

TDN Q & A

The two things David Milch knows best are horse racing and television. He's owned dozens of top horses, including Breeders' Cup winners Gilded Time and Val



David Milch

Doug Hyun/HBO photo

Royal (Fr). If not at the track, he's probably at a studio somewhere. He is a four-time Emmy Award winner who was the executive producer of *Hill Street Blues* and *NYPD Blue* and the creator, writer and executive producer of the HBO series *Deadwood*.

In his latest project, Milch has brought his passion and his profession together. Milch and filmmaker Michael Mann have begun work on "Luck," a drama

about horse racing and the people who make the typical racetrack such a fascinating place. The series will air on HBO and Milch will be its executive producer.

The lead character is named Ace Bernstein. He has recently been released from jail for securities violations and, once freed, heads straight to the racetrack.

The *Thoroughbred Daily News* recently caught up with Milch and got his thoughts on Luck, owning horses and why the sport is such a big part of his life?

A series about horses, is that something you've long wanted to do?

Only for about 35 years. I literally started working on a racetrack show around 1975, something like that.

What took you so long?

Some stories take longer to filter their way through our defenses than others.

Several reports about the show have mentioned that it will be as much about racetrack characters as racing itself. One report said that the show would be about "horse racing culture." What, exactly, does that mean?

It has plural meanings. The world of horse racing is a fully elaborated ecology. There's the backside, which couldn't be more different from what goes on in the clubhouse, the grandstand or at the ticket windows. This would hope to be an examination of the whole of that world.

Are any of the characters in Luck based on real life people that you have come across at the racetrack?

Mark Twain used to say every character in every story he ever wrote he met on the river. I suppose what I'd say is every one of these characters is based upon one or more than one person I've met at the track. We incorporate elements of every one, so, in that regard, they are based on real people. Whether they are readily recognizable as a single known personality, I would say no.

Tell us about the lead character, Ace Bernstein. Is he a typical racetrack character?

I don't want to get too far ahead of myself. If I could describe any one of these characters I probably wouldn't have had to write them. Henry James used to speak of the obstinate finality of every human being. I don't think it does justice to try to thumbnail these characters.

Horse racing isn't exactly mainstream or on the mind of the general public. For that reason, was this a tough sell to HBO?

No. I'm grateful that I've had a long relationship with the people at HBO and I have a little bit of history before I went to work at HBO. They are respectful. If it is something that has engaged my interest, they, at a minimum, will be polite about it. HBO is very hospitable to taking a refractive look at society rather than looking at it through a clear prism. I think you and I would agree that when you look at horse racing you are looking at the world through a certain angle. So the relative strangeness of it was in no way a problem with them. In fact, it was quite the opposite.

You work must be enjoyable. But a horse racing series...that must be, well, a lot of fun for someone like yourself. Is that the case?

I hope it's going to be an awful lot of fun, but I am realistic enough to know that not every day at the racetrack ends with people skipping happily through the flowers. With anything that is a passion, I think it's a passion because it accommodates a whole range of feelings, some of which are mutually exclusive. It's both love and pain. I would hope this will render the full spectrum of emotions. If you ask me whether I'm looking forward to it, I'm absolutely looking forward to it. Do I expect it to be fun? I'm not sure.

Let's go over some particulars. When do you start shooting? When will the first segment air?

Michael Mann is going to direct and to some extent the time and dates will be contingent on our casting and the availability of certain key actors. With that stipulation, I would say we would begin around March 15. Typically, the shooting itself would take about six weeks and the goal would be to go on the air the first of the year.

Q & A cont.

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How does this work? Do you have a long-term deal with HBO, a one-year deal? Are they committed to a pilot only? For those of us who do not understand the ins and outs of the entertainment industry, explain how this works.

My contractual relationship with HBO is a multi-year relationship. Both parties have the opportunity to visit the particulars of the relationship after each project. So after we get done shooting this first episode, we'll sit down and decide if this is how they want me to occupy my time for the next several years. Was that adequately evasive?

The mandatory question: how did you get interested in horseracing?

My dad did take me to the races when I was five or six years old, but I wouldn't say it was a wholly joyful experience. I've had some dark experiences in which the racetrack was the setting. The bottom line is I love horse racing and I have a tremendous respect for the complexity of the world and its richness. But I would not say it's an unalloyed joy. Nothing that is worthwhile is.

Your first horse, Evening M'Lord, was a stakes winner. You claimed a horse named Awesome Daze and he won a Cal Cup race. You've had two Breeders' Cup winners. Did you ever start to think this was an easy game?

Never for a minute did I think it was easy. You and I both know that for every success there are dozens of failures. I have done my share of heavy lifting in the failure department. To me, the absolute measure of success or failure is not necessarily victory or defeat. One of my favorite horses was a horse named Marvin's Policy, who was not a very pretty horse and his conformation left a good deal to be desired and he never won any Breeders' Cups. The blessing of being involved with horses is that they exhibit qualities of character as well as personality. It's like a family member. You don't just love a family member on the day they win a prize. I've had a lot of really good horses and have been lucky in that regard, but that hasn't been the measure of my pleasure in being involved.

When it comes to horses, what do you have now?

Garbage. I got out of it pretty much. I did own a filly, Lady Lumberjack, who ran second in a couple of graded stakes this past season, but she's hurt. I'm not involved in it the way I used to be as an owner, although I would like to think I am more deeply involved than ever.

Why do you currently own so few horses?

I made a decision to cut way back on it a few years ago. I had a character in Deadwood who said if you want to hear God laugh tell him your plans. As things turned out, I haven't been completely out of the game, but I'm not in it like the way I used to be.

Your job is to create a terrific series that will draw viewers to HBO. But, in some regard, are you also hopeful that you will create interest in horseracing with Luck?

Absolutely. But I think of it in the context of the way the characters think about it rather than the way I think about it. I don't know anyone who is involved in horseracing in any serious way that doesn't care deeply about the game or the extent to which it germane or ought to be. Those are things that are part of the organizing story line of the series itself. I think anyone who sets out with a particular goal as a storyteller to change things in the world is kidding themselves. But I think it's a proper function of a storyteller, if he's serious about the world he's portraying, that certain of his characters are going to care about it in one way or another.