

## PRINT, RADIO AND TELEVISION COVERAGE IN THE AGE OF SIMULCASTING

*Bill Heller - free-lance writer and president, United States Harness Writers Association*

*Alan Kirschenbaum - co-creator and executive producer of the CBS comedy Yes Dear, head writer of ABC comedy Coach, and harness racing owner and driver*

*Debbie Little - harness writer, New York Post*

*Rob Longley - harness writer, Toronto Sun*

*Phil Pikelny - Director of New Media, Landmark Broadcasting*

Stan Bergstein: Next is Print, Radio, and Television Coverage in the Age of Simulcasting. Bill Heller is an award-winner freelance racing writer and president of the United States Harness Writers Association. Alan Kirschenbaum is a co-creator and executive producer of the CBS comedy Yes Dear, writes sessions for Everybody Loves Raymond and was head writer of the ABC comedy Coach. He also is a harness racing owner and driver. Debbie Little is the harness writer for the New York Post. Rob Longley is the harness writer for the Toronto Sun and Phil Pikelny is Director of New Media at Landmark Broadcasting. Bill Heller, you are in a distinct and unique position, unfortunately a minority position, of being someone who writes both harness and thoroughbred racing. I'm going to ask you to kick this discussion off.

**Bill Heller:** I'd like to talk about four different areas very briefly. One is resources. Is the material there when you need it? I have been based in upstate New York for 30 years. Every year, Michelle Blanco, who is the PR director of Calder Racetrack in Miami, sends me a media guide. I get a call from a magazine. They want a story on Oriental Park in Cuba, the former racetrack where all the horsemen wound up migrating to southern Florida. I have that yearbook. I look it up and there is every bio and stat waiting to be used—very, very helpful. Every single year I get a media guide from the Breeders Crown, which happens to be well done, so it's there when I need it. By contrast, only once or twice have I ever gotten a media guide from Yonkers or the Meadowlands, which I've been writing about for over 25 years. The only way I get one is by calling up and asking for it. I don't think that's a good thing. The U.S. Trotting and Pacing Guide, a wonderful resource, is hit and miss every single year. The last Harness Handbook, with the bios of horsemen, I received was eight years ago. Trotting and Pacing Guide doesn't have statistics for trainers, which I find interesting in covering both sports. I don't know why there really is no credit given to trainers. Almost every horseman was a driver-trainer 20 years ago. That's no longer true and there are no trainer statistics. It's just something that is not addressed. It would be very helpful if it were.

The second brief thing is attitude. I call up Yonkers Raceway or the New York Racing Association, for example. Depending on whom you get when you make a request, “I’m doing a story on something,” you hear the sigh in the background—“Here we go again.” I was asked to do a story on Lafitte Pincay and called up Santa Anita, which I never write about. The person who answered got Lafitte Pincay and called me back in half an hour. Those are two different approaches. I think the second one is more helpful.

The third area I want to mention is responsibility. Terry Meyocks has been the president of the New York Racing Association for better than 10 years. I frequently have written very negative things about the New York Racing Association. He’s called back every single time in the last 10 years—100%. By contrast, a certain general manager of a New York harness track beginning with the letter “Y”—I don’t want to use names but Bob Galterio, who is a wonderfully nice man—returns about 50% of his calls, is very quotable and does a great job. One particular time at Yonkers there was a rumor, as there is almost every single year, that Yonkers was going to be sold the next day. I called him up in the afternoon twice, no return call, tried him that night, no return call. It happened to be in August and I’m covering Thoroughbred racing at Saratoga. I’m sitting in the pressbox with a very good friend of mine, Bill Finley, writing for the Daily News

at the time. I called Bob Galterio that morning and never got a call back. Bill Finley says, "I just heard Yonkers is going to be sold." He calls Bob Galterio and leaves a message. I say to Bill Finley, "Good luck, he'll never return the call." By the time I finished saying those six words, he returned the call. I told Bob Galterio about it and he said, "Oh, it was just a mix-up." A common courtesy that most of us would do for any single person is to return the call. Let us do our jobs. You may not like the job we do, but return our phone calls.

The final thing I want to touch upon is cohesion and consistency. There are very good things that are in thoroughbred racing that aren't in harness racing, and vice versa. Thoroughbred racing has a very elitist view sometimes, which is just maddening. However some 30 years ago, thoroughbred racing decided that multiple awards were not a good thing. There were three different bodies, three different awards. They created the Eclipse Awards and the impact was obvious. I don't think, and most media people don't think, that we're serving the sport of harness racing by having the Dan Patch awards from the Harness Writers, the Nova awards from HTA, the O'Brien awards in Canada. I don't think it helps the sport. The Triple Crown in thoroughbred racing. If you go into an OTB parlor and ask somebody "When's the Kentucky Derby?" odds are somebody will say, "The first Saturday in May." You go in and ask "When is the Cane Pace?" nobody's

going to know that answer. Thirdly, the Breeders' Cup and the Breeders Crown both started the exact same year, 1984. The Breeders' Cup concept was to put them all together on one day and obviously it's worked very well. The Breeders Crown has tried a lot of different approaches but it's not set on one day, one night of championship racing. A lot of people think that maybe it would be better served that way. Thank you very much.

**Stan Bergstein:** Thank you, Bill. What harness racing needs is a serial on prime-time TV in which the good, the bad, the blemishes, the advantages, the beauty and the ugly are all portrayed with characters who are involved with harness racing. Alan Kirschenbaum can address this topic.

**Alan Kirschenbaum:** I think that it's a very good idea and of course it would probably take the only person working in network television nowadays that is interested in harness racing, which would be me, to do it. It's never been harder to get a television show on television. This is probably one of the oddest paradoxes because there've never been more television networks, there've never been more stations, there've never been more ways of delivering programs to the public than there are right now. But because of the fact that some of that is an illusion, that a few big companies control almost all of that, it would take a great deal of passion

and leverage and all the planets aligning correctly for anything like that to happen with any television show nowadays.

I can't say I could walk into a network and say, "Hey, I've got this great idea, it's a show about harness racing," and not be met with great indifference. At the same time, if I could walk in there and say, "I have this show and what it's really about is a family of people, in the way that any great cop show is really about a family of people, or any great sitcom is really about a family of people, and the backdrop to this all is harness racing," I think that somebody at this point in my career would say, "Well, go write a script and we'll take a look at it when it comes in." It helps, of course, that the show that I'm doing right now is Everybody Loves Raymond and it's one of the top five shows on TV. You get a certain amount more leverage that way.

I'm convinced in my heart that there's no reason why that show couldn't be popular and watched on TV. I've kicked the idea of a movie around in my mind for a long, long time, not a TV show. But you could do the same in a TV show. I think it speaks a little more to everybody who's interesting in putting harness racing on television, even if it's just racing. Breeders Crown shows, nightly simulcast shows—I think you could construct something where you tell eight

different stories over the course of a movie or a show and by the time of a race that would take place at the very end of this project, you could have people rooting for every possible horse in the race just based on the strength of how you've told the stories of the people connected with that horse, or the horse itself. Leave people with an incredibly ambivalent feeling. I think most people watching a race, and I think this is a weakness of the way harness racing and thoroughbred racing as presented, have no idea of what each race means to the people involved in that race. We have so many races. We have 15 races a night sometimes, or 13 races a night, six nights a week. Every race therefore cannot mean that much, because there's too many of them.

If there were less of them and we were able to communicate to the public—then the question is are we communicating this to the gamblers who watch the races every night or trying to reach a public beyond that—what it means to every trainer, driver, groom, owner. Pick one of those people for each horse for every race and tell those stories well. To me, that has always been the only way to get people interested in any form of racing.

The horses, despite what we all think here, all look alike to most people. The drivers all look alike. They're not. Their stories are not the same. Their stories

are drastically different and, from the time I was involved in harness racing publicity and television through now, there has never been enough time trying to communicate those things. Nor the resources to communicate those things. I remember when I did the Breeders Crown shows. We had enough money and time when we got someplace to do one feature over the course of a half-hour. It's not enough. For me, the only thing that's going to help new people become interested in this sport is these dramatic stories that go along with each horse.

In some ways, a television show would be the perfect way to do it but you would need a lot of powerful people behind it. Probably more powerful than I at this moment, but should you all go home and watch my show and get everyone you know to watch my show, then it would be more likely.

**Stan Bergstein:** Phil Pikelny of Landmark Broadcasting.

**Phil Pikelny:** Many of you may remember the horse Rambling Willie. I had the great honor to work with Don Evans on the book, *Rambling Willie: The Horse that God Loved*. At this period, Don Evans did not intend to write one more book. The reason that book came out is because there was a producer in Hollywood who asked, "Is there a book on Rambling Willie that I could base a made-for-television

movie on?" That was really the reasoning behind that book coming out and the tour for the horse. We, by the way, made more money optioning that book than we ever did from writing the book.

The book was optioned to Disney. This was the Disney that at the time was putting out Herbie: The Love Bug movies. They shied away from doing that made-for-TV movie because there was way too much religion in the book. The gambling didn't bother them but the religion had them all freaked out. Ken Adams was the guy's name, who then went to CBS and he was on the verge of signing a made-for-TV deal, again, on Rambling Willie, until the people who were in power at CBS decided that there was way too much gambling in this story. Didn't care about the religion, that actually was a positive, but it was the gambling that really put the kill on it.

Pat Boone did the foreword for the book. Pat Boone is an individual with clout in Hollywood who, from having done State Fair, has a great passion for harness racing. That is why he wrote the foreword for the book. He did his album of acid rock or hard rock songs, which totally surprised the country and got him back in everybody's view. He then bought the option for the Rambling Willie book. The problem was his rising star fell just as quickly as it went up and the option expired.

There are stories out there. There are people wanting to do things like that. It's hitting that home run— that really outside chance of getting the right story to the right people and getting the money committed.

**Stan Bergstein:** There was some question when we turned Hoof Beats into a color magazine, whether there were going to be enough features to run in it. When I left USTA and Hoof Beats, I had 36 stories that George Smallsreed had scheduled to shoot. The point being that there are a hundred stories on every backstretch but not enough publicity people assigned to the backstretch to write them. I worked for Western Harness Racing, when there was racing in Hollywood Park and Santa Anita, and I was assigned to the backstretch and not allowed on the front stretch. All I was assigned to do was write features from the backstretch. There were 10 newspapers then in Los Angeles, there's one or two now. Phil, I know you have some ideas of what harness racing should do about television, so why don't you briefly tell us about them.

**Phil Pikelnny:** I have the wonderful life of being able to live where you guys are going to be five years from now, and by the time you get there five years from now, it's my job to be where you're going to next.

One of the things that you need to know is the major change in media that has happened since 1994 to this point. 1994 is when digital happened, basically the Internet, for a simple term. When you look back at all the changes from 1994 to the year 2000, basically one specific thing happened that made the Internet such a major force in all of our lives. That one thing is the way that individuals relate to, and the habits they have with, a computer. We got to the point where we believe we can go to a computer and, whenever we want, can find any piece of text in any form anywhere anytime. Get right to it without anybody getting between us and that piece of information. That's a major change from where we were in 1994, and the way consumers became empowered by the Internet will keep the Internet moving as we go forward.

But what also happened at that same time is the federal government decided that the television that we watch today, which is analog, meaning I send out a signal from one of my two TV stations. Landmark owns the CBS affiliate here in Las Vegas and we own the CBS affiliate in Nashville, Tennessee. In analog television, one signal, one program, that's it. You get what we send you, you watch it when we give it to you and that's about all that television can do.

The interesting thing about the Internet and television is, even today as big as the Internet has gotten, people spend three to eight hours per month with the Internet. People spend seven hours per day with television. So you can imagine how important television is in people's lives. A number of years ago the federal government decided television was also going to be digital. So what does television going digital mean? Basically what it means is more choice. Whether it's cable, satellite or over the air, where I used to have a signal that went out and one program could be on it, now I can have a signal and four programs can be on it, simultaneously airing to your television set. You can go to channel seven-a, channel seven-b, channel seven-c, channel seven-d. That's change number one.

The other change that digital has brought is that we are no longer in the business of doing programs. We are in the business of moving 19.4 megabits per second out into the community. That's a huge pipe, a huge amount of data that we can send out. What if you can't be at home to watch the data when I send it out? There are now machines called digital video recorders, personal video recorders, TiVo, Replay, Ultimate TV—it's all one technology. It's basically a box that receives a television signal and lets you watch it when you want.

I can guarantee you the big change that's going to happen to television is, just like with the PC, people will come to believe—and I think young people already do believe—that they can go to a television and get any piece of video anytime they want it, anywhere they want it. We've seen it happen with music, that's what Napster was all about. I don't have to go out and buy an album that has 10 songs that somebody at Warner Bros. told me what those songs would be. I go out and create my own album with my own songs.

What that means as a business, and this gets to the very end of what I'm talking about, is we've been digital at KALS-TV for 2 years now. KALS-TV makes, in an average year, \$30 million worth of revenue from the TV station that we have. In two years our digital signal has produced \$80,000 in revenue. That's a small number compared to what we're used to, but it is probably \$80,000 more than any other TV station in the nation has generated off their digital signal.

Where the world is headed is people will find the video that they want, and there's a problem of minus and a plus for people like Alan. The minus is that selling to the network is not going to be where his money's made, because networks who schedule television that we watch are going to recede into the background as time goes on. But people like Alan will be able to take the shows that they create and

be able to truly get them delivered to you without that middleman. Build their own audience and be able to own the consumer who will watch whatever that next show is.

That same opportunity sits in front of the harness racing world. You've each got eight to 10 TV stations in your community. They have digital signals but haven't figured out how to monetize them. They can take a portion of that signal and give you the opportunity to create a racing channel, part of it being live and part of it sending programming to a box in people's homes for them to watch when they want to watch it.

It can be done today. All it takes is a digital TV station. The cost will be somewhere between \$250 to \$300 for the box that goes into the consumer's home. If you turn your thinking around, of the economics of how you do business, and say, "I could take every one of my best customers and, for a customer acquisition cost of \$250 to \$300, put a box in their home that they simply hit a button and get information on racing." It could be the program, features, the live races, when they go on. Now all of a sudden, working with a local broadcaster, you as a racetrack can own the consumer. Can have a box that reaches that consumer's affinity, their passion — hence the Affinity Channel. You will find about eight revenue streams

that I can mention just sitting here that all of a sudden open up to you beyond simply being the betting revenue that you currently tap into. So that's what Affinity Channels is about.

**Stan Bergstein:** Going to print media, we have two reporters here who write for two major urban newspapers. Their editors, I believe firmly, don't consider harness racing a sport. Debbie Little works for the New York Post, Rob Longley works for the Toronto Sun. Debbie, ladies first. Give us your view, and obviously now the dual view of it, because your husband works for the New York Daily News. So give us the family story on harness racing in metropolitan area.

**Debbie Little:** Does my editor think that harness racing is a sport? Not anywhere near as much as thoroughbreds. Harness is that "other" sport we have to report on occasionally, but no, it doesn't matter to him nearly as much as thoroughbreds do.

I can echo a lot of the comments that Bill was saying before. It's very hard being a reporter and trying to get information in the paper when people do not want to supply you with it. It's very frustrating, you feel like you waste a lot of your time. I was talking to someone today from Northfield Park. Walter Case Jr. is very well known in the New York area, obviously raced there for years. The night that he

was supposed to win his 10,000<sup>th</sup> victory, I had to call six times to find out if Walter got that victory. Actually he didn't the first night, but the reason I was trying to do that is I also write for Times: in Harness magazine and I was trying to make a deadline with the magazine, as well as with the newspaper. I kept calling and their announcer, who's a very nice guy, kept telling me, "No, finished second. No, didn't make it. No, he's unhappy and doesn't want to talk to anybody." He ended up getting it a couple nights later and again I made phone calls, but it was very difficult because they are short-staffed, as are most places.

Back in the late 1980s when Tom Cosentino was at Yonkers Raceway, he made a point of knowing who everybody was at all the newspapers. There were about 13 of them then. I know this because I used to work communications for him. He would come up with individual stories and send them to the New York Post, and then a different story and a different angle would go to the Daily News. That doesn't happen anymore.

I think part of it is that so many people rely so heavily on Ellen Harvey and Gen Sullivan at Harness Racing Communications. They are two people who do a hell of a tough job. They can't write 12 different stories to send out to different places,

it can't happen. I think the tracks are relying too heavily on them and doing nothing themselves.

The problem that I see with my newspaper is that we've shrunk in size. We've got new color presses and color is the focus that we now have. Because of that there is less space. The type is smaller. Things get squeezed out. A couple months ago Monticello Raceway had their system crash and we weren't able to put results in the paper. A couple days later we almost didn't put entries in the paper. I called Monticello and said, "Hey guys, get this fixed or the entries may never go back in the paper." Cliff Ehrlich made it happen. They got it fixed because if you take it away suddenly my boss is going to say, "Those Monticello entries are gone. We've got more space to put in something about the Mets or the Yankees or the Nicks or the Nets. It's a very tough market. Thoroughbreds are always going to get more space. My paper happens to focus on what New York City OTB is putting out there. When the Prix d'Amerique happened, I had to go to say "Look this is a really, really big race. Everybody knows who this horse was. Please, please, please put it in for next edition." I begged and pleaded with the right guy. You kind of bargain with people and you say, "Look, somebody cares about this," and sometimes it works. When the driver of the year got announced, I fought to get Stephane Bouchard, who was the top driver at Yonkers Raceway, into the

paper. I can tell you it was not like Yonkers was trying to publish that, which they should have been. They should have been calling. They should have cared about that. Getting back to the point with Tom Cosentino. When the Breeders Crown and the Hambletonian happens, he sends us stories every day—from the press conference on down to the races, every single day. Do we use them all? No, but if we need to fill space in an early edition, it finds space. My point to anyone out there is you should be sending us stuff and not making us chase you to find out what's going on. It's too hard and, unlike 10 years ago when we had people who could sit there and type stuff in, it has to come in. It has to be clean, preferably not too long and it has to be easy for us to put out. If we have to put any effort into it there's just not enough staffing anymore. Everybody had downsized and there are not enough people to do that. I'm one of the people who's fighting for it

**Stan Bergstein:** Rob Longley, what is your take on racing. Also what do you think of future races being held too late at night to get coverage in the morning paper.

**Rob Longley:** That's been an issue for as long as there's been harness racing. We've had a little more success at Woodbine in past years to get races earlier on

the card but the mentality still exists that if you run your feature too early in the card people are going to leave.

I believe that times have changed. That there is enough entertainment at the racetrack, enough options available to the customer that tracks could relax that a little bit. Deadlines at newspapers are tighter now than they've ever been and if you don't have a race running before 9:30 pm, you're likely not going to get anything in the newspaper. That's a difficult sticking point.

I feel like a dinosaur today with all the new technology we talked about. I just work for a yellowing old newspaper. That speaks for the challenge that we in newspapers face. One of the points that really struck me late last year is David Willmot was quoted as saying and I paraphrase, "Racing is only a sport on it's biggest days. The rest of the year we're a business." Now that's a pretty blunt and brash statement and it could lead to a defeatist attitude but there's some wisdom to that if you look deeper. By the time a newspaper comes out the next morning almost everyone's going to know the results. They're going to have found it out on the Internet, whether they were at the track. They know the information they need to know. If we're going to get coverage of harness racing in newspapers, we're going to have to go deeper than the story on the \$10,000 claimer.

**Phil Pikelny:** Look at the World Wrestling Federation. Here is a pseudo-sport that is never going to get in the newspaper, never going to be in a box score. Yet if you look on cable television, they own the number one watched show or at least the number two watched show week after week after week. Why? Because it's all about features. It's all about the stars becoming larger than life, and secondly, they're going to their core audience. They're telling their story directly, it's nothing screened or given by somebody else. Which isn't to say abandon the media, but it is to say take your own destiny in whatever form you can.

**Alan Kirschenbaum:** What Phil is saying is very correct. I certainly don't watch wrestling, but I'm aware of it. The wrestling matches in a wrestling show are the culmination of a continuing story line about I'd say people, but really, characters, that are scripted. I know writers who have left Los Angeles and moved to Connecticut to work for the World Wrestling Federation. Comedy writers, soap-opera writers who are getting paid more by them than they were making in television to construct these elaborate storylines about people to get to a point where a wrestling match means something. It doesn't mean anything about whether one guy pins somebody else. It's about what's going to happen to this person's family because of the results of this and that's what racing needs to do.

We constantly go back and forth whether we are trying to appeal to new fans or to the people who already watch racing. If we're trying to appeal to the people who already watch racing, we can all pat ourselves on the back. Everybody's doing a pretty good job. But if we're looking to appeal to new fans, we have to highlight the people and the stories so that each race means something.

**Bill Heller:** A couple years ago during August—the Saratoga Thoroughbred meet runs for six weeks every summer—who shows up at Saratoga Harness, which is now Saratoga Equine Sports Center, Gallo Blue Chip. Super star. Not a single word in any of the three local newspapers the next day. Not a single bit of television coverage, and they already had everyone at Saratoga covering the feature race that day. You have to be more aggressive. You have to make some kind of impact with a horse like that.

**Stan Bergstein:** That's a fine appeal, and my final appeal is get your track photographers out of the winner's circle and on the backstretch. It's all right to have them in the winner's circle at night if they want to take pictures and make their \$12 or \$15. The art of having track photographers is to have them on the

backstretch in the morning getting feature pictures. If they do it, and do it skillfully, you'll get them printed. Thank you very much.