

ALAN F. BALCH

ANTICIPATING NECESSITY

Looking back over 2019, it seems to me this has been The Year of the Bromide. Our own *annus horribilus* in so many ways, including having to endure so many of those truisms, many of them dubious, owing to racing's regrettable circumstances.

"Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger." "The darkest hour is just before dawn." "There is no I in TEAM, but ME is in there somewhere."

And my own personal favorite: "Stress is the confusion created when one's mind overrides the body's basic desire to choke the living s**t out of some a**hole who desperately deserves it."

So, yes, if there's one thing we've plenty of, it's stress. As an enterprise, humor aside, all of us in racing are stressed as never before; not the least of that stress is trying to determine what's been happening, why, and how we can correct our course.

It seems to me that the root of our problem is cultural. Other sports, when distressed, can resort to multiple remedies including constant rule-changing when faced with fundamental problems. Tennis invented the tie-breaker to eliminate endless boredom. Basketball adopted the three-pointer for excitement and closer competition. Baseball re-organized its leagues, designated hitters for pitchers, juiced the ball, defined wild card teams, and improved drug testing. Football is finally concentrating on player safety . . . too late?

But we have an animal to nurture and protect. We're fundamentally different from all other sports. How human culture treats animals has been evolving since the beginning of time, and that won't stop.

In horse sport, we who have always preached animal welfare are now confronted by those who no longer speak in terms of humane husbandry, but instead of animal "rights." Football players choose their game; horses do not, even though they're bred for it. Racing's rabid enemies vehemently argue that "no animal can be required to participate in any activity without its informed consent." Seriously. That means your pets and even your choice of food are at risk, according to these advocates, not just horse racing. And any leisure activity involving a horse or any other animal.

Absurd, you say? No, it's not. I've been in front of several governmental authorities this year when these arguments have been made. And have been received seriously and solemnly. They underly, stimulate, and spread the entire worldwide opposition to racing we are seeing more and more every month. Our experience and the media coverage of it at Santa Anita this year, and elsewhere, has given our enemies a platform and influence with media and journalists they always had but never before could exploit as they do now. We belittle them, fail to understand them, and ignore these arguments and their consequences, at our peril.

A year ago in these pages, I actually praised The Jockey Club's annual Round Table, for a change, on its enlightening and productive conference. This year, I wish I could do the same . . . but with one exception, that's impossible.

The industry had a rare opportunity this August to listen to an expert who should also have been understood deeply: David Fuscus of Xenophon Strategies, which deals with crisis management and communications. Anyone whose company is named for the founder of horsemanship and cavalry command is someone we should take seriously. The complete transcript of his remarks is readily available.

After pointing out that every crisis, however dangerous, offers opportunity, he stated very simply that "the first rule of crisis communications is to end it." That is, end the crisis, take the actions necessary to correct the situation, and then clearly communicate that to the public. But most often, he said, industries



don't "end it" because they don't observe one or more of the four fundamentals he then described: engagement, transparency, responsibility, and meaningful actions.

After detouring through non-racing case studies for illustration, he pointed out that many elements of racing are engaged on the current crisis, but not coordinated on a clear message or solution. As to transparency, there is no unified narrative, so we're perceived by the public as "cloudy." While we admit to being responsible for a problem, we don't actually define or even agree on just what it is. Meaningful actions? We are a long way from ending the crisis, despite the serious steps begun in California and replicated elsewhere to improve safety.

Here, then, was a golden opportunity for The Jockey Club to set out explicitly what should have been and needs to be done. As an expert, who understands racing, Fuscus could have helped us understand and begin developing the fundamental "engagement" he said we required. But what happened? Instead, he pitched the Horse Racing Integrity Act, as did the following two speakers, one from the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). Each was at great pains to try to connect that same old, divisive Jockey Club legislative project (which deals exclusively with an authority for uniform national drug and medication rules) to what ails us now. That can't be done, at least in anything close to the bill's present form, which even detracts from the engagement, transparency, responsibility, and meaningful actions we need! Moreover, eliminating race-day Lasix and funding the United States Anti-Doping Agency would not improve our safety metrics, and might well even worsen them, all the while calling more attention to our sport's supposed "cheaters and abusers."

Was it a coincidence that the 2019 version of this legislation was introduced March 14 in Congress, simultaneously with California's United States Senator and Santa Anita's Congresswoman in