted individual who tried his best on the racetrack and had a knack for sharing his love. And on a hot, muggy afternoon on the Ohio River, he did wonders for a few horse owners who needed to know they at least had a shot at something more.

Safe Place is retired, and Chris is gone. But the hope still remains. 🐾

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