

TDN Q&A

JASON WILSON

After a decade away from the game, FOX Sports jumped back into Thoroughbred racing in early 2014 with the launch of "The Jockey Club Tour on FOX," a series originally scheduled to consist of nine races which began with the GI Donn H. at Gulfstream Park Feb. 9 and features a diverse set of races through September, culminating with the GI Woodbine Mile Sept. 14. To its credit, The Jockey Club and FOX made an 11th-hour decision to include the GI Santa Anita H. Mar. 8 when it drew the first- and second-place finishers from the GI Breeders' Cup Classic--Mucho



Macho Man and Will Take Charge--in addition to Game On Dude. The third program in the series takes place Saturday, when, for perhaps the first time ever, the G1 Dubai World Cup will be televised in real time on something other than one of the channels devoted to horse racing. The TDN caught up with Jason Wilson, vice president of business development for The Jockey Club, to get his thoughts on the first two

telecasts and for what's in store this weekend and beyond.

Why did The Jockey Club select FOX Sports1 as opposed to a more mainstream outlet?

Actually, FOX Sports1 covers more than 90 million homes in the United States, so I would consider it a mainstream outlet, although it is a relatively new channel under this brand. We were interested in FOX's history of innovation around sports presentation and their willingness to feature wagering more prominently in their broadcasts. In addition, as our discussions developed, we learned that the organization is peppered with fans who have followed Thoroughbred racing and really know the sport, which has been very helpful.

What were the criteria in selecting the on-air talent?

As a threshold matter, we wanted to build a team that was competent in several areas--race analysis, handicapping, history of racing and racing culture. Then we set out to find a team that had the right chemistry to bring the excitement and richness of a day at the races to life.

How difficult a decision was it to move the Donn back one day? Was there any resistance from the track or from elsewhere?

When you are building a racing series on television, you need cooperation from the tracks and the network. The track has its racing schedule and the network has its programming schedule so you do your best to bring them together.

If you look at the schedule, quite a few of our races are on a Sunday. While that was not always the tracks' first choice, they warmed up to the idea of moving their races to Sunday and we certainly appreciate their willingness to try new things. Our analysis showed that if they moved some of their races to Sunday, they would see an overall improvement in handle for the weekend. The experience at the Donn H. has supported this analysis.

What were your expectations going into the maiden voyage?

FOX had not produced a horse race in over a decade, so we knew we had a lot of work to do in getting a team up and running, both behind the cameras and on-air. Going into the year, we wanted to do different things and show both the sport of horse racing and the experience of handicapping. We also wanted to build a strong foundation from which to grow. We will continue to experiment as the year goes on.

Were you happy with the numbers/viewership for the first show? Did they meet/fall short of/exceed your expectations?

We wanted to attract a similar level of viewers that racing has had on events outside the Triple Crown and Breeders' Cup races, and we've met those expectations. Now, together with FOX Sports, we want to grow those numbers with a sustained effort, on a variety of platforms, over time. Cont. p15

Jason Wilson Q&A cont.

One aspect that exceeded our expectation was the mix of viewers. We wanted to attract a younger demographic, and at least through our first two shows, it looks like we are skewing younger than racing's traditional programming. Another encouraging development has been the addition of FOX Deportes as an outlet. The ratings on Deportes were very strong and we are considering ways to extend into the Spanish-speaking community.

What lessons were learned from the first broadcast that were improved upon for the Santa Anita H. telecast?

The shows were actually very different in that the second show was 30 minutes and moved at a faster pace. In each show, we delivered on our promise to promote the handicapping aspect of the sport more prominently. Without getting into specifics, we solicit input from a wide range of constituencies on how the programming can be improved.

How were the numbers for that program, given that it was a late addition to the lineup?

We saw an increase in viewership from the Donn to the Santa Anita H., and the numbers were in line with the rest of the programming on FOX Sports 1 that day.

How important was it for The Jockey Club/FOX to include the Dubai World Cup on the schedule, especially, as it ends up, that the American participation is non-existent?

With or without American-based horses, this is the world's richest race. It's an important race and we wanted the international exposure. We often lose sight of the fact that this sport is global and has rich traditions that extend past our borders.

There is a criticism that the rest of the schedule includes an emphasis on turf racing? What is your response to that?

Stay tuned.

Do you foresee any changes of any variety in the future?

I could see many ways for this to evolve. This is a new property--change is the order of the day. I encourage racing fans and people who haven't yet enjoyed our sport to follow the series. The Dubai World Cup is the featured race this weekend at 1 p.m. ET. They will find it interesting and educational...and fun.

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