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By Robert McCoppin
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Patti Miller has never known a life without the horses at Hawthorne Race Course.

Her visits to the track in west suburban Stickney began when she was a baby. Her grandfather trained horses there. As a teenager, she worked at Hawthorne as a pony girl, riding alongside high-strung racehorses to guide them to the starting gate in front of thousands of fans.

Now 69, and after decades as a trainer herself, she'll lead her horses out of Hawthorne for good, as the course ran what was likely its last race on July 19 after 135 years in operation. As the last remaining commercial course in the Chicago area, Hawthorne's closure is the end of an era that once saw five tracks running the most popular spectator sport in the country.

The Carey family has owned the track for more than a century. Despite years of assurances from

END OF AN ERA

Horse racing was once the nation's most popular sport. Hawthorne's bankruptcy, impending closure mark its demise in Chicago area

owner Tim Carey that he would get financing to open a casino to save the track, that never happened. The facility went bankrupt and is being sold to a company that will end racing there.

"It's crushing," Miller said. "We hung tough, and it never happened. How did they screw this up so bad?"

The answer to that question lies in years of missteps by lawmakers and track owners, competition from an explosion of gambling, and people turning away from a sport that once dominated American culture.

In the mid-20th century, horse racing drew more spectators than even the national pastime of baseball. Throngs turned out to see legendary horses like Seabiscuit, Man o' War and Secretariat, who were well-known even to non-racing fans.

But as sports like football and basketball grew, horse racing began to tail off in popularity, seen

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Above: Horses run on grass during the last race of the day at Hawthorne Race Course on July 19 in suburban Stickney. The course likely ran its last race on July 19, after 135 years in operation. **ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

Courts at center of removal efforts

Trump administration turns system it oversees into 'deportation factory'

By Caroline Kubzansky
and Joe Mahr
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

On a May morning, Immigration Judge Peter Kim's Loop courtroom offered a scene that would help explain how Chicago would soon lead the nation in deportation orders.

In notes kept by a volunteer group of court observers, they described an overflowing courtroom, with people standing two rows deep up to an interpreter's desk. One observer jotted down: "I've never seen this before."

Neither, apparently, had Kim, a recently transferred judge from Los Angeles. According to the notes, he said, "this is so hard. This is not going to work."

It was the first recorded instance of dozens of so-called "mega-master" hearings: enlarged versions of early-stage hearings where immigrants appear in large groups. Combined with a massive turnover in judges on the Trump-controlled court and less-immigrant-friendly rules, the hearings helped fuel a dramatic rise in the number of removal orders issued by judges there — turning what once was a large but average court into a national trendsetter for the presi-

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INSIDE



EILEEN T. MESLAR/TRIBUNE

Plastic surgeon's license suspended

Officials have temporarily barred Dr. Ayoub Sayeg from practicing medicine in Illinois following a Tribune investigation finding the state had not disciplined him despite eight patient deaths. **Chicagoland, Page A2**

Houthis fire missiles at Saudi Arabia

Yemen's Houthi rebels said they fired missiles and drones at Saudi Arabia in response to Saudi strikes on the Red Sea city of Hodeida. **Nation & World, Page B5**

The Sky absent from WNBA All-Star party

Chicago throws a bash for WNBA All-Star weekend — but the hometown team is left watching from the sidelines. **Sports**

Poor air quality an enduring problem for some

Residents put monitors in areas where pollutants are ever-present issue

By Finnegan Belleau
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Sonia Monet Saxon often wakes up around 4 a.m. to the smell of burning asphalt.

Her McKinley Park home is close enough to an asphalt plant that the stench makes it difficult to go outside some days.

Long before wildfire smoke from Canada and Minnesota brought record-breaking levels of PM2.5 to the Chicago region a week ago, pollutants have been an ever-present problem in many communities.

That's why, a day before the smoke plumes descended, Saxon

was using zip ties to fasten an air quality sensor to the railing of a house in McKinley Park, the latest of 15 or so installations she's done over the past few years. Her goal is to monitor pollution from the asphalt plant.

"I love this neighborhood so much, but if you were here yesterday or the day before around this time, it would smell like burning asphalt," she said. "It was almost unbearable to be outside."

Air quality in Chicago is measured in different ways, from fairly cheap sensors such as the one Saxon installed to the sensors in the network set up last summer by the city of Chicago and University of Illinois Chicago. Then there are the sophisticated regulatory monitors that are much more

See **POLLUTION** on Page A6



Sonia Monet Saxon, a community science organizer at Neighbors for Environmental Justice, installs an air quality monitor at a home in the McKinley Park neighborhood on July 15. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

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Discover solitude in Great Blasket Island



Imagine blinking away the ocean spray as your inflatable dinghy bumps its way to a rocky pier — the only access point to an island that houses the eerie remains of a once-vibrant Irish culture. After disembarking, the captain says, “We’ll pick you back up in four hours.”

It’s now just you, a handful of fellow travelers and the lonesome island.

There are few better places in Europe to really “get away from it all” than Ireland’s Great Blasket Island. This mossy mound is the largest of The Blaskets, a group of rugged islands that float just off the Dingle Peninsula. It takes a sea-tumbled journey to get here, but those who make the effort are rewarded with an authentic look at traditional Irish life, far removed from the tourist crowds.

The community on Great Blasket was one of the final outposts of ancient Gaelic culture. Life here was hard, but manageable.

On this treeless island, residents were exposed to the elements and had to cut peat for fuel. Each family had a cow, a few sheep, and a plot of potatoes and oats. Islanders harvested fish from the sea, which always provided, so nobody went hungry.

World War I provided an occasional windfall, as valuable cargo washed ashore from merchant ships sunk by U-boats.

Because they were not entirely dependent on the potato, Islanders survived the Great Famine relatively unscathed — and at its peak, Great Blasket Island was home to around 180 people. But its population dwindled in the 20th century, with many young Islanders leaving for a better, safer



Great Blasket Island, which once housed around 180 people, is vacant but still holds authentic insight into traditional Irish life. **RICK STEVES' EUROPE**

and more exciting life on the mainland.

In the 1950s, the Irish government moved the last handful of elderly residents off the island because the crossing was too difficult to guarantee services in case of an emergency.

For present-day visitors, that crossing remains a challenge. To reach Great Blasket Island, you must take a boat across a particularly angry stretch of the Atlantic. This is the westernmost point of Ireland, meaning the Blaskets are exposed to whatever the sea throws at them. When the weather is bad, which it often is, locals say the waves “charge in like white horses.”

Not only is the crossing often rough, but boats cannot dock directly on the island, so you cover the final few hundred feet in a skiff before landing on a rope-lined, slip-and-slide “pier” of rocks.

When the skies are clear, visitors are treated to thrilling views of the cliffs along the Dingle coastline and glimpses of exotic wildlife (dolphin and puffin sightings are common). While many of Dingle’s sightseeing cruises include views of Great Blasket from the boat, only a few vessels drop visitors off here. Your best bet is the Great Blasket Island Experience, which leaves from Dingle Town, or the Blasket Ferry, which shuttles passengers from Dunquin harbor at the far west end of the peninsula.

Dunquin is also home to the Blasket Centre, a top-notch museum that covers

the history and culture of Blasket Islanders. If you’re heading to Great Blasket, visit here first to learn about the rich sound of the Gaelic language, hear first-person accounts of life on the island and explore its impressive literary history.

From this simple but proud community came three writers of international acclaim — Peig Sayers, Thomas O’Crohan and Maurice O’Sullivan — whose tales of life on Great Blasket Island have been translated from their original Gaelic into many languages.

Visiting Great Blasket Island is not for the faint of heart, but once you disembark and regain your “land legs,” you’re swallowed up by the solitude. On the plateau just above the pier

are the ghostly remains of the abandoned fishing village. On most days, guides lead tours through the vacated stone structures, offering glimpses into a hardy, archaic lifestyle that survived well into the 20th century. The island has one working bathroom, a tiny café and a few rudimentary cabins for rent.

But the best thing to do here is hike.

The long, thin island is flanked by easy-to-follow trails that meet in the middle and continue up toward a 950-foot summit. Bring good shoes: The mossy terrain soaks up moisture, and walking here can be like stomping on wet sponges. Distract yourself from your damp feet with gripping views down steep cliffs, across unobstructed

grassy hillside and out to the Atlantic Ocean...where the next land over is America.

Standing on that trail feels very edge-of-the-world. This untrampled island seems particularly close to the Gaelic soul, yet starkly disconnected from today’s Emerald Isle.

Forget Guinness, trad music and any fear of a tourist trap ... other than the chance for dreary, drizzly weather, Great Blasket Island offers an experience unlike any other you’ll have in Ireland.

Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European travel guidebooks and hosts travel shows on public television and public radio. Email him at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.

CELEBRITY TRAVEL

Actor sets sights on singing at NY venue

By Jae-Ha Kim
TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

Oli Higginson is an actor based in London who’s best known as Footman John in the “Bridgerton” franchise. But he also has the musical alter ego Modern Oli who released the song “People Pleaser” and toured the U.S. before finishing his tour in his Europe this fall.

“(Acting and singing) both arrived at the same time,” he said. “From as early as I can remember, I’ve been obsessed with acting, singing, dressing up, (and) performing. But most of all, (I liked) the weird and kind of shamanic exercise of becoming a character, becoming someone else. Like that line between Norma Jean and Marilyn Monroe, Laurence Olivier and Hamlet, David Bowie and Ziggy Stardust.”

This interview with Higginson has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: How was the U.S. leg of your tour?
A: It was utterly incredible. Each place had its own vibe. New York was definitely as chaotic and crazy and wild as I expected it to be, and then some. Los Angeles had such a great atmosphere. We also went for drinks at a local place called The Douglas in Echo Park, which I loved. It was like this fusion of a British pub and an American dive bar.

Q: What is your bucket-list venue that you have yet to perform in?
A: Dare I say Madison Square Garden? I mean, who do I think I am? I saw Billy Joel there once. It kind of feels like the most impos-



Actor and musician Oli Higginson lists Antibes in the south of France among his favorite vacation spots. **PHIL SHARP**

sible thing to ever happen. I also love Paradiso in Amsterdam. The National Theatre in London is one of the only places I haven’t done a play in, and I’m keen to do something there. Also New York Theatre Workshop feels like a cool rite of passage. Playwrights Horizons (in New York), too.

Q: Where are some places you filmed “Bridgerton”?
A: We are always in a beautiful part of England for “Bridgerton.” I’ve filmed wonderful scenes at the Bridgerton house in Greenwich and at Hampton Court Palace near Richmond. We used to film a lot in the English city of Bath, but now they have built this incredible backlot set out at Shepperton Studios, which is truly a feat of artistic engineering. It is stunning.

Q: Where would you like to go next?
A: I’d love to go to somewhere in East Asia, maybe for a holiday. I’d love to visit Japan. But right now it’s full steam ahead with work, and I feel lucky to be able to do this incredible adventure as a job.

Q: What is your favorite vacation destination?
A: I love the south of France, Antibes, especially. The weather, the coastline, the color of the sea, the people, the food, the light there. The jazz festival every summer. It feels like being in a movie.

Q: What was a trip you took as a child that stands out?
A: I have memories of driv-

ing up to Newcastle one very rainy weekend and walking along Hadrian’s Wall near Newcastle with my dad when I was maybe 11 or 12. We just chatted and walked through these extraordinary hills and then ate a great big pub meal at the end of the day. I could repeat that trip a hundred times.

Q: If you’ve ever gone away for the holidays, which was the best trip?
A: My sister used to live for a little while in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. We spent Christmas on an island and it was like living in the jungle. A monkey climbed up the side of the hotel through an open balcony door, opened the minibar and tore into a packet of Pringles. True story.

Q: What are your five favorite cities?
A: New York, London, Paris, Vegas and LA.

Q: What is your best or worst vacation memory?
A: I love Prague and had a super cool holiday there until the night before we left. I got this horrible stomach bug and spent most of that last 24 hours bound to the bathroom of our Airbnb. Let’s just say it was traumatic for everyone involved. The chaos of my tummy felt like a scourge on the landscape of such a beautiful, sophisticated city. I must go back and make new memories.

For more from the reporter, visit www.jaehakim.com.

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Change to itinerary forces couple to pay over \$8,000 for new tickets

By Christopher Elliott | KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

I recently booked a round-trip flight from Minneapolis to Dublin for my wife and myself through Orbitz. I paid \$1,626 for the trip on American Airlines and Aer Lingus. Months before the flight, I received an email from Orbitz that Aer Lingus had canceled the Philadelphia-Dublin segment of the flight. I contacted Orbitz, and a representative told me that I could take a flight from Minneapolis to Dublin via London on British Airways, then return on a direct flight from Dublin to Minneapolis on Aer Lingus. I agreed.

I downloaded the Aer Lingus app, which showed that I was booked for the new flights. During our stopover in London, British Airways had some initial trouble checking me in for the next leg of the flight but put me on the plane to Dublin. An agent told me to check in with Aer Lingus when I reached Dublin.

But on my return flight, Aer Lingus refused to let me board the plane. A representative claimed that Orbitz had failed to confirm the itinerary change properly. It was essential that my wife and I return to Minneapolis that day. The only seats available were in business class, and the cost was approximately \$8,000 for two tickets.

Out of necessity, I agreed, and we got to Minneapolis that day. I emailed Orbitz and received no response. Aer Lingus opened a case file but responded that it wouldn’t refund my money because it doesn’t process refunds for transactions that are made through third parties.

I’d like a refund of the \$8,000 that I paid Aer Lingus for business-class tickets. Can you help?

— Steve Miller, Shoreview, Minnesota

A: It appears you fell into a black hole between your online travel agency and the airlines that were operating your flights. When Orbitz rebooked you, it seems they created a reservation code — also known as a Passenger Name Record (PNR) — but the ticket was never actually issued.

This is a critical distinction that trips up many travelers. A reservation confirms that a seat is held for you. A ticket is the payment for the seat, but you can have a reservation code without having a ticket number. In the airline’s computer, you existed as a passenger, but you hadn’t technically paid for the flight in their system.

When you checked in at Heathrow Airport, the British Airways agent likely saw the reservation but couldn’t generate a boarding pass for the second leg because the ticket number was missing or invalid. They sent you to Dublin hoping that Aer Lingus could sort it out. Aer Lingus couldn’t — or wouldn’t.

You did the right thing by trying to resolve this on the spot, but Orbitz should have fixed this immediately. You emailed your online travel agency, but it didn’t respond. Aer Lingus also washed its hands of the problem, telling you that because the booking originated with a third party, it couldn’t issue a refund.

This is why I always advise travelers to check for a ticket number, not just a confirmation code. This number usually starts with a three-digit code representing the airline (053 for Aer Lingus), followed by 10 digits. If you don’t see this number, you don’t have a ticket.

A brief, polite email to one of the executives at Orbitz (owned by Expedia) might have helped. I publish the names, numbers and email addresses of Expedia’s customer service managers on my consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org. I contacted Expedia on your behalf. A representative reviewed your case and admitted the mistake.

“After reviewing the situation, it appears the tickets weren’t issued correctly, which resulted in the airline not having his reservation,” the representative told me. Expedia refunded you \$8,206, covering the cost of the emergency business-class tickets.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.