

INSIDERNJ.COM

SPECIAL EDITION

Gaming Sports and Entertainment

Sport Versus Art:

In New Jersey, the Ultimate
Gladiatorial Political Spectacle

Monday Night Football:

Written, with Apologies,
in Real Time

Senator Mike Testa

The InsiderNJ Interview

Shakur Stevenson of Newark:

The Sports Illustrated Cover
You'll Never See



DEDICATION

WE DEDICATE THIS SPECIAL EDITION TO BRAD PITT AS ACHILLES.

Not since Vinny Testaverde went down in 1999 have we had a chance to invoke the name of a Greek hero, let alone the Greek hero. If Aaron Rodgers' torn Achilles Tendon just landed the Jets' season on a funeral pyre, and with it our vicarious existence, at least we have a chance to collectively consider our western heritage as heroes – by filling up dead time on Sundays with bad movie binge watching.







P.O. Box 66
Verona, NJ 07044
InsiderNJ@gmail.com

InsiderNJ.com



Max Pizarro

Editor-in-Chief

Max@InsiderNJ.com



Pete Oneglia

General Manager

Pete@InsiderNJ.com

Michael Graham

CEO

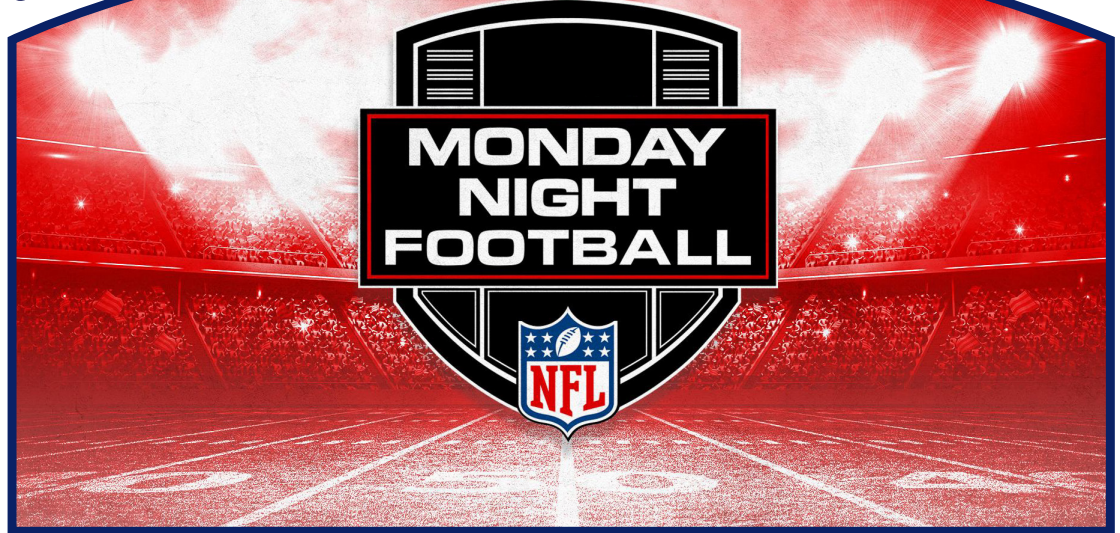
John F.X. Graham

Publisher

Ryan Graham

Associate Publisher

INTRODUCTION



In a few weeks we'll all be partying down at Cuba Libre and we'll feel better, sports fans.

That was originally supposed to read "Giants fans," as I contemplated writing this introduction on a Sunday night, to be read in a paternal Charlton Heston tone for a blue franchise made even more blue by the Dallas Cowboys.

But then Monday Night Football happened, and (see below, far below) the Giants suddenly looked – if it could possibly be believed – better – and more sure-footed - than the Jets.

Helium went into the vocal chords with a kind of cruel vengeance.

Indeed, given the history of the two franchises, the Giants looked *much, much better* than Gang Green.

As I write this, I hear that table of Buffalo Bills fans again absolutely obnoxiously taking over the bar.

But, hey, life isn't just about football.

If it was then we'd all be like the Al Pacino character in *Any Given Sunday*, who come to think of it, reminds me of most people I've ever had a conversation with in this state.

And – truth be told - that's not a bad thing.

In the following pages, hopefully

you'll find something that interests you in the way of sport, popular culture, gaming, gambling, rock and roll or art (or what in our state passes for art, what the late Jim Whelan described as the sports banners hanging from the gym, "That's art.").

It's all art, really.

Unless it's a wind turbine.

Then it's literature.

Hopefully, the stuff makes some sense in the end.

But one thing that you should never forget – or question – flipping through the pages that follow:

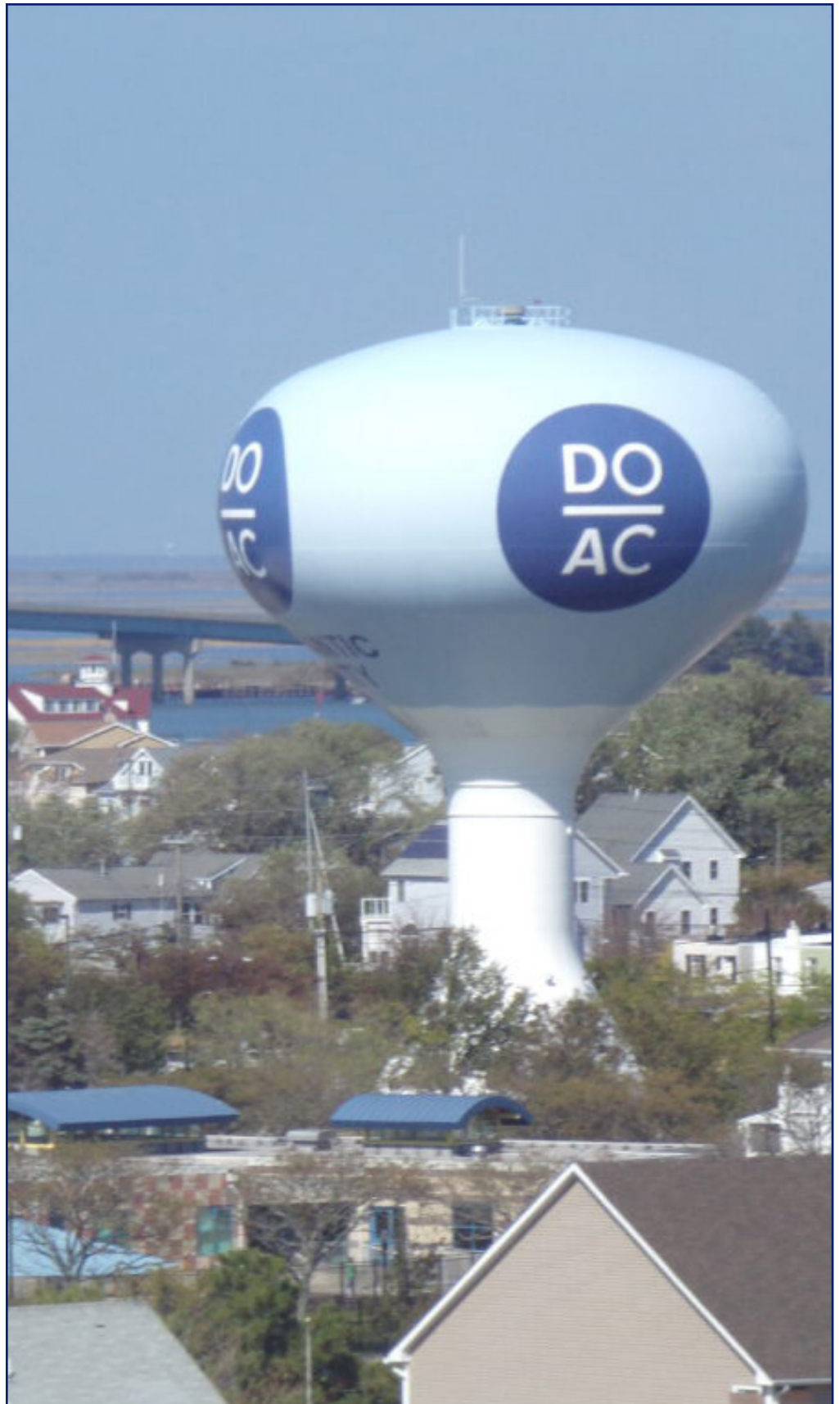
It's really all only about New Jersey.

And in the words of Senator Jon Bramnick, with a shrug in the voice, and good-natured chuckle, lest we ever take any of it too seriously – "It's politics."

Max Pizarro

Max Pizarro

Editor, Insider NJ





MetLife



GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Sport Versus Art:

In New Jersey, the Ultimate Gladiatorial Political Spectacle

Our deluded age cavalierly supplants critical thinking – hard fought, going back to Galileo – with iconography, an early medieval heresy that again clawed its way into more than serious contention as a 21st Century reality.

In this case, for the purposes of our InsiderNJ special edition of sports, gaming and entertainment, we had at the pre-season outset a MetLife Meadowlands battle of supposed heavyweight icons that somewhat approximated our pretty impoverished ongoing political “battle.”

I refer, of course, to Aaron Rodgers and Bruce Springsteen, respectively those contagious magic conjurers of sport and art, who – for a brief, shining moment – bestrode the Meadowlands like colossi, and, roughly, speak to the bifurcated halves of the country, right here in lil’ ol’ New Jersey.

The legitimate occupant of the

throne of New Jersey culture, the medicine man of MetLife Stadium, Springsteen in fact gave birth to arena rock, or rock and



roll as a blue-collar-working-class sporting event, and the natural outgrowth of Broadway Joe Namath in a mink coat in search of a roughneck soundtrack. What Bruce undertook with the per-

sonal religious fervor of an out-cast medieval woodcutter on the first five albums of the 1970s and 1980s, became in the heart of the eighties a circus maximus – not of artistic intimacy – but of absolute extroverted everyman showmanship.

The fact that he kept getting bigger and bigger didn’t matter, not really. His old stuff was so good, so pure, so timeless, Springsteen could tour with the most commercially obnoxious obscenity and never alienate the diehards. But then something happened, which coincided with a divide creeping up on the country, a divide that would end up propelling us close to the brink, which resulted in the hydra-headed stampeding of the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, and today lingers with a perilous vengeance.

Politics.

Yes, politics.

“Bruce ain’t supposed to be political.”

“I’m not listening to him no more.”

I’ve heard that a lot, even from a best friend of mine.

“I hate Bruce.”

This is a Harley-Davidson-riding wharf rat, Monmouth born and bred.

He’s jealous, right?

We grew up right down the street from where Springsteen wrote “Born to Run”, and instead of playing guitars we decided to spend time catching frogs.

No, it’s more than that. It’s not jealousy at all, in fact.

Bruce – this is going back almost 20 years now – spoke out in partisan political terms, and his Monmouth County base who for years had the Boss on in the background while they lounged by their swimming pools, didn’t like that very much.

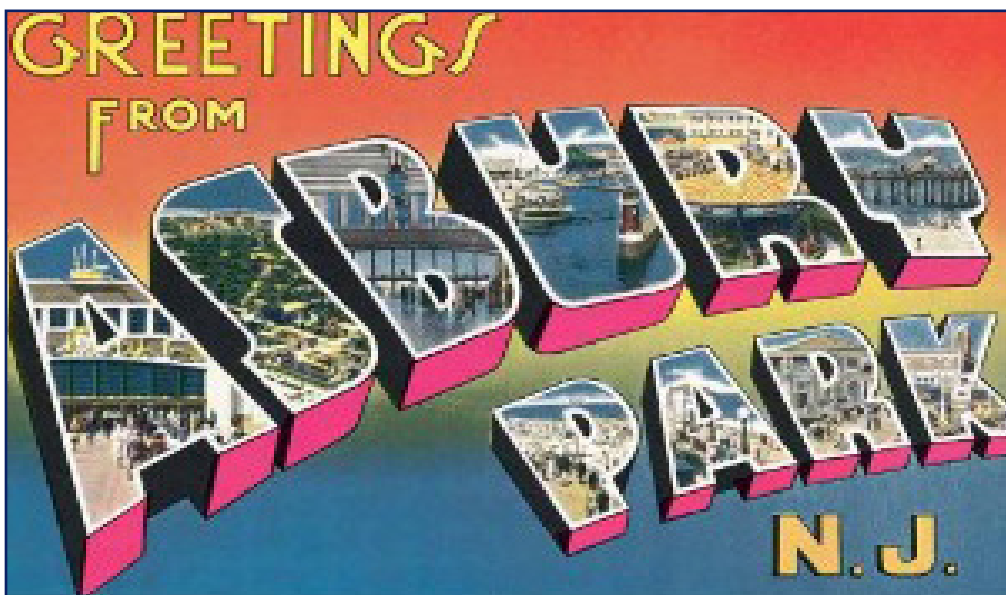
It’s hatred for someone who chooses a political position different from one’s own, and uses his supposedly apolitical platform of power for politics.

Of course, those suddenly angry with Bruce didn’t pay attention to the fact that he was always political, especially, ironically, on his most commercial album, *Born in the USA*, which wasn’t a mindless patriotic anthem – as some of his biggest so-called fans profess – but, in fact, a patriotic rebuke

of ourselves, for obscenely sending people to war whom we then scorn and leave to die in our own country.

A local boy from Freehold who saw his own friends get killed in Vietnam, or come home in wheelchairs, Springsteen had that experience firmly at the forefront – and I suppose deep within – when he opposed George W. Bush’s 2002 resolution sending young men and women to war in Iraq without compelling accompanying evidence. His opposition to the president was bad enough. But Springsteen onstage with John Kerry during the 2004 election cycle truly offended people. Imagine that guy who for years thought he was listening to a pro-Ronald Reagan American rock opera number having to look at the Boss walking around and singing “No Surrender” with John “I actually voted for the \$87 Billion, before I voted against it” Kerry.

By the time Springsteen had voted for Obama, criticized Christie publicly in an eloquent Asbury Park op-ed, hot-rodged with Barack at the shore, and allowed exorbitant ticket pricing for his monster shows, part of his old Monmouth County base wouldn’t





**GENOVA
BURNS**

be caught dead in a Springsteen t-shirt. They might burn an effigy of Joe Biden wearing one. Having slipped and fallen on the stage a few weeks ago in a very rare display of inartful footedness, the 72-year-old rock and roll warrior has worse troubles ahead. “Mr. Springsteen is being treated for symptoms of peptic ulcer disease and the decision of his medical advisors is that he should postpone the remainder of his September shows,” said a statement posted to his Instagram.

The throne of the king of MetLife Stadium stood eerily vacant above the noxious fogged airport strips, factory fires, fragged highways and landfill-jagged horizons.

But...

Fellow rust belt reject Aaron Rodgers (the sports equivalent of Springsteen? If Tom Brady is Bob Dylan, might Rodgers get away with playing the Boss) lately of the Green Bay Packers, arrived as the supposed savior of a battered sports franchise, the Michael Ironside Overdog of a swamp that long ago – at least for Jets fans - sapped and impurified man’s best heroic impulses. If New Jersey provides a punchline to much of the rest of the civilized world, the

New York Jets had become simply synonymous with failure. I remember covering a local township committee meeting in the late summer of the 1990s. When the scheduled public speaking portion arrived, a sagging middle-aged man in a green jumpsuit, jacket and cap managed to make it to the microphone. On the back of his get up you could read the word “Jets” stenciled in bright white.

If New Jersey provides a punchline to much of the rest of the civilized world, the New York Jets had become simply synonymous with failure.

The gesture spoke of that sort of enthusiasm explicable only to Jets fans, a willingness to go out in public looking like a giant walking stalk of corn, just prior to suffering yet another inevitable and miserable belly flop. In the case of this poor, benighted fellow, it was

the Rich Kotite era, so he probably suffered internal damage that lasted for years if it didn’t kill him outright.

“I like your outfit,” said the township attorney, wearily, apparently another Jets fan, eager for commiseration, by way of trying to change the subject from undelivered government services or overcharged government taxes.

The very culture of sports failure translates to politics so easily in New Jersey, where we have come to have the expectation of government as failure. Chris Christie used to perk up half the independents in the state by publicly feeling sorry for himself as a long-suffering Mets fan.

Never underestimate the power of mediocrity as an emotional connecting point.

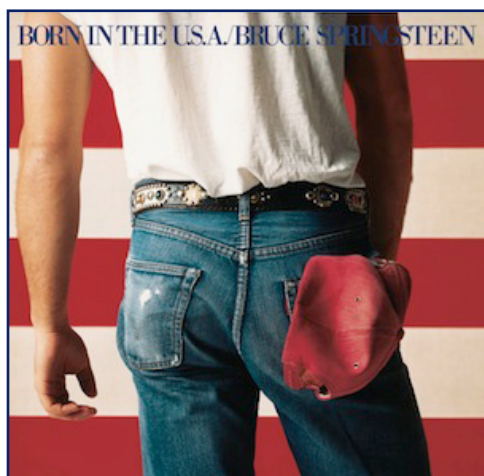
“I don’t know nothing about politics but I’m going to vote for that guy cause he’s a compassionate individual who knows about suffering.”

The gimmick works particularly well when the political purveyor of the message merely has an appetite for power and doesn’t really care about suffering. If he invokes

the Jets and Mets, he can bank a certain number of votes while no longer having to trouble himself with unhip subjects like the poor and the dispossessed or even property taxes crushing the middle class.

“Them Mets last night, I swear to God...” the politician complains aloud.

Maybe the man in traction in a hospital room with no health insurance, no job, and the ballgame playing on the suspended television set will think, deep within the mummy wraps that mask his face, “That guy understands me.”



Anyway, it’s worth a shot, the public man broods, particularly if the only endgame involves cozying up to people like Jerry Jones in their two-percent cocoons.

There is a compassion ceiling in

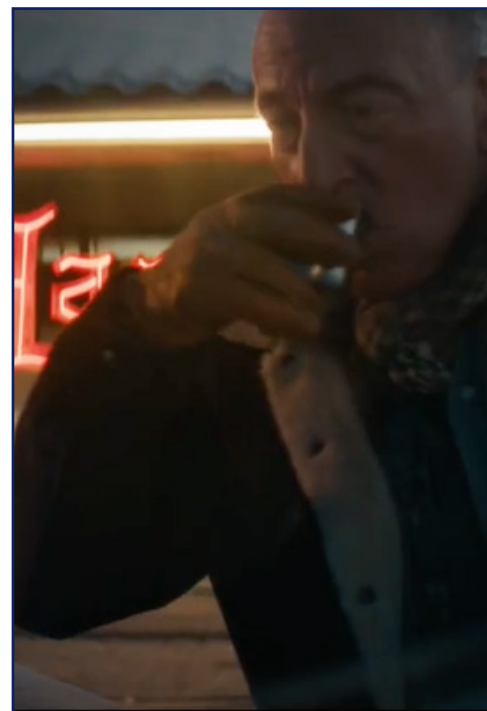
political terms, of course, which perhaps explains why Christie idolizes the Mets – and the Dallas Cowboys.

To be both a Jets and Mets fan could turn someone bucking for the presidency dangerously into a Rodney Dangerfield type, and let’s face it, even this year, even now (pre-Monday Night Football), the Jets – if we consider the totality – make the Mets actually look like a competent organization, as their 2023 season death spiraled with the Yankees to create precisely the conditions for a hyped football season.

Yes, there are limits even among those constrained to limit their compassion for the human condition to sports.

A great quarterback, the twilight of his career – kind of like Bruce – notwithstanding, Rodgers began the pre-season as a hopeful development, and ended it as the obvious heir to Joe Namath, who would surely overcome the Brett Favre curse and lead the Jets out of the desert – or the swamp! – to their second Super Bowl in franchise history. Remember, the last time the Jets won a Super Bowl was, yes, 1969, or the same year that Springsteen received draft

card 359, but ended up not going to Vietnam, as a draft physical in 1970 deemed him physically unfit.



While trying to suspend for a moment judgement of a society so narcissistic and creaky that it continues to recycle baby boomer rockers and grey bearded quarterbacks as opposed to gracefully training and graduating the next generation of hemi-powered heroes, let’s specifically go back to Rodgers. To some pop culture freaks out there he used to be cool simply by virtue of dating Olivia Munn, who seemed progressive.

“I liked Rodgers,” an ex told me recently. “But then he seemed to get...”



ROUND WORLD
CONSULTING



She struggled to find the right word.

“Flaky?” I tried.

“Yes,” she answered.

What she probably meant was that Rodgers, by undertaking an anti-vax stance on COVID-19, clashed with her own views.

Now, apparently Rodgers isn't Curt Shilling, who as a Boston Red Socks pitcher and proud Republican, went out of his way to back Bush over Massachusetts favorite son Kerry.

Rodgers says he doesn't like politics.

But even fans readily interpreted his anti-vax position as political.

Libs hated it.

To them, it was the equivalent of Springsteen opposing the war.

“Tell your quarterback to get vaccinated,” President Joe Biden told someone in Wisconsin who was wearing a cheese hat.

It triggered a mild back and forth between Rodgers and Biden.

If the famed quarterback never backed Trump – the way Brady seemed to at one point before getting slapped down by his then-wife – the legendary Packer certainly jumped at the chance to back fellow anti-vaxxer Robert Kennedy, Jr. In his much-panned kickoff speech for the presidency, Kennedy said he needed an army backing him, and Rodgers tweeted an emoji of a sword and “kenedy2024” in reply.

As for the vaccine, in what seemed to be an effort to clarify his position, probably as a libertarian, Rodgers told Bill Maher, “I think there's a lot of people that believe that you should have your own decision-making on your own medical decisions. My thing is I have an issue with the hypocrisy in society in general and I know you do as well, but abortion has been a hot topic, right. And especially after *Roe v. Wade* got overturned and sent back to the states, or whatever. I don't believe the government should have any

control over what we do with our bodies.”

Still, as far as old school Dems were concerned, Rodgers had done sufficient damage with his stance on COVID.

He was out.

Too political. Too flaky.

Those disgruntled Bruce Springsteen fans determinedly listening to their old Jimmy Buffet vinyls?

They liked Rodgers.

He said he was unpolitical?

Well, he was political enough on a key question for them to get excited about him coming to the Meadowlands.

Meet the new boss, not the same as the old Boss.

Springsteen and the war on the one side.

Rodgers and the vaccine on the other.

And the swamp of the Meadowlands between them, with the soul of New Jersey – and by extension the country – at stake.

As Bruce struggled in the locker room with a peptic ulcer, could Rodgers produce a season akin to Bruce's first five albums?

For those who love the entirety of Springsteen's magnificent career, I offer my apologies. The first five records stand in a separate category for me, and it probably has something to do with the triumph – at the heart of America, perhaps – of youth itself, the expression of a young man who will not be denied. I like the first five so much I can never quite figure out which I like best. Generally, I narrow it down to the *E Street Shuffle* and *Born to Run*, probably in part thanks to David Sancious' playing, which gives a jazz core to the sound. But Springsteen – just as nothing interferes with the perfect spiral thrown in a moment of majestic time – on those records, the early ones, is that quarter-back poet, a mystic outcast, who wills himself to become Robert Mitchum, that American dreamer yearning, and connecting, with a perfect pass to all those kids stumbling around out there in loneliness and darkness.

“Here, kid... catch.”

That's what *Backstreets* feels like, even now.

As another great poet (and faded jock, in his case, an old football player), Jack Kerouac wrote, “So in America, when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going...”

What had appeared almost culturally significant in the form of Aaron v. the Boss – turned into a wretched old man's nightmare of an Achilles Tendon versus a Peptic Ulcer

The road goes and goes.

For Rodgers, it led east.

Ultimately, amid the tatters of the Jets history in the broken down world of Jersey, it would be, the lonely fan whispered, the ex-Packer within himself and his

greatness as a player to extend to those around him, to produce a statement the size of Bruce's first five albums; or, if each album is the artistic equivalent of a Super Bowl, as I believe each is, Rodgers will have to create one *Darkness on the Edge of Town* or one *Greetings from Asbury Park*, or a single *River*.

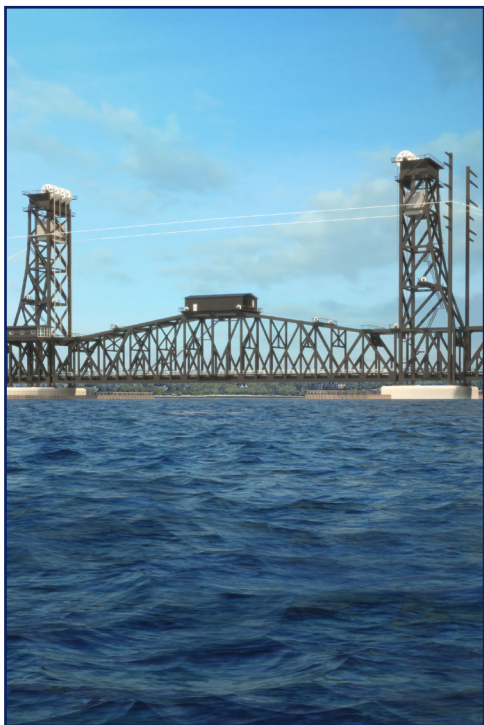
In the words of Tom Barrett, “He has the goods.”

Would he deliver?

For all our bloody failure, and the saturation of our citizens with the idea of our system itself as failure, we occupy turf gained in the name of civilization. Unlike primitive cultures, we do not require our kings to kill their forebearers.

Rodgers could surely occupy the throne for a season, until the Boss returned.

Perhaps they could even coexist and teach our hapless politicians – and our even worse detached and complacent selves, content to contribute to the country's suicide – something about sacrifice, and the art and sport of discipline brilliantly conceived, brilliantly executed, not loyalty blindly given, or government occupied only in the name of the public interest.



Go on now, Jersey, through all the heartbreaks, the sins, and institutional dependent lividity, lean into this season, we dreamed. The battle of the Meadowlands began. Go ahead and laugh, ye of little faith out there, but we would watch the sun disappear down the Raritan River again and rise on the Atlantic. Much like Homer had Hector and his horses, they would say, of Bruce someday, already in fact, and hopefully Aaron too, heroes run through arpeggios in the key of E, and thread passes down the sideline through the Dallas Cowboys defense, co-existent, and never mutually exclusive to our hopefully merely quirky and idiosyncratic politics, regardless of party, football and

rock and roll and New Jersey.

It sounded good, anyway.

Too good.

Bruce down.

Rodgers followed, out for the season, the second coming – not of Namath – but of Brett Favre as a Jet fused with that catastrophic Vinny Testaverde season, this written in real time (see below) as *Monday Night Football* unfolded in front of a finally baffled but victorious bar crowd.

The Clash of the Titans?

The shriveled fast-aging internal voice insisted that Bruce would return and Rodgers find a way to ice his Achilles, but short of Zach Wilson – of all people – and Taylor Swift (was there a Jersey connection there somewhere, or the Jonas Brothers, didn't they hail from Bergen) mustering some late chutzpah, for those seeking a massive mashup of personalities, mice scampered amid the ruins of western civilization otherwise known as the Meadowlands.

What had appeared almost culturally significant in the form of Aaron v. the Boss – turned into a

wretched old man's nightmare of an Achilles Tendon versus a Peptic Ulcer, while in other news in the country, an Emerson Polling Survey found Joe Biden, 80, and Donald Trump, 77, still ahead in Iowa but both losing ground.

At least in New Jersey sports and entertainment, the throne that towered above the marshes – after months of delusion, hype and mindless hero worship – looked suddenly up for grabs, as we wondered if a new generation could fill a power vacuum.





Shakur Stevenson of Newark:

The Sports Illustrated Cover You'll Never See



Imagine if Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier, and George Foreman had all decided they didn't want to fight Muhammad Ali. Or picture Sugar Ray Leonard shadow boxing in a ring without the accompaniment of Wilfredo Benitez, Tommy Hearn, Roberto Duran, and Marvin Hagler.

Now, Shakur "Sugar" Stevenson, the best super featherweight in

the world, isn't Ali or Leonard.

But his unique talent as a boxer – a skillster gifted in hitting and not getting hit – suggests he could be in a very special category – even, yes, great – if only he had the chance.

The trouble – in large part – for Stevenson is no one wants to fight him.

"Shakur Stevenson is willing to fight anybody in and around his weight class," Top Rank spokesperson Evan Korn told ESPN. "The fact that so many fighters have turned down the challenge is a testament to his greatness."

Earlier this month, Stevenson – a Newark native with a built-in base of Brick City fans – appeared locked into at least a somewhat interesting fight against undefeated contender Frank Martin, but the deal collapsed.

So, who will he fight instead?

Other fighters – champs – out there who offer truly compelling ring company – Teofimo Lopez, Devin Haney, and Gervonta Davis – don't want to put their titles on the line against a boxer whose speed, trickery and moves make opponents look befuddled, muddled, and kerfuffled.

Joet Gonzalez was supposed to be a tough opponent for Stevenson, who peppered his way to a lopsided decision win. Champion Jamel Herring was tough, a combat veteran, and Stevenson chopped him down in the tenth round. Oscar Valdez? Stevenson beat him up. Valdez was lucky to make it to the final bell that night. How good is Stevenson right now?

It's not hyperbole to say he's the best New Jersey-born boxer/fighter since the late, great Hagler, although Hagler – chased out of Newark by the troubles – fought out of Brockton, Mass, not Newark. So, Stevenson offers diehard Jersey fight fans a particularly compelling point of departure.



If no meaningful competitor wants to fight him, he has at least entertained a hometown crowd while running over his last two opponents at the Rock: Robson Conceicao (by unanimous decision) and Shuichiro Yoshino (TKO-6).

Stevenson's inability to land big names has a rather deflating – at least for boxing fans – sports context.

As he prepared to take on and ultimately beat Josh Taylor for the WBO and lineal junior welterweight championship, Teofimo Lopez conversed with Taylor and ESPN boxing commentator Mark Kriegel on April 8th. Taylor had made the trip from Scotland to sit ringside at the Rock to promote his upcoming bout with Lopez while Stevenson demolished Yoshino. Lopez made an appearance from Miami via satellite.

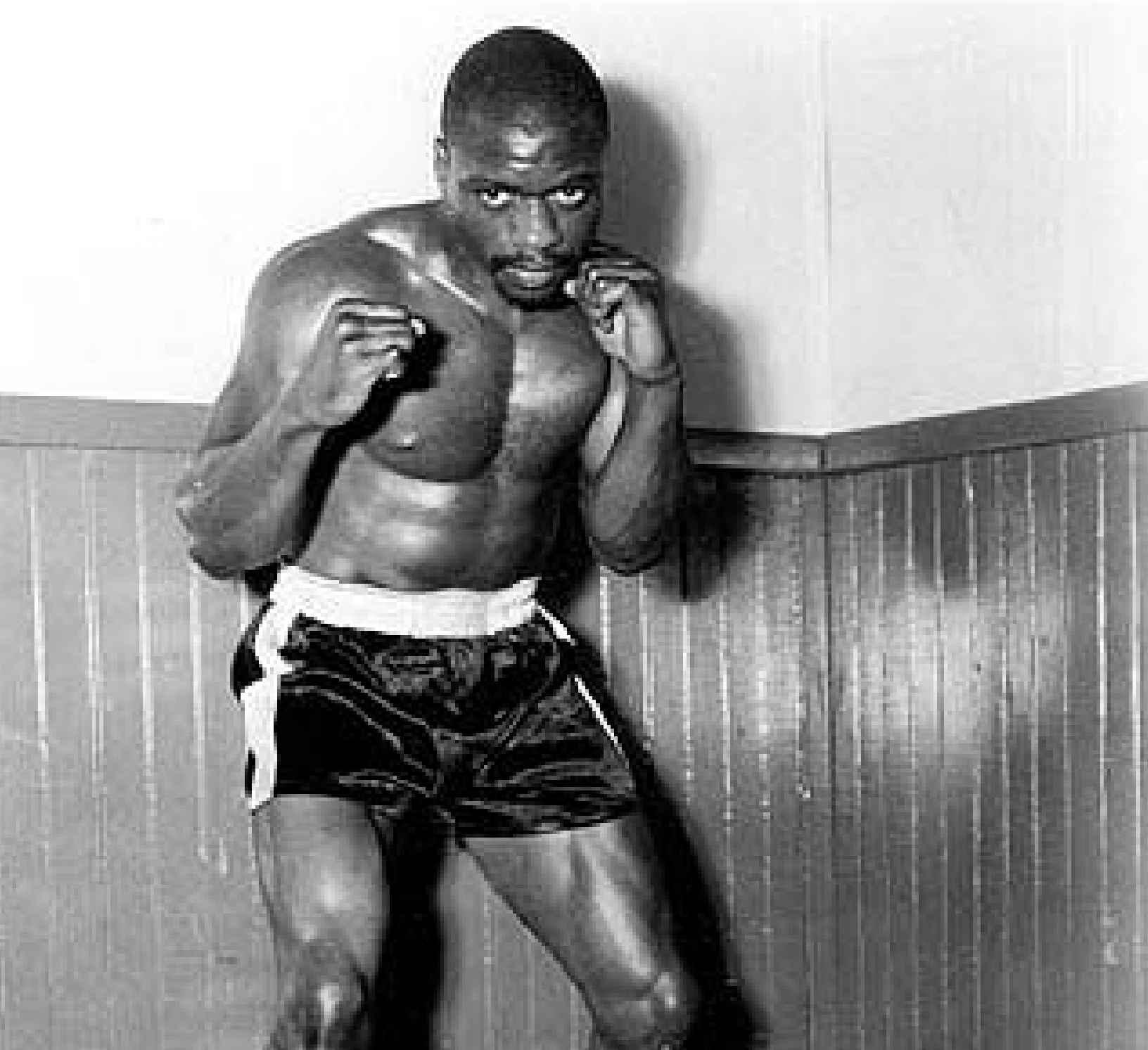
Back in the Mike Tyson era, Atlantic City rivaled Las Vegas as the fighting capital of the world. On that *Sports Illustrated* cover night back in 1988 when he knocked out Michael Spinks in Convention Hall in a single round, Iron Mike anchored what was then the richest fight in boxing history (\$70 million).

New Jersey was not only Atlantic City, it was the home of Madame Bey's Boxing Camp, where many greats trained, from Joe Louis to Sandy Saddler. It was also where Hurricane Carter lived, and the birthplace of Marvelous Marvin Hagler, and the Cinderella Man, James Braddock.



But Lopez – a Brooklynite who actually does train in the Garden State – acted like he didn't have time for that twinkling swampland west of Manhattan. He told Kriegel and Taylor, "I don't need to go to New Jersey. I've got everybody coming over here. I'm at the UFC [Ultimate Fighting Championship] 287."

In that short sentence, Lopez managed to cram several key pejoratives, namely the low esteem



**Agudath Israel
of America**
New Jersey Office

in which the boxing world holds New Jersey, and – candidly – the low esteem boxing holds for itself. This goes beyond a mere craggily poetic acknowledgement of boxing – like New Jersey – fitting the bill as little more than a rat hole of infestation and corruption. No, it's worse. A boxer fighting for a title doesn't bother going to New Jersey to promote his own fight because he's got everyone going to Miami where they're enjoying a mixed martial arts (MMA) event. It's not just disrespectful. It's dismal.

Moreover, it highlights the problem for Shakur Stevenson, whose fight against Martin was never going to be in Jersey, but Vegas, signifying a kind of irritating step up out of the state where people should be falling all over one another to get to the former two division champ Newarker.

The bigger problem for not only Stevenson, but for the sweet science, is that MMA replaced boxing as sports entertainment, in the worlds of one very grim veteran insider who works the traditional fight game, from Atlantic City to Newark and beyond.

“The trouble is,” he said, “is that most people think they can predict



the outcome of a boxing match. MMA guys, they may have multiple losses on their records, but they still draw a crowd because they're all wildcards. No one knows who's going to win. But in boxing now, everyone's so scared of losing, careful matchmaking assures that no one [at least no one important] loses.”

Or at least seldom loses.

It's kind of like New Jersey politics, post redistricting.

No one has any reason to show

up at the polls because insiders already preordained the outcomes. If *Sports Illustrated* once thrilled fans with coverage of the Tyson-Spinks showdown, now they feature a hapless boxing youtuber on the cover, as the magazine goes for profane showmanship over substance. No wonder Stevenson – the ultimate old school practitioner of boxing – can't catch a break. His backers hoped a recent rare upsurge of important title fights (Gervonta Davis KO Ryan Garcia), (Devin Haney WSD Vasilij Lomachenko) would compel someone important (preferably Haney or Davis) into

Shakur's wheelhouse.

But it hasn't happened.

Stevenson, again, can't even get Frank Martin in the ring.

Meanwhile, "UFC is targeting a December return to Atlantic City. Likely a fight night, this would be UFC's first AC trip since 2018," according to Crossing Board.

That's not just a throwaway title fight with a tomato can.

It's real.

Stevenson?

"I don't want to get into the com-motion, but I feel like nobody's really lining up to fight me," he told FightHype.com. "You see a lot of people's names, but you don't see nobody say my name."

The champ says his best shot at this point may be to try to smoke Lomachenko, a legendary former champ from Ukraine, who already lost to Lopez (in a close fight) and Haney (albeit a disputed decision). As for Atlantic City, don't completely count out

a boxing headliner at some point soon, but sources say he won't be a slickster like Shakur. The city does have a history of taking to knockout artists, like Mike, and may try to double back on that action.

Whoever surfaces as the next Kid Dynamite at the ocean, the Brick City phenom whom you'll never see on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* will probably sooner be in a ring alongside Billy Idol, dancing with himself.





ACT NOW
FOUNDATION

Dementia Center

Boardwalk Context



Governor Phil Murphy this year signed S3989/A5675, which establishes the Boardwalk Preservation Fund and appropriates \$100 million for the renovation and repair of boardwalks in Shore communities across the state. Primary sponsors of the legislation include Senator Paul Sarlo, Senator Michael Testa, Assemblyman Louis

D. Greenwald, and Assemblyman William Moen; co-sponsors include Senator Vin Gopal and Senator Vince Polistina.

The bill utilizes American Rescue Plan COVID State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds and appropriates \$100 million to the DCA to administer the fund.

Additionally, Murphy announced the official opening of the Boardwalk Preservation Fund's application process, managed by the Department of Community Affairs (DCA), which will remain open until October 31. As a crucial complement to the Boardwalk Preservation Fund in Atlantic City, the Fiscal Year 2024 Bud-

get also includes an investment of tens of millions of American Rescue Plan dollars toward infrastructure investments that will continue to drive the City's economic recovery and success, the governor noted.



“From Atlantic City to Asbury Park, for decades our state’s boardwalks have served as iconic fixtures in our Shore communities, contributing not just to their local economies but to their unique histories and cultural fabric as well,” Murphy explained. “Maximizing the potential of our boardwalks requires robust, forward-looking investments that will prepare them to endure the test of time and the intensifying impacts of the climate crisis. I’m proud to build upon Lieutenant Governor Oliver’s legacy as a champion of Atlantic City while we stand alongside elected offi-

cial on both sides of the aisle in support of these invaluable community assets.”

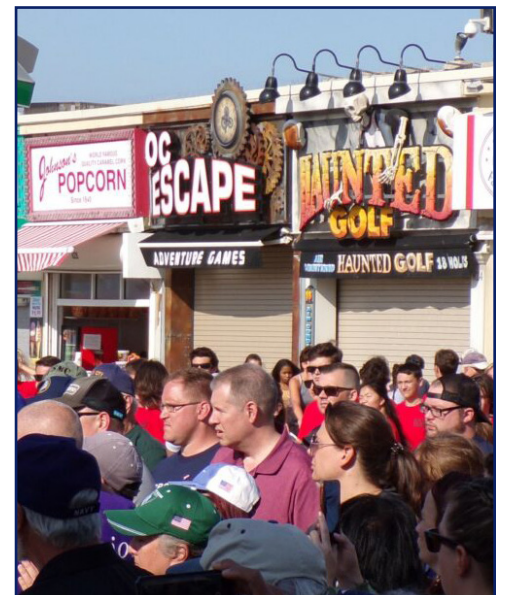
“Boardwalks are an economic driver for New Jersey tourism and generate millions of dollars in revenue for the state. The signing of this legislation makes a historic investment to improve the infrastructure of these iconic attractions,” said Testa. “The establishment of the Boardwalk Preservation Fund will have a significant return on investment by bolstering tourist appeal and opening additional opportunities for businesses to generate revenue. Most importantly, this fund will help our shore town communities preserve the historical significance of these structures.”

Municipalities, counties, or a combination of both who are awarded grants through the DCA Boardwalk Preservation Fund would be required to make a contribution or expenditure no less than five percent of the project’s cost. Under the bill, grant applicants who make a contribution or expenditure greater than five percent would be given preference by the DCA.

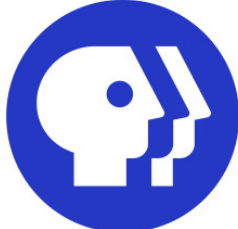
A grant applicant that has one of the highest fifty distress scores on

the 2020 Municipal Revitalization Index would not be required to make a contribution or expenditure under the bill.

“With the signing of this bill, we are making a monumental investment into our shore town communities which are the lifeblood of our tourism industry. The Boardwalk Preservation Fund will provide a significant boost to support the long-term economic success of the New Jersey Shore,” said Polistina. “Millions of people travel from all over the world to enjoy our historic boardwalks and beaches. This fund will help our shore towns preserve and maintain these popular tourist destinations by enabling them to construct and make necessary repairs to these critical structures and landscapes.”





NJ  **PBS**

Senator Mike Testa:

The InsiderNJ Interview

The state Senator from LD-1 once worked as a Wildwood lifeguard, so he knows something about South Jersey Shore culture. In the waning days of summer 2023, InsiderNJ went down to Cumberland County to talk with Senator Testa, at one of his favorite hangouts, Luca's Pizza.

We wanted to check in with the conservative Republican lawmaker about how recent legislative developments have impacted South Jersey, specifically life in and around the beaches.

A full transcript of that interview with Testa follows.

INSIDERNJ

Senator, how has cannabis legalization and the governor's and legislature's support for wind turbine energy impacted life at the Shore?

SENATOR TESTA

I think that South Jersey is a place that gets somewhat used and abused by those under the gold dome, by those who continuously visit every year and think that gem and our shore community is always going to be there. We're talking about a place that generates \$660 million in tourism tax dollars every year and yet, we have some crumbling infrastructure – roads, bridges, and our

boardwalks. I'm proud to say I helped fix that problem by supporting the \$100 million preservation fund (see above). Think about this, Wildwood, in order to replace their much trafficked and battered boardwalk, needs \$80 million. How can a town have that much sitting in a capital improvement fund? People travel from all over New Jersey and Pennsylvania – and Canada! – come here. Look, if we can afford a French Museum in Jersey City, I think we should be able to fund our Wildwood Boardwalk.

INSIDERNJ

But what about the culture created by cannabis legalization?

SENATOR TESTA

So many of our law enforcement agencies feel handcuffed. The culture has changed with the legalization of cannabis. I'm walking with my family on the boardwalk in Wildwood and my daughter says, 'Why does it smell like a skunk?' I don't think people want their kids exposed to that when they take them on a roller coaster or a Ferris Wheel. Law enforcement is handcuffed on how to deal with underaged drinking and those who are using cannabis on the boardwalk and beach in a dry town. A culture has changed when it comes to parents on senior week telling law enforcement officers, 'this is their time to cut loose before they go to college.' Look, I don't think any-

body wants to see youngsters have a lifelong record because they used cannabis once in Ocean City, but we want everyone to be able to enjoy the boardwalk. Avalon is not traditionally an unruly town but now we have to deal with this soft on crime culture emanating from the attorney general's office. Again, I'm not saying slap someone with a lifelong record, but think about how crazy it is if you have a group of ten youngsters five of whom are smoking marijuana who can't be arrested, but if the other five have alcohol, they could. That's a gap in the law."

INSIDERNJ

How has the tourism industry been impacted – or how might it be impacted or altered by the wind turbine debate? Talk about how all these changes – cannabis, climate change, which causes some people to not even think about going to the beach anymore because it's too uncomfortable to move, let alone go outside, let alone travel, and wind energy – interact.

SENATOR TESTA

What I am hearing a lot of is shop owners on the board-

walk, because of the culture spiked on certain weekends, like Memorial Day. What they get is shoplifting youngsters at Ocean City, and when shoplifters say 'get out of my store,' they're unruly. As far as the wind turbines, look, Orsted's own report said it will impact tourism by fifteen percent.

If all those projects are built, they may have no effect on climate change while offering the vista of red lights that will represent a Robocop-Bladerunner dystopian view

That's a lot. My concern is the industrialization of our oceans. I'm not a climate change denier but I don't necessarily believe it's caused by man. New Jersey is a drop in the ocean and if we're going to make energy changes and we're not going to have China India and Brazil doing the same things, we're

not accomplishing anything except green energy virtue signaling. If all those projects are built, they may have no effect on climate change while offering the vista of red lights that will represent a Robocop-Bladerunner dystopian view. We are the last bastion of being close with nature besides our beautiful state parks. In the summertime, nothing is more iconic than Tom Kean on the beach saying 'New Jersey and you. perfect together.' Who doesn't understand that – maybe only Phil Murphy, who summers in Italy at his villa. Those who want to fulfill a dream to buy a home in Sea Isle city or Mantoloking, for example, and then come face to face with a red light district in the ocean, I'm sure that's not what they had in mind. As for the impact of sonar mapping on porpoise and whale deaths I know the polling shows that people at least want a pause. What good is a boardwalk if people don't want to go to the shore? Proponents of green energy are saying this isn't a result of wind energy. I'm not a marine biologist but I want to get to the bottom of this. We must hear the message of anger sent to Trenton.

INSIDERNJ

Do you see a way to reserve the negative impact to the shore of cannabis legalization?

SENATOR TESTA

The legalization of cannabis has been very impactful in terms of keeping law and order in New Jersey. I have benefit of sitting on the Senate Judiciary Committee. People voted that cannabis should be legal, and I respect that, but the way it's been rolled out has been nothing short of a bureaucratic disaster. My colleague on the committee, Senator [Joe] Lagana brought up a great point. Youngsters are suffering the bad effects from Delta 8 and 9 because they're buying these products from local convenience stores, and now police officers have to deal with that. They're dealing with enough. The scariest piece of legislation we considered in the last budget session was wind energy, because it represents the first piece of a slippery slope that takes home rule away from municipalities and grants eminent domain powers to a foreign nation. This push to get green energy to happen – we

should take a look at other states more blue than us, that have taken a pause entirely. The commercial fishing industry is the backbone of South Jersey's economy. How will it be impacted? How will bats and migratory birds and our recreational fishing industry be impacted? I foresee people in watercraft banging into these things. People under the gold dome don't come here very often but they want to tell us how to run our lives. I have a real problem with that. This is a company that recorded profits and we gave a billion dollars in subsidies to Orsted, which conceivably will do everlasting damage to our tourism industry. On top of that, imagine if Orsted decides to sell to China. Now we have an enemy that has eminent domain powers off the coast of the Jersey Shore. The 9.3 million New Jerseyans deserve answers.

I'm told I'm not supposed to read the comments on Facebook and Twitter. And indeed, some people are just hateful trolls but others have insight, and what I see consistently from both sides, the Sue Altmans of the world, or from the far right, is that they want

transparency and accountability. Dare I say the Murphy Administration has been less than transparent and less than accountable.

***INSIDERNJ***

How do you see all of this impacting South Jersey elections this year?

SENATOR TESTA

Considerably.

During COVID, the Murphy Administration took the legislature completely out of the game, and many of the wins in 2021 – including Ed Durr's win over Steve Sweeney – were due to the fact that the Murphy Admin had overstepped their bounds. I'm a constitutionalist. I believe in the sep-

aration of powers, and three separate but equal branches. Under an emergency look at countries like Sweden and states like Florida, which did a much better job than we did. This year we will see a continuation of that, a reaction to that. Bill Stepien said of my 2019 win in the first legislative district that it was the tip of the spear. Again, in 2021, there was nothing bigger than the upset in LD-3, and now that Senator Fred Madden, an old fashioned blue dog Democrat with a lifelong career in law enforcement, is not run-

ning for reelection, LD-4 is an extremely winnable race for the GOP. Talk to most people. There has been a chilling effect. The Murphy Administration is afraid to admit the mistakes they made during the COVID era, the pain caused to third generation business owners who came to me and said, 'I'm going to lose this legacy and I have no power to fix this.' Trenton sees the tourism industry as the golden goose that is never going to go away but I don't know how many golden eggs Cape May can lay if there is a dystopi-

an Bladerunner Robocop red light district in our sea, which will eliminate 15% of the tourist trade. Most companies can't sustain a 15% loss and survive. In addition, Route 55 is essential at this point. It's the fifth or sixth most dangerous evacuation route in the country, vulnerable to a one-hundred-year storm. You want to run a route perpendicular out of there, not parallel. The governor has this energy master plan, but my people need transportation not electrification shoved down their throats.

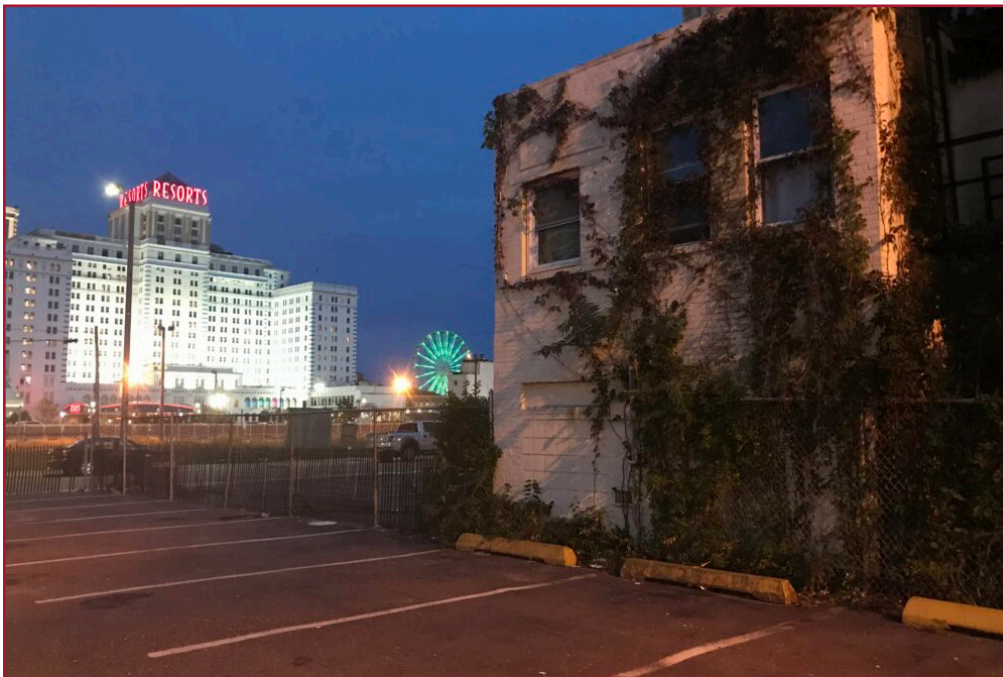





AMG
ADVOCACY & MANAGEMENT GROUP

Smoking, Gambling and Family Fun:

What is the Future of Atlantic City?



The ride from the highway to Atlantic City feels like the plank a gangster walks before he falls off the edge into eternity.

He sees before his eyes all his past sins, like ghoulish pictures captured and blown up on billboards.

Racked above the swamps.

Then he teeters over into damnation.

Alright, maybe it's not quite that bad.

Or maybe it's worse.

We won't know, will we, until the end, or immediately after the end.

But for years, New Jersey's public men have told us, and sworn they mean it sincerely, that they no longer want Atlantic City to simply symbolize our own little local answer to Sodom and Gomorrah, that gloomy getaway from the ravages of suburban boredom.

They, in fact, want to align AC with the rest of Jersey, at least that part of the state that prioritizes family.

Now, there's some evidence that these same guys – or some of the ones who are still here after all these years – actually see this as a viable playing piece on Atlantic City's crumbling Monopoly board.

Atlantic City Mayor Marty Small:

"Never before has the city been in this great position in terms of di-

versifying offerings to attract families – and you know that I love family,” Small told InsiderNJ.

This past July, the Showboat Casino opened the largest indoor waterpark in the world.

Let’s do that again.

The largest indoor waterpark in the world.

In Atlantic City.

“It’s no mistake,” Small said. “It’s happening now, in a city where the mayor loves entertainment, and in particular family entertainment. The waterpark is a reality, and it’s going to be a game changer.”

In addition, Small noted in his state of the city address this year, as reported by The Press of Atlantic City:

Dave & Buster’s is preparing to open a location in Tanger Outlets The Walk by Oct. 16, a representative of the company told The Courier Post. The 21,187-square-foot restaurant and entertainment center will be located at 2120 Atlantic Ave. in the building that used to house the 40/40 Club, a sports bar and lounge co-owned by rapper Jay-Z from 2005 to 2012.

“That’s family entertainment,” said the mayor. “A lot of people are watching to see what’s going to happen next.”

Small maintains that the city has a good relationship now with the casinos and with the state.



There’s synergy there, and, yes, legitimate hope for the city’s nascent family friendly footprint.

But others express continuing skepticism about the state’s capacity to prop up the casino industry long-term, especially since only two (or three, depending on whom you ask) of the seaside Samuel Taylor Coleridge pleasure domes are actually doing well financially, and essentially carrying the others. Governor Phil Murphy approved a post COVID casino aid package totaling \$55

million, before the industry reported roughly \$767 million in gross operating profit in 2021. In addition, an insider described all the talk about family and AC as primarily aspirational and marketing driven as a way to expand the gaming market post 2007 recession. The real comeback for those who toughed it out is, in part, online gaming tied to their in-person experience, which has been entertainment for adults.

“There’s a lot of construction because hotels are always trying to stay ahead of the next door neighbor,” said Mike Laughlin, president of the South Jersey Building Trades. “The Hard Rock and Ocean put pressure on the others. The flow is steady. Not as great as in Atlantic City’s heyday, but it’s there. There are quite a few projects out there. The biggest thing on our radar is a casino smoking ban. If that’s implemented, we believe we could lose two to three casinos.”

It’s a delicate issue.

It’s a family issue.

And Laughlin concedes, “How do you say as building trades, ‘We want you to smoke in the casinos?’ What about the people who

work in that environment?”

The Hard Rock and others are looking at ventilation alternatives and best practices to find a solution. The casino revenues apparently come from the top five percent of gamers, and 80% of them smoke.



It's hard core at the Hard Rock, and it's a bit of a problem, not just there but everywhere, or anywhere here trying to reconcile a burgeoning family image with smoking.

It's one problem among many.

Forget, for just a moment, the decades-long weigh-down of corporate greed and bad government, not to mention the uptick of competition from Pennsylvania and New York and the wildcard of internet gaming. Forget for a

moment the NJ legalization of cannabis dropping like bomb run of horse manure on family boardwalk dreams.

Being generous:

“We still don't have that family friendly gateway on the expressway,” Laughlin told InsiderNJ. “The issue is Atlantic City is a two-night destination not like Vegas, which is a week-long town. Atlantic City still hasn't leveraged the ocean and the beach. At Ocean Resorts, you can look out and see the ocean from the floor.”

A good development.

But most of the others are struggling to stay afloat.

Bally's could be in a bad way if the smoking ban hits.

The long-stalled development of Bader Field could impact the city significantly, as investors kick around plans for a racetrack, and accompanying recreational apartments, townhouses and a marina.

Atlantic City will know if it's real by the end of the month.

What is real, in the meantime, is that waterpark.

“We'll see this winter how it fares,” said Laughlin. “It's a big attraction. It looks great, like a place you'd want to take your kids, and we didn't have that before. Every beach, every shore community, has its thing. Families? That's Sea Isle and Stone Harbor. Atlantic City, though, could be all of that, not to mention the amount of available land. We just need some more businesses to come in. Dave and Buster's is good, another good addition. Another family addition. You can picture families going to Applebee's then going to play games at Dave and Busters. But there are other places. The abandoned Hilton by Stockton. That place has been empty. There's great potential there.”



There's supposedly great potential, too, in the old Trump Plaza, toppled in 2021 to mark the ignominious cascade of the Man-

hattan socialite turned shore crawler in the eighties, turned TV reality show star, turned president, turned indicted candidate for president.

The ruins of the plaza smolder downtown.

“It’s no secret what Donald Trump’s history was here,” said Small, scornful of the grifter casino owner’s delinquent record with casino workers.

“We knocked the place down in the name of health and safety,” the mayor added. “It was a hazard. Debris falling. A flying piece of metal could have killed people if something fell from 20 stories above. Now the property’s up for sale.”

Trump provides a convenient target for those of us now trying – kind of – to climb out of the city’s past, and the state’s past, a wasteland emblem of all the worst excesses of regional corruption, as

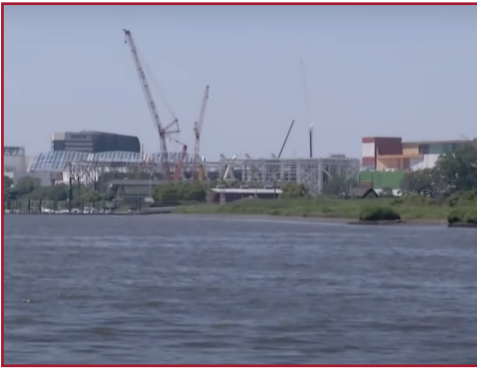
if Atlantic City and New Jersey could juggle Trump off to the country to assuage an acid bath of sins, or at least delay, for a term or two or maybe three, that swampy, family-bereft and godless expressway to damnation. “That’s their mess out there, those goons who voted for him in the heartland and stormed the capital,” we tell ourselves, as the end of the gangplank doesn’t arrive, yet, and we face the same battered horizon beckoning on the shoreline.





Malamut
& Associates^{LLC}
ATTORNEYS AT LAW

Albeit Changed, the Never-Ending Race still Entertains



Likely gone for good are the days of guys who look like Robert Mitchum and Sterling Hayden in fedoras with ticket stubs in their overcoat pockets and Jane Greer and Jean Hagen on their arms as they all crank through the turnstiles on their way into the race-track.

“The newer, younger generation is not going to go for a night out to gamble on horse racing,” veteran South Bergen state Senator Paul Sarlo (D-36) told InsiderNJ. “They need other things to be involved. They need other

attractions, other opportunities, to bring excitement. They’re not going to get that by sitting there watching ten horse races. That’s not going to excite them.”

But you add a trendy bar, food, sports, TV, music and football games – or maybe March Madness – and the horses running through that in the background.

Now, you got something.

“You get that element that makes it more attractive, and horse racing is still alive and well,” said Sarlo, who ought to know.

The Meadowlands, that bastion of harness and horseracing, sits in his legislative district.

Sarlo notes that it’s a billion-dollar industry, still connected to horse farms throughout New Jersey,

and the people who live on them, run them, and breed horses.

“We’re one of the few states in the country with open space of this kind – horse farms. *We’re not Kentucky*,” he added. “But it’s still alive and well. It has to be done in conjunction with sports gaming and or other things, as I said. We put about \$20 million to \$30 million in this year’s budget to strengthen the industry. If I’m running a Meadowlands corporate party, I might have a cigar night on the rooftop. Get some food and beverages and see a bunch of races. Or if I’m doing a political fundraiser with college football going, and I can bet on races coupled with other opportunities, that’s it.”

The Meadowlands Racetrack held its first harness race on September 1 of 1976, and, according

to the research of Laura DeSiena of New Jersey Digest, “continued to expand into sprinkles of Thoroughbred racing in 1977.” “The original advertising campaigns featured a slogan pulled directly from “Racing with the Moon,” a big band number written by bandleader Vaughn Monroe in 1941.”

But that beguiling moonlight eventually evaporated, at least for horse racing, at least for then-Governor Chris Christie, who in 2011

threatened to crack down on state horse track subsidies. A budget hawkish Christie put Monmouth Park – the Central Jersey sister track to the Meadowlands – on the chopping block. Eventually the New Jersey Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association and the state reached an agreement and kept the track open.

“I still believe Monmouth and Meadowlands are two viable tracks,” Sarlo said. “They keep us in the industry. Standard breeds

and thoroughbreds.”

Even if you won't find too many old school types slumped in the stands with visions of the ultimate heist racing through their brains, actually keeping the tracks afloat on the strength of ripped ticket stubs, “Not many lawmakers will say we have to dismantle horse racing,” said Sarlo, and maybe those worlds aren't so far apart, after all.





CWA

Monday Night Football

(Written, with Apologies, in Real Time)

The barmaid hails from Southern California and a few weeks ago I saw an Indian parked out in front of the bar and went in to tell her to be on guard. Those bikers have their own underground rivalries, and I know she loves her Harley. So does her father, who actually named her Harley.

But this bar stool rivalry was on another scale.

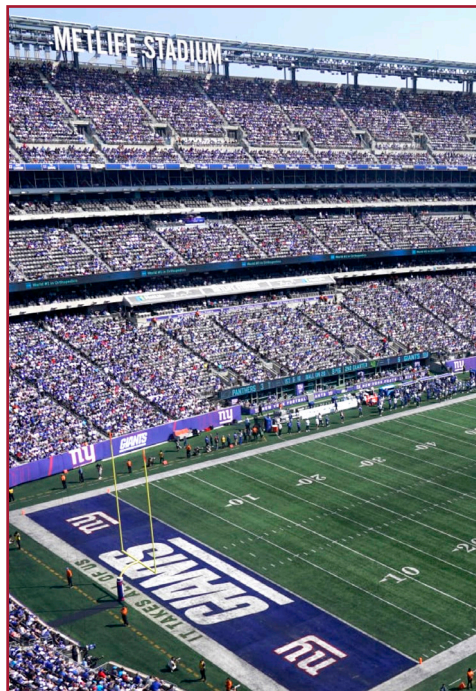
And no, I don't mean Giants versus Jets for the football soul of North Jersey.

Apparently, that would-be collision died last night when the Cowboys formally buried the Giants at the Meadowlands.

Sorry, I forgot to mention that this piece is written by a worshipper of

the Jets, who are right now moments away from tramping onto that very burial ground in the stadium they shared with that late, sadly aforementioned team.

No, right now, that rivalry the size of or bigger – yes, bigger – than



Harley Davidson versus Indian, is the New York Jets versus the Buffalo Bills.

Not to twist my cleats into the dirt any harder but, let's face it, the Giants hype machine had a singular pre-season mission, and that was to inflate expectations for their franchise to New York Jets proportions.

I ran that by my InsiderNJ colleague, Fred Snowflack.

"Oh, absolutely," he said.

I've learned something about politics over these years, and haven't retained much, but one thing I do know: a cynical Jersey reporter from Hudson County like Snowflack doesn't use absolutes like that unless he actually means them.

(Of course, he's also – second big confession coming up – a Jets fan).

That makes him weak-kneed when it comes to our team.

To be fair, we aren't fair weather fans.

Neither of us.

But nearly overnight, the Jets acquisition of Aaron Rodgers had turned Zach Wilson-bedraggled barflies – into world beaters, never mind that the classically hapless franchise hasn't won a Super Bowl since 1969.

A brass band accompanies Rodgers onto the field and when he executes his first-hand off, he nearly upends the bar.

I'm beaming.

I'm practically standing on the bar.

Even Harley looks concerned.

On the second play of the game, Rodgers almost gets sacked but throws it away instead and to hear the reaction here when he evades a humiliating take-down, you'd think the Jets had just won the game.

Moments later, Rodgers gets sacked and it's bedlam.

Wait a minute now.

Rodgers is... limping... off... the field??????

Zach Wilson (of all people!) comes on.

The bar has gone silent, if not utterly belly up.

I look around.

The mood is positively funereal.

Moments later, Rodgers (courageously? LOL) refuses a golf cart conveyance off the sideline and hobbles toward the locker room.

Ah, you Giants fans, you magnificent guys, you. What a storied history, what a ridiculous anomaly last night as you continue- yes, you do - to nobly crusade toward a Meadowlands-springboarded Super Bowl, maybe against the... Buffalo Bills, whose cheering section here at the bar has suddenly overtaken the place.

I can't think, it's so loud – let alone write.

I want to go outside to see if there are any Indian motorcycles idling nearby, so I can warn Harley.

But she looks like she can handle herself just fine.

At least the old *Monday Night Football* theme sounded heroic.

That soundtrack is old, almost as old as me, or Namath.

The Buffalo Bills fans have taken over the bar.

I turn to the poor guy in a Jets jersey on the accompanying stool.

“Do we start a bar brawl,” I ask him amid the ongoing howls of Bills, “or does that just make us look weaker?”

His head is face down on the bar.

Editor's Note (written on the Tuesday morning following the game)

The Jets would actually go on to win in overtime against the Bills, 22-16. Watching Rodgers go down on the first drive was akin to seeing Russ Tamblyn as Riff removed from 'West Side Story' before he even gets a chance to sing the Jets Song. But the whole team rallied, including last year's bust at quarterback, Zach Wilson, perhaps proving that hero worship, or holding onto an old guy just because he has a recognizable name, doesn't always win the game. Maybe there's a political message in there somewhere.