

# FOUR

## Windows Onto Tragedy

### THE DEATH OF HORSE RACING IN QUEBEC

has had a negative impact on  
hundreds of lives as highlighted  
by these four stories of personal loss.

story by Paul Delean | photos by Sylvain Gagnon

**LOSING ONE RACETRACK WOULD HAVE BEEN DIFFICULT ENOUGH.**

**LOSING ALL FOUR IN JUST OVER A YEAR WAS THE WORST POSSIBLE SCENARIO FOR THE QUEBEC HORSE RACING INDUSTRY, NOW AN INDUSTRY ONLY IN THE PAST TENSE.**

**THE COLLAPSE HAS TAKEN AN IMMENSE TOLL, AND NOT ONLY FINANCIALLY.**

**MANY PEOPLE WHOSE LIVES REVOLVED AROUND RACING ARE PHYSICALLY EXHAUSTED AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY SPENT.**

**INFRASTRUCTURE, KNOWLEDGE, HISTORY AND EXPERTISE THAT WERE DECADES IN THE MAKING ARE RELOCATING, OR SIMPLY FADING AWAY.**

**THE IMPACT EXTENDS WELL BEYOND THE PEOPLE WHO ACTUALLY HANDLE HORSES EACH DAY. HUNDREDS OF OTHERS HAD JOBS AND LIVELIHOODS THAT ALSO HINGED ON THE SPORT AND ITS PERPETUATION IN THE PROVINCE. THEY, TOO, HAVE BEEN LEFT HIGH AND DRY.**

**HERE ARE THE STORIES OF FOUR, FROM AMONG THE HUNDREDS NOW OBLIGED TO REROUTE THEIR LIVES.**



**YVON GIGUERE SEEMED PREDESTINED FOR A CAREER IN HORSE RACING.**

His father, Jules, is in the Canadian Horse Racing Hall of Fame as a trainer/driver. His uncle Georges, a longtime racing executive considered one of the architects of Quebec racing, is enshrined as a builder. Brother Robert was a starter in Quebec City. Brother Michel was both a driver and administrator. Brother Guy was a vet.

Giguere did indeed follow in the family tradition, helping introduce and develop simulcasting at Hippodrome de Montreal alongside the late Bill Slack and eventually becoming simulcast director.

"I completed my 20th year (at the track) in May," he said.

But that's as far as it will go.

Hippodrome de Montréal is history and so is Attractions Hippiques, the company that used to sign his cheques.

At 56, with a young family to support, Yvon is in the unexpected position of having to rethink his future.

He knew Attractions Hippiques was in trouble, but the end was still a bit of a shock. Just the day before, he'd been told to keep working on plans to open a new teletheatre in Aylmer, for which mall space had already been rented.

"I felt bad for all the people from the OTB network. The owners were not informed in any way."

His preference would be to stay in horseracing, but opportunities are scarce in Canada and non-existent in Quebec.

Europe and the U.S. look like the best bets, which is why he flew to Europe in November and attended the December gaming conference in Arizona.

France, in particular, holds promise for the personable, bilingual Giguere. The monopoly on pari-mutuel betting in France will be lifted next summer, and other players interested in the market could be looking for people with simulcast and Internet-wagering savvy.

"If I'm going to make a move, now's the time, given the age of my kids (twin boys 13, a daughter 8)," said Giguere. "But I can't be off long. I've got a house, and kids. Michelle (his partner of 20 years) works part-time. It's tight for us right now. If nothing comes along, then I'll go to Plan B — other things than racing."

**WHEN HE BOUGHT A TELETHEATRE ON THE EASTERN TIP OF THE ISLAND OF MONTREAL THREE YEARS AGO, REJEAN BELVAL NEVER IMAGINED AN OUTCOME SO CATASTROPHIC.**

The 200-seat betting parlour in Pointe-aux-Trembles had long been one of the busiest and best performers in the network.

Belval, 60, saw it as a business that would transition him to retirement once he sold his other enterprise, a metal-structures company.

"There were a lot of regulars, a lot of atmosphere. For many, it was a second home. It was fun."

Not anymore.

Since Attractions Hippiques folded in mid-October, ending all simulcast betting, Belval has lost a bundle. Rent alone is \$6,800 a month.

"I'm out of pocket about \$10,000 per month that I carry on. It can't continue much longer like that. At least I still have the other business."

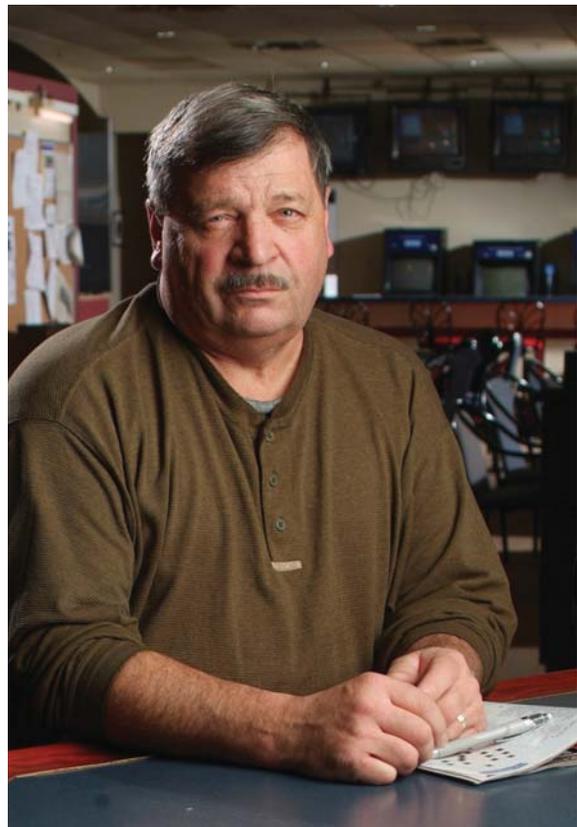
He's still peeved that Attractions Hippiques suddenly announced that instead of paying the teletheatres' September commissions on Oct. 1, it would do so on Oct. 15, then pulled the plug Oct. 14. "I'm still owed \$35,000," he said.

His teletheatre still has revenue, from video-poker machines, but Pointe-aux-Trembles only has five of them, half the number of most betting parlours in Quebec. Racing was his main draw, and racing is gone. What used to be a hive of activity now sits empty and silent.

Belval has laid off five of his seven employees. The other two work reduced hours. Saturdays, he fills in himself.

He's giving himself a little more time before deciding whether to hold on, in the hope some solution is found, or liquidate everything.

"Of course, if I'd known what was coming, I'd never have bought," he said. "What I can't figure out is why the Quebec government seems ready to just let this all go."





**CLAUDETTE PAQUET WAS HAVING A DIFFICULT YEAR EVEN BEFORE THE COLLAPSE OF THE HORSE RACING INDUSTRY IN QUEBEC.**

Her life partner Marc Linger, a cook in a retirement home, suffered an aneurism in April and spent six months in hospital. He's now recuperating at home, but has little long-term memory.

Paquet, for her part, is on sick leave, due to stress and fatigue.

But when that ends this month, she doesn't expect to return to the office job she happily held for 20 years at the provincial horsemen's association, ATAQ.

The association can no longer afford two paid employees. With no money coming in from racetrack operators, declining membership and hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees stemming from its Attractions Hippiques contestations, ATAQ is in dire straits financially.

Paquet still goes to the office twice a week, on her own time, to help long-time friend and colleague Gilles Fortier learn how to do the second job.

"He used to look after the pension fund, I handled insurance and (membership) renewals, set up conference calls, took the minutes at meetings. Now he's got to do everything," said Paquet, whose introduction to horse racing came through her former husband, trainer Jacques Paquet.

At 69, her job prospects are limited, but Paquet said her plan is to return to the workforce, though starting over somewhere else will be daunting.

It will be even harder for others, she notes. Paquet recently prepared a c.v. for one longtime racetrack acquaintance applying for a job at Loblaw's, "and there wasn't a whole lot on it. All he's done his whole life is look after horses."

"This is hurting an awful lot of people, in more ways than just money," she said. "My son (Stephane, a trainer) had to leave. Many racetrack regulars would come to our office (near Hippodrome de Montréal) just to spend a little time with people they knew. They don't know what to do with themselves. They used to go to the track. It was their life. Now they have nowhere to go."

**FOR BENOIT FRENETTE, THE TOUGHEST ADJUSTMENT WAS THE SOLITUDE.**

The former race secretary went from the bustle of the Hippodrome de Montréal race office, where he sometimes made and received 200 telephone calls a day, to long stretches at home with only an occasional call.

"I was often alone, which was new to me, and it was hard. But I did golf a lot," said Frenette, 47, who's been out of work since July 19, 2008, but expects to start a new career soon in something completely different.

His whole family used to have racing-related jobs. Now, nobody does.

Daughter Isabelle, who used to work at a teletheatre, graduated from university last year and is a teacher. Son Sebastien, formerly of the Hippodrome de Montreal maintenance crew, now has a job in snow removal and landscaping. Partner Sylvie Lecuyer still is on the payroll of the government regulatory agency, but she's been switched to the boxing side of the operation since racing's demise.

Frenette sued Attractions Hippiques for unfair dismissal but the case was not adjudicated before the company went insolvent, leaving little likelihood of any settlement. Contributions to his pension plan stopped in December, 2008.

"My plan was to retire at 55," he said. "Now, I cannot, for sure."

He visited his old office at the track one last time this fall, and "it broke my heart. All that was left was a chair and a lot of papers. The place looked like a dump. Anything that looked like it had value was gone, and everything else was on the floor. That used to be my home."

Frenette, whose late father Jean-Louis worked 35 years as track handicapper and program director, has resigned himself to the likelihood there's no future for him in the sport that's been his livelihood for 31 years, and which he still loves.

"I guess I could move, but all things considered, I'd rather stay here with the family. I'm healthy. I have a nice home. Starting over won't be easy, I'll be out of my comfort zone, but I know I have the personality to do other things. It's just so sad, and unfair, that it ended like this. It's not just a shame for me, it's a shame for 3,000 people who gave their time, sweat and everything. They're paying for nothing." 

