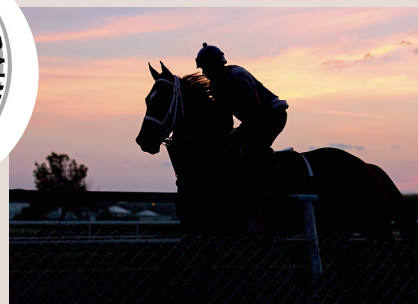


ALAN F. BALCH

IT'S AMAZING...



It's amazing what can be accomplished when nobody cares who gets the credit."

This saying has come to me often in the weeks since Thursday, December 7, 2017, when a catastrophic wildfire claimed the lives of scores of racehorses at San Luis Rey Downs in Bonsall, California. Several hundred others throughout the area were successfully evacuated to Del Mar and elsewhere amidst the chaos. Dozens of horsemen were injured in one way or another trying to save their animals, three of them seriously, including one grievously.

Different leaders in politics and sports have had this aphorism attributed to them, including most prominently American presidents Harry S Truman and Ronald Reagan, as well as coach John Wooden. Indira Gandhi offered a companion idea, "My grandfather once told me that there were two kinds of people: those who do the work and those who take the credit. He told me to try to be in the first group; there was much less competition."

Without any concern about getting credit for their generosity and work, response to this tragedy from the world's racing and broader equestrian community has been staggering. And fulfilling. It renews one's sense of pride in our sport and all our stakeholders. In the goodness of people generally, their love of horses and of those who care for them.

From the moments when the nearby smoke was first sighted, throughout that day and night, and since then, all antique and modern communication methods were mobilized. First, to fight the fire and to attempt evacuations. These were hours of anguish and then heartbreak, little understood by those who have never seen or experienced a wind-whipped California wildfire, and its random, unconquerable devastation. Then, immediate and unhesitating welcome and management by the leadership of the Del Mar Fairgrounds and Thoroughbred Club, to receive hundreds of horses with impeccable organization, commitment, and skill. Veterinarians, van drivers, and a flotilla of equestrians with horse trailers united in the effort. As a sleepless night then fell, countless citizens and leaders of

the sport alike went to work all that night long, separately, independently, and then together, to organize the relief effort that would follow.

When dawn broke Friday, the Del Mar Stable Gate was virtually overwhelmed by the general public: horse lovers from every point of the compass had simply arrived to help, offering to do anything from mucking stalls, to feeding, to walking to ... anything asked of them as volunteers. They brought with them their own grooming and mucking supplies, tons of carrots, blankets, clothing, toiletries, feed, buckets, halters, lead ropes, and all the rest. The horses were first in mind; nor were their caretakers forgotten, either.

Brass from California's racing associations, horsemen's organizations, and regulators, convened informally on the backstretch to organize and divide



ARE WE MEANT TO TAKE MORE THAN WE GIVE OR ARE WE MEANT TO BE KIND?

AS SUNG BY BURT BACHARACH, JANUARY 2018

duties and responsibilities. This effort itself was mammoth, given that every aspect of the sport's governance had roles to play, from identifying and reuniting lost horses with trainers, to commencing fund-raising for relief of the afflicted, to ensuring the best medical care possible for those injured, whether human or equine. Not to mention determining how to return to training and racing routines.

Virtually everyone involved was on his or her best behavior. Questions and disagreements (and there were many) rarely resulted in even a raised voice or an accusatory tone, which is quite astounding since we in racing are so accustomed to that! Very, very few adhered to our painful past performances.

Overnight, two strains of thinking on essential fund-raising for relief had taken

shape, and they merged as one before noon that day. Two racing associations led the effort to arrange an Internet GoFundMe account, and launched it in response to overwhelming public demand. The California Thoroughbred Horsemen's Foundation, the statutory organization for backstretch welfare in the state, stood ready to receive and raise more dedicated funds and disburse them. Small supervisory groups were formed with representatives of horsemen, management, and regulator. The result was over \$1 million in funding and supplies in less than a month, including the holiday period.

Without citing President Truman's maxim, or perhaps just sensing it without even knowing about it, one prominent horseman had already stepped forward. He insisted on anonymity, and asked how he could fund an immediate and significant cash infusion himself for each member of the backstretch community at San Luis Rey from the destroyed barns, without benefit of tax deductions and organizational support, in order to provide the benefit more quickly. After a weekend of administrative labor to reconstruct all the worklists, those funds were disbursed individually within a few days. Others immediately sent truckloads of tack, supplies, and living essentials (and even luxuries) for the backstretch community.

The backstretch at San Luis Rey is a microcosm of the sport, mixing trainers of the smallest barns with ever bigger ones, all the way up to the mega-stables. How to fairly, efficiently (and especially quickly) allocate cash and other relief throughout this disparate community, among those simply inconvenienced by the evacuation as well as those whose barns, businesses, livestock, and even health were destroyed, became the paramount concerns.

For those directly affected, this was literally a life-changing event, and no amount of relief, cash, and well wishes can overcome the pain, sorrow, and actual losses. But it did affirm, for all the world to see, the commitment of horsemen to each other, and their brave dedication and love of their horses above all else. ■