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Making visit to Churchill Downs for 2

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. -- It was our little ritual. I'd slip down the stadium tunnel and dial his telephone number. He'd answer. Before kickoff of the Super Bowl or a Rose Bowl, or the first pitch of the World Series, or from one of golf's majors, or from the Olympics, or a Final Four my 94-year old grandfather and I would talk.

I'd tell him I was at Yankee Stadium. And he'd say, "I saw Lou Gehrig hit a home run there." I'd tell him I was at Pebble Beach, and he'd say, "I'm rooting for Jack Nicklaus." I'd tell him I was at the Super Bowl, watching the Steelers warm up, and he'd say, "Pittsburgh --now, that's my team."

We'd talk for a few minutes. He'd ask me what time my deadline was. I'd ask him what it was like to see Babe Ruth and the Waner brothers play in person. He'd ask me where the media sat during games. I'd ask him what Arnold Palmer's swing looked like in person. And near the end, I'd hear his television turned up in the background, and the commentators welcoming the viewing audience, and he'd say: "I have to go; it's about to begin."

We'd laugh about that.

Before he got off the telephone, we'd talk loosely about making plans someday. Maybe he'd meet me at a golf tournament or college bowl game sometime. Or the Kentucky Derby, because he loved to be around people, and sports, and somehow, neither of us had ever been inside Churchill Downs.

Until now.

I arrived here Wednesday, ducking under the shadow of the unmistakable peaked spires that have towered above this place since 1895, 20 years after the track opened. They've constructed a new facade around the track, and there are lights that shine over brilliant golden letters that now read, "CHURCHILL DOWNS." But I am here, and so is the original grandstand. And when you step inside, it's true what people say, the track looks like a giant oval kitchen table.

My childhood was spent sitting around the family dinner table on Sunday afternoons, listening to my grandfather talk about working in the steel mills in Pennsylvania. And talk about Forbes Field and Dom, Vince and Joe DiMaggio. He'd talk about hopping trains across the country, going East to West for the 1930 Rose Bowl game between Pitt and USC.

He'd tell us, during that trip, he was detained and accused of being in the mafia after accidentally hopping onto a train carrying President Hoover. And he'd tell us that he asked my grandmother, Mary, whom he adored, to marry him five times before she finally accepted. And he'd explain that his father, an Italian immigrant who never played sports, came to see him play in a baseball game for the first time.

My grandfather was a catcher, see. They had small masks, no chest protector and a leather brick for a glove. And early, he took a foul tip off a bat that hit him in the throat.

"I was rolling around on the ground," my grandfather said, "I couldn't breathe. So what do you think my father did? He went home."

When my grandfather said this, he always looked around the room, taking in the captivated faces, pausing just enough, before delivering his kicker, which was always a hammer, no matter the story.

"After that, I played first base."

His timing and delivery were a God-given gift. He raised three children --two school teachers and a professional baseball player --but my grandfather was a born storyteller.

When I went to work at my first newspaper, he beamed. It was a small newspaper. I covered Little League games. The pay was low. But he read every word I wrote, and always said: "Boy, that was a great write-up," no matter how lousy it was. Then, one Sunday, my grandfather went to his closet and pulled an old sport coat off a hanger.

It was bluish-maroon, some god-awful checked-pattern, 1970s. He used to wear it when he sold real estate. He asked me to put it on. I tried to widen my chest and shrink up my arms to make it appear too small, but in the end, the thing fit me like he'd had it tailored for me, and I took it home.

I hid it in my automobile trunk for years. I tried it on for friends who laughed until their sides ached at how hideous it was. I could never bring myself to throw it away. Finally, I put it on the last hanger at the back of my closet, where it's been hanging for the last decade, out of sight.

"Did you wear the jacket today?" he'd ask me sometimes on the telephone.

"Maybe next time," I'd tell him.

Sometimes we'd talk about how things changed during his lifetime. The Super Bowl turned into a corporate event. The Rose Bowl sold out to the Bowl Championship Series. The Masters became a debate on gender and politics. Steroids ruined baseball. Heavyweight boxing became a joke. But the Kentucky Derby is always the same simple horse race.

For 133 years, it's always been about horses, jockeys, mint juleps, big hats and this beautiful race --a mile and a quarter --untouched by time. There are no protestors, or suspensions, and the athletes never trash talk.

So maybe you're thinking my grandfather should have been here when the night security guard let me slip inside the gates, to get my first look at this track on Wednesday. Maybe you're thinking, at the least, I should slip down to the paddock before post time and dial his number. You know, bring him here with me for a few minutes, as I did in June 2004 on the afternoon Smarty Jones raced at Belmont Park for the Triple Crown.

Except I can't make that call.

My grandfather died one month after that Belmont Stakes.

I still reach for my telephone to call him before the Super Bowl or World Series. Then, I remember, he's gone. Sometimes, I call my brother, or my father, who my grandfather always called his best friend. Once, as some kind of silly personal tribute, I dialed his old number anyway. A recording came on, saying it's no longer in service.

His number has changed.

I get that.

But there's something about the Kentucky Derby --this track, this city, the horses, the history --that feels timeless. The race is wide open. Two minutes before the Derby

begins, everything feels unfinished, unsettled, and then, two minutes after it starts, there is one winning horse and one winning jockey and the nation watches as they're draped with a blanket of roses.

Nobody complains. Nobody asks for a rematch. It's just over. And done. Just like that, simple. Which means there's closure here unlike most anything else we get in sport, or life.

Maybe this is why, when I was packing for this trip, I went back to my closet for one last look. I sifted past the jackets I usually wear, to the end, back corner, where I saw that checkered jacket still hanging. I pulled it out, and slipped it on, shaking my head at how it still fits. But for some reason, this time, I didn't put it back. I packed it. And I wore it as I walked through the gates of Churchill Downs on Wednesday.

And it felt like it belonged here all along.

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