

## Spotlight On: FHBPA President Stephen Screni

It wasn't the lure of cashing big on a cold trifecta that first drew Florida HBPA President Stephen Screni to horse racing. He didn't dream of one day standing in the winner's circle at Churchill Downs on the first Saturday in May, not back then. It was a fascination with the diverse crowd at Suffolk Downs in East

Boston that hooked him from the start.



"I just loved it from the minute I walked in, it was like walking into Disneyland for me," said Screni, who started going to the track when he was 16. "I love the mix of people. At the track, you'll see a father and son spending a Saturday afternoon together next to the guy who owns the Florida Panthers, you see the jockeys and the agents; I love that there are people from all walks of life, everybody focused on the horses in the starting gate."

Screni himself has blue-collar roots. His father was a tailor, his mother worked on occasion while raising five children. But when it came time to choose a profession, the native New Englander took a different path, earning a business degree at Suffolk University before electing to branch into law.

"It was more of a career decision rather than a love for the law," Screni admitted. "After I graduated from Suffolk University, I worked in the restaurant industry, but that's nights and weekends and it's not a good fit

for a balanced life. I bought a liquor store with a partner, and put myself through law school at night. It was a lot of work."

The long hours paid off. Screni was in the top 10 percent of his class at New England School of Law and passed the bar in Massachusetts in 1993. But just shy of 30 at the time, he was looking to make a move.

"It was a time in my life when I could make a change, and I wanted something different," he said.

Screni sold his liquor store and headed south, settling in Ft. Lauderdale. He passed the bar in Florida in 1995, intending to use his legal acumen to augment his business practice, but things did not go as planned.

"My objective was to find a business opportunity that suited me, but I took a position with a small firm in the interim, and never left the practice of law," Screni said, adding, "That's how life changes unexpectedly."

Screni's firm handles business transactional matters and includes real estate and probate divisions, but he specializes in contract law. He has built a client list that includes the business agents of athletes and entertainers, leading to some noteworthy assignments. While still with the small firm, Screni coordinated the criminal and civil defenses of Ron Artest after the "Malice in the Palace" that saw the NBA champion charged for a brawl between the Pistons and the Pacers in 2005.

After going out on his own, Screni forged a bond with NHL star Alexander Ovechkin through his business manager, George Landa.

"Alex had just signed the [\$124 million deal in 2008] and his team asked me to review his contract," Screni said. "I told George we could go out and have a beer and I could look it over, but I wasn't his attorney yet and I didn't want to give a legal opinion."



NHL Photo

The relationship strengthened over the years. Screni signed on Ovechkin's attorney, and became his certified agent with the NHL in 2012. In addition to Landa, Ovechkin's team also includes his wife Nastya, his parents Tatiana and Mikhail, and longtime marketing agent David Abrutyn, who has signed deals with Coca Cola, Nike, Gillette, Capitol One, Verizon, Papa John's, Hublot Watches, and Fanatics, to name a few.

"It's been a pleasure to work with the team," Screni said. "They are very talented and Alex is truly a great guy. It's been so much fun. He's chasing Gretzky's all-time goals record and he has a really good shot at it."

He added, "He's considered to be one of the top 5 who have ever played, so you don't get a lot of pushback when you're negotiating on his behalf. He's like Secretariat."

Screni has not been so lucky to have a horse like Secretariat in his stable. A fan of racing since those after-school trips to the track as a teenager, Screni dipped his toe into horse ownership while going to law school in the early '90s.

"One of our customers at the liquor store asked me and my partner if we wanted to buy into a horse," he said. "We said, sure. Of course, he came back with two horses instead of one."

Screni's first horse was a filly named Smart Maiden who won her share as a solid \$5,000 claimer. But the next couple of purchases did not fare as well, and Screni stepped back from racing. Soon after relocating to Florida, he reconnected with his now wife Cindy, who had made the move ahead of him. The two were married; daughter Lia was born in 1997, and son Bradley came along the following year.

"I got busy with life," Screni said.

But after his legal career took off, he was in position to get back into the game.

"I had a couple of nice things happen in my career, and my wife said, 'why don't you buy a horse?'" he remarked. "I didn't know anyone in racing at that time, but I met Greg Kaufman at my son's Little League game – he had on a T-shirt with the logo for his stable, and Cindy started asking him questions. We saw him at a few of the games, and he asked me if I wanted to get in on a horse."

Screni was back in the business.

"We had a lot of fun – we had Bushmill's Best, he won the OBS Championship, we thought for a short time we might be going to the Derby, but he got hurt," he said. "I also owned a talented filly by the name of Ollgonewile with Chester Bishop. She won the Georgia Debutante and Sweetest Chant. Don't ask me why we named her 'Oilgonewile' – Chester named her and to this day I still don't understand why he spelled 'wile' with and an e."



Karakatsie, Lauren King/Coglianese Photos

doing great."

A decade after getting back into racing, the attorney decided to use the skills honed as an advocate for the interests of athletes to advocate for the interests of horsemen. He was elected to the Florida HBPA Board in 2015, and found himself named president of the organization when Bill White stepped down in November of 2017.

"I've always felt that, truly, owners fuel the sport, but they are not involved enough," Screni said. "I wanted to represent the owners, to give them a voice."

He added, "When I came in, I wanted to bring balance to the Board. I wanted to narrow down our focus, and get the organization to stick to its grass roots – negotiating with management, dealing with safety and benevolence issues, preserving and growing the purse account, and working on the legislative issues we need to pay attention to. And I wanted our Board to figure out how to work together."

As with many of the plot changes in his life, Screni had not planned to assume the role of President of the Florida HBPA, but after four years at the helm, he is gratified by the experience.

"Our Board has done a lot of good," he said. "We were at complete odds with the breeders when I stepped in, that relationship is much better now. We're really doing a good job in Tallahassee, we have a great lobbying team in Jeff Johnson and Amanda Stewart. We have a productive relationship with the Stronach Group."

"It's been very rewarding," he continued. "It's tough, we work hard. But our organization is taken seriously and respected, and that's a reflection of the entire Board."

There have been many changes since Screni first stepped through the turnstiles of a racetrack, but the allure of the sport has been a constant.

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else on a Saturday afternoon," he said. "It's not the betting, it's not the action, it's just being at the track. I love it."

Screni has yet to celebrate a graded stakes winner, but he has had his share of victories. His favorite horse was Risk Factor, a \$4,000 steal as an OBS August yearling who was runner-up in the 2014 Grade 3 Mr. Prospector Stakes at Gulfstream. His latest stakes runner is Karakatsie, twice stakes-placed at Gulfstream earlier this year and fourth in the Grade 2 San Clemente Stakes at Del Mar this summer.

"I thought we had a shot to get our first graded win with Karakatsie, but she got hurt," Screni said. "She had a hairline fracture, but she had surgery and she should come back 100%. She's