



op/ed

by rob whiteley

LET US NOW PRAISE GIFTED MEN

Riddle: Who among us performs the most difficult job in the industry while bringing widespread added value to our sport ... day after day, week after week, year after year?

Answer: *A small fraternity of especially talented professionals known as track announcers.*

Think the job is not difficult? Go ahead, practice as long as you want, pick up a microphone and try to enthusiastically call a race with four or more horses. See how you do. (I rest my case.)

Many horse-related jobs require innate talent and the application of keen observation and quick response. But only one also requires remarkable cognitive ability, incredible memory, a high level of enthusiasm and a pleasing personality, a resonating quality of voice and exceptional eye-mouth coordination. Expert race calling is truly a high-order art form, requiring a unique blend of specialized genius.

Over 30 active race callers make up this elite band of talented brothers at Thoroughbred tracks across North America, and their abilities range from good to great. Patrons at major tracks have their daily enjoyment enhanced by the likes of: Kurt Becker (Keeneland); Larry Collmus (Gulfstream, Monmouth); Trevor Denman (Breeders' Cup, Del Mar, Santa Anita); John Dooley (Arlington, Fair Grounds); Tom Durkin (Aqueduct, Belmont, Saratoga); Mark Johnson (Churchill Downs); Dan Loiselle (Woodbine); Bobby Neuman (Calder); Dave Rodman (Laurel, Pimlico); Vic Stauffer (Hollywood Park); and Terry Wallace (Oaklawn), etc. Special mention should also include long-time maestro Dave Johnson, who may surprise here and there with a cameo appearance, and Frank Mirahmadi, who spontaneously treats Turf Paradise fans to hilarious impersonations of fellow race callers. In addition, the announcers who bring extra life to races in the minor circuits also possess impressive talent.

Among this group of luminaries, however, we are blessed with three superstars who are numero uno in distinct aspects of race calling.

Tom Durkin...stretch calls. *No one matches Tom Durkin's enthusiasm, articulate use of language or wit and humor in the stretch.* His scintillating calls in big races elevate our excitement and enjoyment, and they are often so compelling and memorable that stallion owners love to feature them in promotional DVDs or play them over and over to prospective clients who phone in and are placed on hold. (I hope a few stallion managers who benefit from his artistry have thought to throw a comp season or two Tom's way).



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For two decades, Tom has been a gift to New York racing. It is hard to believe that nearly 20 years have passed since I listened to Tom's inspired stretch call of the brilliant Meadow Star as she swept past the great Lite Light and future champions Dance Smartly, Flawlessly and Wilderness Song, (as the still shortest-priced favorite in Breeders' Cup history). It was not so much Tom's words, as it was his dramatic and poetic cadence and expression that left his race call echoing in my ears long after the horses were back in the barn: "It is still MEADOW STAR leading the way by FOUR...leading the way now by FIVE...and leaving the others behind in the WAKE OF HER BRILLIANCE! A PERFECT SEASON FOR MEADOW STAR!"

Another of my many Tom Durkin favorites over all these years is his call of the 2005 Jockey Club Gold Cup: "BORREGO! Borrego is inhaling horses one at a time with a sensational BLITZ on the far turn...Borrego CA-TA-PUL-TING past the field!...a WILD MOVE by Borrego...He's opening up by five lengths as the field comes down to the final furlong!...Suave is second, Grand Reward is third, Flower Alley toiling, Imperialism, Sun King...Borrego just blew them away and he is IN HAND!...IN HAND for this final furlong!...He walked home...He won that easily!"

Thanks to Tom, we have hundreds of similarly memorable moments where his articulate exuberance has ratcheted our excitement to heightened levels. When the horses turn for home, Tom holds a daylight advantage over his peers. **Cont. p13**

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Trevor Denman...race development. *No one matches Trevor Denman's ability to see a race unfolding or a horse in the back preparing to unleash a challenging move.* Trevor's vast experience and love of racing come through in his dynamic and descriptive calls from start



to finish. And his laser-eyed calls at the wire are nearly flawless. If he calls your horse as the winner in a head-bobbing finish, you can head to the window with confidence.

Trevor is also a sentient man who cares about horses, the safety of jockeys and the erosion of our fan base. For over 15 years, Trevor has applied his keen eye and his scrutiny of a zillion races in making another important and accurate racing call by speaking out for "kinder" whips and strict rules for their use. (Although some minor changes have finally occurred, those in decision-making positions still don't "get it," and need to realize that it is not just the whips, but *the whipping*, that turns away would-be fans and detracts from the beauty of the sport). No race caller or observer sees the nuances of a race as clearly as Trevor, and we should pay special attention to what this brilliant man sees and comprehends. Meanwhile, let's just give thanks for Trevor, an industry treasure.

Kurt Becker...race description. *No one matches Kurt Becker's precision and eye-mouth coordination.* Young, and somewhat still "the new kid on the block," Kurt is rapidly evolving into a superstar. It is truly dazzling how the voice of Keeneland racing can energetically call a full field of 12 *or more*, give the time for a quarter, call the full field again, give the time for a half, spot horses beginning to make a move from the back, and then give a rousing call of all participants in the stretch run. Kurt's thoroughness, accuracy and energy mark him as special, but his consistency sets him apart. Given his youth, we should have him around for years to come to excite fans and heighten our enjoyment.

So, have you hugged your race caller today? Let us pause to celebrate this very special group of talented and essential professionals. As we face daily challenges while our sport continues its steady decline, we should remember to give thanks for the bright spots that help to energize and entertain. Let your local announcer know that you appreciate his contributions. And, while you have his ear, whisper to him that we need a few women announcers in the stand.

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