

ALAN F. BALCH

ANTICIPATING NECESSITY



Looking back over 2019, it seems to me this has been The Year of the Bromide. Our own *annus horribilis* 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.

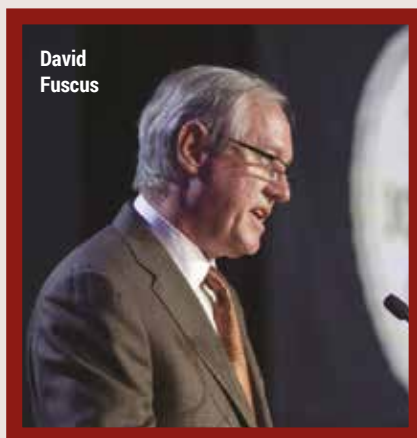
In horse sport, we who have always preached animal welfare are now confronted by those who no longer speak in terms of humane husbandry, but instead of animal "rights." Football players choose their game; horses do not, even though they're bred for it. Racing's rabid enemies vehemently argue that "no 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

Washington calling for racing at Santa Anita to be stopped? I doubt it . . . since the HSUS political operatives were working over Congress in support of that legislation at the very same time Santa Anita had been closed for track renovations.

Does anyone seriously believe that the enemies of racing wouldn't see through the smokescreen of that federal legislation in a heartbeat, were it even possible to enact, and could turn its passage into the rightful accusation that it would do little or nothing to improve safety? Worsening our perception problems?

To achieve true engagement of the entire American racing industry on this crisis, The Jockey Club, National Thoroughbred Racing Association, Breeders' Cup, National HBPA, Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association, California Thoroughbred Trainers, Thoroughbred Owners of California, New York Racing Association, Churchill Downs, The Stronach Group, National Turf Writers and Broadcasters Association, Association of Racing Commissioners International and each major racing state's commission, should be invited immediately to appoint delegates of racing's wisest and most experienced to a leadership council. Unwieldy? Maybe not so much – there is so much overlap and duplication among many of these organizations that

preliminary conversations could well lead to a manageable number. In any event, the first task of these Supreme Overseers would be promptly to elect a much smaller, more effective steering committee to organize an exceptionally serious closed-door brainstorming and consensus-building strategy summit prior to the end of this year.

Engagement is job one, remember, to coordinate on clear messaging and solution development. Everything else flows from that.

And remember too, as I've written before, that we are in this situation because of our increasing failure over decades to observe the most basic principles of horsemanship and racing management, and adapt to cultural changes. Breeding a more substantial, sound horse is fundamental to its welfare; so is that horse's proper management and the proper management of the conditions under which it is raised, trained, and raced. There is enormous room for improvement in these basics.

As daunting as those tasks, or more, is grappling with public perception. The culture of "animals are people, too" no doubt started with human domestication of and care for animals. That began with dogs around 15,000 years ago, researchers say, and other animals around 12,000 years ago. It no doubt seemed only "natural" to begin naming particular domesticated animals and even ascribing human characteristics to them. What we now call "media," beginning in the early 1900s, intensely stimulated this process: Felix the Cat was "born" in 1919 and Mickey Mouse in 1928. Motion pictures and the advent of "talkies" literally gave these animals humanistic lives, and the race to anthropomorphize virtually everything was on.

Think of it: we started naming mammals, then expanded to fowl (Donald Duck), and as media attention exploded,

just about everything else: insects, fish, even inanimate objects such as cars and natural phenomena like storms and winds. This all seems to be an innate tendency of human psychology, and some believe it actually helps to keep humans happy and grounded.

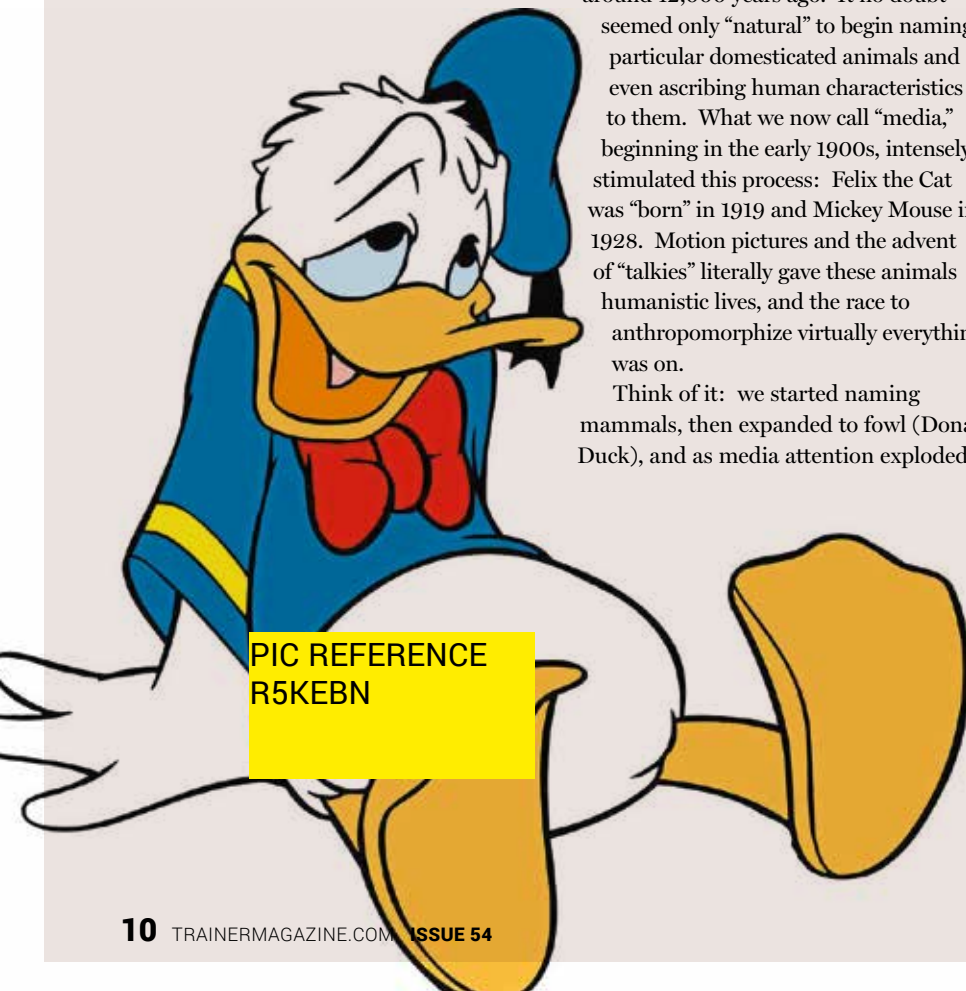
Pets have come to be part of the typically affluent American family, of course, and are treated as such. Prior to World War II, pets were far less common. But now, expenditures in the United States alone on pets mushroomed from \$17-billion in 1994 to an estimated \$75-billion this year. Almost 70% of American families now own a pet, and pet marketing is based fundamentally on ascribing human characteristics to pets, as each of us sees every day in media and markets if we have our eyes open.

Is it any wonder, therefore, that animal "rights" has taken over from animal welfare, in an unthinking way, by so many in our political and media leadership and influencers? I freely admit that I didn't understand the distinction myself until a few months ago, and I have little doubt that only a relatively small portion of the American public has given these issues much more than a passing thought. Which is exactly what animal "rights" extremists are banking on. The status and emphases of organizations like the 4-H Club and Future Farmers of America have been transformed as the nation has transitioned from less rural to more urban economies, and understandings of livestock husbandry have been diminished drastically and increasingly in the last 50 years.

It is in this very fertile soil that racing's enemies are multiplying, flowering, and prospering, while we flounder to respond. To end a crisis. To save our sport's reputation and the very sport itself.

If racing is to survive in anything like its present reach and magnitude, our leadership, our cavalry command, must act like Xenophon, with care for and husbandry of the horse above all else. They must urgently develop our strategy, anticipating the necessity of changing in harmony with the cultural evolution we can all see. Now. And we soldiers in the cavalry – whether breeders, owners, trainers, veterinarians, regulators, or marketers – must execute their fully developed national strategy without reservation and with massive financial, emotional, political, media, and public relations support.

There is no realistic alternative for ending this crisis. **T**



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