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“THE TRAINERS”

Over the last 65 years, since I first was a horse-crazy kid, doing anything I could to be with these animals, I’ve spent an inordinate time around horse trainers. To begin with, it was simple hero worship. Why, why, why ... it seemed like every time I opened my mouth, that was the first word out. Why does a horse do this or that? Why do you do this or that? Since most of my time was spent mucking, feeding, watering, cleaning, raking, brushing – and relatively little time doing what I wanted to do much more, riding – I had plenty of time to observe and wonder.

Looking back now on those earliest days of my equine consciousness, I guess it should be said that the best trainers are patient. With children (and fools) like I was (and am). And with their horses, which one famous horseman described to me as like “the dumbest child you might ever be around.” And he meant that in a positive way.

The first horses I knew were not even what I might have later called park hacks. But I was in awe of them. I remember their names, just as you would: Joe, Maude, Sugar, Ginger, Marine, Banjo, Elvis, Sunburst, and a dozen more, including my favorite, Sox, who was a refugee from some race track, somewhere. They were rented by the hour, to sailors on the shore in San Diego, for birthday party rides, and matrons who had grown up in high society and their children. In those days, the 1950s, “horseback riding” was a thing to do, and rent stables abounded ... to the professional trainers who owned and ran them, they were a gateway to the show ring, to competitive riding, and to clients with money.

By the early 60s, I had also discovered the race track at Del Mar, earlier at the horse show during our county fair, then the races and summer sale, which brought layups and yearlings to be broke to the stable I worked at in La Jolla. Race horses that were too slow but still sound were the primary source of hunters and jumpers and dressage horses in those days. Horses from the major California tracks that had ultimately been relegated to Caliente, across the border, or to the many auctions conducted in those days, found their way to the show ring. Including my first competitive



LEFT: Hall of Fame trainer Charles Whittingham with a bust of himself located in the paddock at Santa Anita.

horse, a gray gelding by Mahmoud, bred by Mervyn LeRoy, who had topped the Keeneland sale as a yearling. As I learned on my first day working at Santa Anita much later – when I discovered chart books and the American Racing Manual – he also once had held the course record there for about a mile and three-quarters on turf, in 1954.

Until a little over ten years ago, in racing or otherwise, I was always a suit – I never had worked for a trainers’ organization, although I had been in plenty of intense negotiations with horsemen’s groups from time to time, and had owned any number of horses to ride and compete myself, but not to race.

So, I now know about horse trainers, nationally and internationally, from almost every perspective, through many decades of experiences. And if there’s one thing I’m certain of, it’s that those individuals in politics, management, or the media, or as regulators, or administrators, who speak of “the trainers,” just don’t know what in hell they’re talking about.

Stereotypes of any category of people (or horses) may be entertaining or malicious, but are likely dubious in the most important respects. That word comes from the Greek – and literally means a “solid impression.” Those who traffic in stereotypes often use and enhance them viciously, as we have come to learn. Sadly, Repeating such stereotypes endlessly only makes their “impression” more solid. Just ask a lawyer. Preferably one with a sense of humor.

“Get a group of ten horse trainers to discuss any subject and you’ll get at least a hundred opinions.” There’s more than a germ of truth in that, and I console myself with it when I hear management or regulators or journalists pontificate about what “the trainers” will do or say or believe in any instance.

Early in my days representing California trainers, I remember vividly the reaction I got when I spoke of the “intellectual capital” the professional horsemen might bring to a problem we were facing. An outburst of laughter and head-shaking greeted that! One prominent owner we were meeting was even more shocked at my reaction. I told him it might not be the same kind of firepower he was used to dealing with in his boardroom of fellow millionaires, but it was just as valuable and even more so when applied to horse racing. After all, I lectured, didn’t he spend a literal fortune on horses? Didn’t he then place them under the care, custody, and control of a “mere” horse trainer?

To those of us who know and really like horses, trainers deserve and receive our undying respect and appreciation. And I’m not mainly talking about the exceptionally rare individuals who have achieved fame and riches ... because, just as with horses, Mother Nature only makes a relative few with that kind of talent (whether in horsemanship or otherwise). Fortunately, she makes relatively few scoundrels, too, whether equine or human.

No, it’s the overwhelmingly large number of trainers you’ve never heard of that I’m talking about. The people that commit themselves and their help to their horses 52 weeks a year, at all hours day and night, every day. They run small, unique, difficult businesses that never close. They deal with all the human problems the rest of us do, and an unfathomably large number of equine risks, issues, and behavior – and that of their owners – mostly without complaint.

Why do they make this commitment? Why is this the life they’ve chosen?

The next time you hear someone bash “the trainers,” please tell them the answer. **T**