

## **Last Hurrah by Robin Dawson...a review**

The first instinct you have when you start reading Robin Dawson's first novel, **Last Hurrah** is to be reminded of the great Dick Francis. For more than 40 years Francis, a former jumps jockey in England, crafted wonderful and thrilling books that always had a horse racing theme. Like the Francis narratives, Last Hurrah has good guys and bad guys and the latter inevitably get their just desserts thanks to the efforts of the former. To be fair, however, Dawson goes far beyond the Francis template, even if he's pleased at the comparison

"I'm very flattered," says Dawson. "I met Dick Francis many years ago early on in my career I was working for a trainer in England. We would chat to him about his latest books. He would come up to Woodbine for various Queen's Plates, especially when the Queen Mother was over here, so I got to meet him a few times and I'm extremely flattered to be mentioned in the same breath."

Last Hurrah is a sprawling 470 pages long and Dawson covers a lot of ground between the covers. Fortunately for this one-page review, he's pretty good at summing up the entire book in a few sentences.

"We have an old established firm in Kentucky and it's struggling," he says. "They bring in a partner who turns out to be not all that nice. He liquidates horses for insurance. When a prized mare is killed, so are a couple of people, but the foal is saved. The people who have the baby now have a foal that nobody knows exists. And this story is about him, resurfacing and winning the Kentucky Derby."

The very length of the book does require a certain endurance by the reader. But there is a reward. Dawson is a skilled writer. His descriptions make it easy to visualize the characters. He paints vivid pictures of various farms and racetracks. He takes us to England and India and Saratoga and Ascot and even Woodbine.

As per the latter, Dawson writes lovingly about the track, but not so much the politics in Ontario between government and racing officials. One of the characters talks about the controversial Slots at Racetracks program:

*"They brought slot machines to the tracks throughout the province of Ontario. Horse racing received over \$4 billion in direct subsidies during that time. That money was supposed to be spent on marketing horse racing to a new and younger audience, to stimulate betting on horses and it was hoped new owners would appear and so the market for Ontario-bred horses would improve. But all management did was to boost the purses to ridiculously high levels to serve existing owners and then paid themselves huge salaries for effectively doling out this public money."*

And without impugning Woodbine specifically, Dawson hints at one of the big issues with our local racing. In a paragraph about English racing, he writes,

*“Even today, as the sport struggles to maintain the interest of contemporary audiences, horse racing is still a big deal that is avidly covered by all forms of media, with a newspapers presence that makes sure that every punter can see when their favourite horses, jockeys and trainers are participating.”*

Dawson has been immersed in horse racing for several decades and inserts some of his unpleasant experiences into this book. There is a lot in Last Hurrah that Dawson admits, gets suits in upper management upset. He describes the convoluted business of yearling sales, where deceit spars with genetics for equal attention.

“I suggest that on the surface at horse sales, not everything is on the up-and-up,” says Dawson. “I explain what’s going on at the sales. It’s somewhat ironic really that of all the states in the U.S., the actual medication rules are relaxed more in Kentucky, than probably anywhere else. And so, a lot of these young horses going into sales are cranked up with steroids, so I expose them.”

The ‘bad guy’ in Dawson’s book is a South American by the name of Hector Delmontez. Delmontez is rich and powerful and is attempting to inject himself into the highest levels of the sport. His income appears to be from international drug trafficking, so he launders his money by buying expensive racehorses. One by one, it seems, his prized equines die mysteriously, and he collects the insurance money. The insurance company doesn’t get suspicious, because it’s owned by Delmontez.

A groom who knows too much is found dead. One of Delmontez’ employees happen to fall out of a plane and his body is found on a beach in Northern Ontario. Horse players get stuck in a broken elevator at Pimlico. Our hero, Tom Fraser would like to be a steeplechase jockey, but his career is interrupted when he learns that his father died in a horrendous and very suspicious barn fire. Sadly, he lost his mother in a plane crash a few years earlier and he starts to wonder if the two deaths are connected.

Meanwhile, there’s the issue of the orphaned foal. How do you explain his presence when the mare has been reduced to ashes? How does this horse end up in the Kentucky Derby? And why, Robin, is there so much reference to Woodbine in your book?

“Because Woodbine was built by E.P. Taylor,” he says. “And Northern Dancer put Canada on the international horseracing map. So the two go together. Everybody knows about Northern Dancer. He’s the key stallion in the last fifty, sixty years. Look at horses like Frankel. Nijinsky, Sadler’s Wells, Nureyev, Storm Bird, The Minstrel. And Woodbine is one of the Premier racetracks in North America. They’ve got two fantastic turf courses. In the coming years, we’re going to look at a lot of contraction with much fewer tracks, but Woodbine will survive because it’s just a splendid racetrack.”

Last Hurrah is a remarkable book on many levels. It's a compelling thriller and the reader needs to know how it ends. But it's also required reading for anyone more curious about the underbelly of the sport; what goes on at the sales, how trainers prepare their horses, and how the cheats prosper.

It's Dawson's first book, but he tells us he's working on a sequel. We're looking forward to that.

Peter Gross  
Down The Stretch