

## ALAN F. BALCH

## ARTISTS OF THE AIR

**T**here are ever fewer of us around who can clearly remember the world before the advent of television. And the Internet.

But as I thought about the retirement of Trevor Denman, and all his illustrious contributions to American racing, nostalgia overtook me. As it does quite often these troubling days.

Those of us who have been around for eight decades or more remember when sports were largely heard, not seen. If you couldn't get yourself to a ballpark, or college football stadium, or race track (there really weren't that many of them, considering the size of the United States, or any country) in the 1940s, or earlier, you followed sports on the radio.

Baseball games were often, even mostly, recreated, with appropriate sound effects. Believe it or not. I was just a kid when I realized that the pop of the ball into the glove was phony, because it was the same for each pitch. Same thing for the sound of a batted ball! The crowd effects were ridiculously similar from inning to inning and park to park. The telegraph wires provided the "facts," and the announcers re-created the action. Someone named Ronald Reagan began his career doing that kind of sports announcing.

Then there were the movie theater newsreels, which almost always had the leading sports. You could "thrill" to Clem McCarthy calling a race, whether it was the first Santa Anita Handicap in giant clouds of dust, or Seabiscuit beating War Admiral at Pimlico, and actually see them. After having heard them on the radio when the races were run.

So, the radio was how racing first came into my life. And into millions of other lives. Joe Hernandez was the original Voice of Santa Anita. He called its first 15,587 consecutive races, never missing one at the winter meeting, from Christmas Day 1934 until he fainted at the microphone in January 1972, and died several days later from the effects of being kicked on the backstretch at Hollywood Park during morning training. That iron-man streak was one of the most remarkable



achievements in sport, in its own way, ranking up there with Lou Gehrig's.

Countless of us, particularly throughout California, only knew racing through Joe's lilting, accented radio calls, all beginning with his booming, "There they go!" — whether from Santa Anita or Del Mar or tracks in the north. "From the foot of the majestic San Gabriel mountains, this is your announcer Joe Hernandez at spectacular Santa Anita," he would intone, and your imagination took over. Just like it did in other sports on radio, when the artist was ... well, an artist!

Hearing him from childhood, live and also re-creating the day's races, hawking "Turf Craft winners" for a sponsor, I couldn't believe my good fortune meeting him when I was first employed at Santa Anita. We immediately started using his artistry in commercials, and he gifted me with all his old recordings, which he had meticulously kept since 1934. I pestered him constantly, and he was an unsurpassed raconteur. He unhesitatingly told me the greatest race he called was the Noor (117 pounds, Longden) and Citation (130, Brooks) battle in the 1950 San Juan Capistrano. They hooked each other for almost the entire mile and three-quarters on the main track. Noor won by a nose. Let your own imagination take over: "the two raced head and head for five-sixteenths, the lead see-sawing back and forth, in the most protracted drive," said Evan Shipman in the American Racing Manual. "They were to continue locked

**LEFT: The Joe Hernandez bust, located in the Paddock Gardens at Santa Anita.**



right down to the wire, where, with the luck of the nod, the camera caught Noor's nose in front." Broken down by quarters, the race reads: 24, 23.4, 24.3, 25.3, 24.3, 24.3, 25.3! Citation led at the mile and a half mark, two-fifths faster than the American record at the time; the two set a new track record by almost six full seconds, and a new American record.

His 1940 call of Seabiscuit becoming "a new world's champion" in the Santa Anita Handicap still rings in my ears, from the souvenir we produced, "70,000 fans going absolutely crazy, including your announcer, and he broke the track record, it's up there."

Is it any wonder that a bust of Hernandez graces the Paddock Gardens at Santa Anita? Perhaps the only such recognition for a race caller in the world?

As Joe's most luminous and artistic successor, Trevor has long-since joined the pantheon of the world's great artists of the air waves, but in an entirely different era. With the advent of racing being televised lived, he couldn't have gotten away with any of Joe's famous antics: he once sat down after calling the horses through the stretch to the wire off the hillside grass course, when they still had another mile to run. Waking up to what had happened as the horses turned into the backstretch, with his customary aplomb he simply blew into the mike and tapped it twice, then proclaimed, "TESTING, TESTING," and continued as though there had been a power outage.

Having once yearned to be a jockey, Trevor's viewpoint has always been unique. He asked permission to walk the courses at Santa Anita his first day. Asked why, he said to me, "I have to see everything from the riders' perspectives." He was the first American caller seamlessly to integrate the riders' names and styles in his pictures, as he painted the race. He also seemed to know instinctively just how much horse each jock had at all times. If you listened carefully to his tenor, many were the times when you knew who the winner would be at the half-mile post.

Still, all the tributes to him can be summed up very simply: he has been, in short, "UN-BE-LIEVE-ABLE." **T**