

NEWS RELEASE

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CHRIS SAMAHA, FOUNDER OF BACKSTRETCH ASSISTANCE PROGRAM, NAMED RECIPIENT OF 2026 BUDDY RAINES AWARD BY MONMOUTH

OCEANPORT, N.J. – Dr. Chris Samaha, who founded the industry-leading Backstretch Community Assistance Program at Monmouth Park more than 30 years ago, has been named the 2026 recipient of the Virgil “Buddy” Raines Distinguished Achievement Award, it was announced today by Monmouth Park.

The Raines Award, currently in its 31st year, is presented annually prior to Monmouth Park’s season opener. It honors men and women who have demonstrated a continuing commitment to the sport of Thoroughbred racing as an owner, trainer or administrator, and whose conduct has been exemplary for professionalism, integrity and service to the sport.

Monmouth Park’s 81st season of racing gets underway on Saturday, May 9.

The 55-year-old Samaha, a sports psychologist, launched a substance abuse program for backstretch workers in 1995 that has since involved into a support system for all types of health issues. The program offers free counseling, as well as health education programs, for licensed stable hands, grooms, hot walkers and exercise riders and offers access to a variety of medical screenings.

Samaha resides in nearby Shrewsbury, N.J.

“I would have burned out long ago if it was strictly a treatment program, but I have all of the other components that help everyone on the backstretch, whether directly or indirectly,” Samaha said. “I’m passionate about what I do and I would not have stayed in it this long if I didn’t believe this a good industry.”

Samaha’s program features a free lunch program for backstretch workers and he provides Thanksgiving dinners for those workers prior to the stable area closing for the winter. Free medical clinics and screenings are key components of the program as well.

The list of previous Raines Award winners:

1996: J. Willard Thompson

1997: Danny Perlsweig

1998: Warren A. "Jimmy" Croll
1999: Joe Pierce Jr.
2000: Peter Shannon
2001: Dennis Drazin
2002: Sam Fieramosca
2003: Charles and Marianne Hesse
2004: Janet Laszlo
2005: Richard Malouf
2006: John Forbes
2007: Ben Perkins Sr.
2008: Gerald and Carolyn Sleeter
2009: Joel Kligman
2010: John Tammaro III
2011: Frank Costa
2012: John Mazza
2013: Ebby Novak
2014: Chuck Spina
2015: Bob Baffert
2016: Ed Barney
2017: Bob Kulina
2018: Mike Musto
2019: Tim Hills
2020: Leonard Green
2021: Bill Anderson
2022: Millie Fleming
2023: Pat McBurney
2024: John Bowers Jr.
2025: John Heims