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WEEKEND

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Local/Region

BACK ON TRACK

Ex-jockey leads business group to day at races

NORWOOD - Jockey Gene Bresnahan traded his riding silks for a business suit 21 years ago.

He began working as a bookkeeper and tax preparer, and he thought he would never go back to the race track.

But on Saturday, Bresnahan will lead 100 business colleagues back to one of his old haunts, Rockingham Park in New Hampshire, for the third annual Neponset Valley Chamber of Commerce Day at the Races. He will award a trophy to the winning rider in a race named for the chamber.

At 5-foot 3 and 118 pounds – only 10 pounds heavier than his racing weight – Bresnahan still looks like a jockey. Yet he says at age 53 that his transformation from jockey to businessman is complete.

"A lot of jockeys, when they stop riding races, they're just another small guy," Bresnahan said. "I'm lucky. I've had a great second half of my life."

When he was 21, Bresnahan quit his job at New England Life, jumped the fence at Suffolk Downs and told the trainers that he wanted to be a jockey.

The only problem was that Bresnahan had never ridden a horse.

During his first riding lesson, the stable attendant asked him whether he wanted to use a Western or English saddle. Bresnahan asked what the difference between the two styles was, and the attendant explained that the Western saddle had a horn.

"Well, if I won't be riding in traffic, I won't need a horn," Bresnahan said. "That was how little I knew about horses."

Bresnahan was a fast learner, however. While on the track, he met Junie Bresnahan (no relation), one of the greatest trainers in New England. He broke horses for Junie at a stable in South Carolina for three years, and then started racing at tracks such as Suffolk Downs and Florida Downs.

Although he suffered many broken bones, Bresnahan thought he would never leave the track. But another flight of fancy in 1971 made him change his mind. On the track before a race, he met the woman he would later marry.

"I had a spill that day," he said. "When she saw me ride, she made me quit."

In 1977, he and his wife, Joanne, were married, and they built a house on Hazelwood Drive in Norwood.

The tax preparation business had always been a sideline for Bresnahan. When he was on the track, he would fill out tax forms for fellow jockeys, some of whom are still his clients.

"I'd ask them if they wanted the short form," he said.

Five years ago, he opened his own bookkeeping and tax preparation business, Comprehensive Business Services. In his office on Route 1 in Dedham, he proudly displays his racing mementos – photo finishes, racetrack passes, newspaper listings of race results.

Although sometimes he misses riding thoroughbreds – the physical exertion, the rush of adrenaline of a race, the freedom of living on the road and traveling from track to track – he's happy to be watching from the grandstand.

"I go back, and I have a wonderful time," he said. "I see the jocks I used to ride with. I'm alive, I'm not crippled, I'm lucky."

By Sari Kalin, The Patriot Ledger