

Echoes of glory at Clairwood

Mike Moon | 11 August, 2014 00:01



Some magic went out of horse racing this week. They closed Clairwood Racecourse - a wide-open space south of Durban, where a precious clutch of my memories were made.

Sea Cottage's victory in the 1966 Clairwood Winter Handicap is one.

Seven weeks earlier, the horse had been shot by a sniper, hired by bookmakers who stood to lose a fortune if trainer Syd Laird's three-year-old were to win the Durban July that year.

The colt recovered sufficiently to line up for the July, just a month after his hindquarter had been pierced by a bullet - fired by gangster Johnny "Machine Gun" Nel, skulking on the Ellis Brown Viaduct waiting for his prey to pass beneath on the way to morning gallops on Blue Lagoon beach.

Sea Cottage heroically ran fourth in the July. Three weeks later, it was a different story.

With a furlong to go in that momentous Clairwood Winter, it seemed jockey Bobby Sivewright had left the challenge too late after loitering at the back. King Willow was out front and sailing home.

Then commentator Ernie Duffield's voice got shrill: "And here comes Sea Cottage!" I'll never forget the next few strides of that horse. Everything stood still, apart from the bay and the gold-and-silver silks; the great one got low to the turf and snared the piece before anyone drew breath.

I was a teenager then and my folks were racing scribes, so I often went with them to the races. And Clairwood was the best course for kids, with its expansive lawns and officialdom that didn't mind brats about.

The Tudor-style buildings; the comical conical roof on the skinny tower that housed judges and commentators; the little one-storey press box; the bookies who laid "flash odds" on close finishes as the grandstand wasn't in line with the winning post; the tiny men of the Passmore family of trainers and jockeys; chatty teen girls in smart frocks who I longed to snog; the day I backed Full Bore in the Merchants at 70/1 and collected more money than I'd ever seen ... mind pictures in a life's album.

Clairwood opened in 1921 in what was then farming land. Trains ran from Durban Central to the course, and a day at the races doubled up as a country excursion, with cattle and sheep all about.

Clairwood's first race was won by Oriel, who later won the July. The feature event went to Proud To Fight, ridden by Johnny Otto, who rode Eunomea to victory in the 1923 July and years later became a stipe and a friend of my dad's.

What stories Mr Otto would tell. One was about riotous soldiers, garrisoned at nearby Clairwood Camp during World War 2. The troops, including liquored-up Aussies as I recall, disagreed with the result of a race and burnt down the poor judge's raised wooden stand.

Now Clairwood will be razed - to make way for warehouses and factories. Racing will use the R430-million it got for the land to prop up what remains of the game.

This is progress and growth; survival perhaps. But it isn't magic.