
TOUCHING BASE WITH DICK MANDELLA



Hall of Fame trainer Richard Mandella has had a career of many years of sustained success, but certain occasions stand out. In 1993, he climaxed his Breeders' Cup Day by sending out Horse of the Year Kotashaan to win the Breeders' Cup Turf, after having saddled Phone Chatter to win the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies earlier in the afternoon. Mandella also won two other stakes on the undercard that day. Astoundingly, he improved on this performance 10 years later, when he again won four stakes, this time all of them Breeders' Cup Championship events!!! That day, too, included victory in the Classic, won by Pleasantly Perfect.

At the first Welfare and Safety of the Racehorse Summit, your suggestion set into motion an effort to amend claiming rules so as to diminish the incentive for trainers or owners to enter a horse knowing it had an increased risk of injury, hoping to unload it onto some other stable. California has been a leader in trying to achieve this through rule change to permit voiding of claims under certain injury related scenarios. However, this has been a tough sell and it is proving difficult to get the wording perfectly in tune with the spirit of the change. What is your impression about how your colleagues have reacted to this attempt?

A trainer that I respect very much once said to me, "How can anyone expect us trainers to agree? We are trying to beat each other everyday." I still believe that the intention is very important in today's world. However, the devil is in the details.

Scientific research that might give trainers useful knowledge is ongoing, but a trainer's routine is very hectic and time consuming. How do you try to keep up with veterinary research and utilize any new knowledge that might be beneficial? Is that something that you are able to be proactive about, or do you have to rely on your veterinarians to bring any new developments into their treatment and advice about your horses?

I have a good relationship with my veterinarians. We try to find the best way to take care of each individual horse. I read the trade magazines which often have good articles concerning scientific research. I have always been involved with research committees that study horse related problems.

Can you describe an instance in which a serious injury or illness was overcome by a veterinarian utilizing methods or knowledge directly relating to academic research?

Johar was diagnosed using scintigraphy to identify a humeral stress fracture in 2003. He won the Breeders' Cup Turf later that year.

Many people believe that the reason American-based race horses don't run as often as they used to is because the breed has gotten weaker. You have trained a number of South American horses which lasted a number of years, but on the other hand, The Tin Man was an American-bred which was successful for you through the age of nine. What are your general thoughts on the issue of soundness in the Thoroughbred and how a trainer can protect soundness?

I don't think you can put the blame for unsoundness or fewer starts on any one thing. I believe it is a combination of many different circumstances that we have in racing, breeding, and sales today. I think that people had racing their horses more in focus than sales in the earlier years. Consequently, they were very critical of unsoundness, physically and mentally, when deciding matings and management.

Keeping horses sound and around for a long career is a team effort. The trainer and his staff, along with the veterinarian, need to identify the injuries early before they become more serious or career ending. The veterinarian is important in getting an accurate diagnosis, and the blacksmith has to do his job well.

All of this is important; however it is meaningless without the owner and trainer being patient and obviously able to afford the cost.

California has been through some tumultuous times in terms of dirt tracks and synthetic surfaces. In a sense, this is an irony: The California Horse Racing Board refuted the cliché that racing is slow to change, by mandating synthetic surfaces, but then found that its pioneering spirit did not achieve its intended result in every case. What is your opinion about what has been learned about racing surfaces, and how do you think the horse can best be protected?

The study on synthetic tracks was not as far advanced as we believed it was. Hopefully, the research will continue to move along and give us more information on track surfaces. The availability of natural resources of the right quality is becoming more difficult to obtain, which makes it difficult to maintain a good dirt track.

You have had some remarkable experiences with winning multiple racings on Breeders' Cup Days. What stands out most in your memory about those events, and which victories do you recall most fondly?

I fondly recall each of individual Breeders' Cup wins. They were all very special to me, and I was fortunate to have been the trainer of these horses.

What is a single race that gave you unique satisfaction---either because of its importance, or its involving the overcoming of some particular problem, or involving a horse for which you had a special affection.

It is unfair to name only one. However, Pleasantly Perfect overcame a virus in his heart as a young horse and later won the Breeders' Cup Classic. He also won the Dubai World Cup, which was equally satisfying.

The National Museum of Racing's Hall of Fame recently held its 2012 induction ceremony in Saratoga. Unlike most Halls of Fame, this institution does not require one to be retired before induction, and you have been a member of the Hall of Fame since 2001. What has been the impact of that status?

Being inducted into the Racing Hall of Fame was one of the proudest days of my life. I constantly worry that there will be a recall.

Your son Gary is also a trainer as well as a well-known commentator on racing on television. Please give us some insight on the satisfactions, and competitive aspects of having your son in the same profession you are.

Gary has always and continues to make me proud in all of his endeavors. I hope that the sport of racing will survive at the same level as I have been able to enjoy.

What is your favorite vacation spot?

My wife Randi and I love to travel and have been to some beautiful places---Dubai, France, Ireland, Brazil, Argentina. However, we have always wanted to visit Italy, but have not yet had the chance.

What is your favorite restaurant in your home area, and why?

Celestino's Restaurant in Pasadena. Great Italian!

If you were given the choice between an evening at the opera, a visit to an art museum, or attending a rock concert, what would you choose?

Can you throw in a Willie Nelson concert? I actually enjoy all types of music.