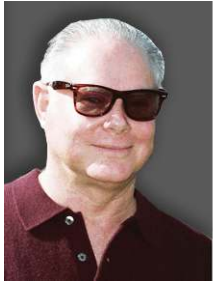


GOOD MAN FORCED TO SIDELINES



op/ed

by barry irwin

GOOD MAN FORCED TO SIDELINES

I don't know Larry Jones. Never met him. But am I surprised that he has had it up to here (I am pointing just north of my own Adam's apple)?

No. Not at all. If not Mr. Jones, it surely would have been somebody else.

Larry Jones, it seems clear to me, is probably not the first, but certainly the most notable example of a racing figure that has decided to chuck his lifelong passion because he chooses no longer to participate in a culture that has made him a target of character assassination by members of a media, both legitimate and underground, that has gone wild.

Since 1969, when I was hired as a virtual cub reporter at *The Blood-Horse*, I have been involved in the media. In my 40 years in racing, I have done many stints in the media, including radio, television, newspapers, publicity, advertising and magazines.

During that time, until recently, I always took a position that the shrinking column inches and evaporating air time devoted to racing would sound the death knell of the sport. I always thought that if racing somehow could stem the tide and provide more television, radio and print coverage that it could hang on to its fan base and develop new fans as well.

After all, as a writer I knew all too well the wealth of interesting stories that could be mined both in the grandstand and on the backstretch. Surely, if these stories could find a platform to be told, they would serve to entertain racing's regulars and lure newcomers. Damon Runyon, Ring Lardner, Joe Palmer and Joe Hirsch showed it could be done.

The advent of the Internet and talk radio has allowed for additional communication opportunities between the media and its consumers. Ironically and sadly, these two avenues have in fact served mostly to create and foster an atmosphere of negativity that is not only down grading the sport, but in the case of Mr. Jones driving out of the game one of its most gifted and successful participants.

Any writer that has covered the Kentucky Derby is well aware that the fine points of the Turf sport are lost on the general sports writers and other media folk that descend upon Churchill Downs on the First Saturday in May.

Here is a one little anecdote of which I am particularly proud that illustrates the point. Old Barry loves nothing more than making a well-timed joke.

After Secretariat won the Derby in 1973, Dan Smith of the publicity department announced to the assembled writers and media types that the triumph represented the first time in the history of the Run for the Roses that the same owner, breeder, trainer and rider had won the Derby two years in a row, as Riva Ridge had taken the roses the year before.

Prankster that I am, I raised my hand, Dan recognized me and I intoned to the dead silence of those in attendance "Excuse me, has the same horse ever won it two years in a row?"

Had a writer covering baseball, football, basketball or even golf or tennis asked something that stupid, his peers would have laughed him out of the building. But at the Kentucky Derby, a question of this type was greeted with barely a wince.

The absurdity of my point was well taken by the veteran writers, as it showed the lack of understanding of the game by the vast majority of those situated in the press box at Churchill Downs. It was in this climate that Eight Belles lost her life when she broke down after finishing second in the Kentucky Derby.

A considerable amount of intelligent commentary was generated by several experienced Turf Writers and responsible charitable organizations that did not blame Larry Jones and recommended changes for the betterment of the welfare of racehorses and the game.

However, at least five situations were generated by the great filly's untimely demise, as follows:

First, based on the quality of coverage from many of the industry's scribes, the lack of insight into training, surface condition and veterinary issues surrounding the accident pointed out a dearth of knowledge about these aspects of the sport from Turf Writers. A dying breed that has all but disappeared during the past decade, these press box denizens were out of their depth when dealing with this tragedy.

Secondly, the general sports writers and media at Churchill Downs were unable to understand how something like this could happen, so without guidance or experience, they each went off on a tangent that sensationalized rather than clarified the event.

Third, radio talk shows got into the act. Hosts and their staffs, looking for hot-button issues that would generate phone calls from listeners, seized upon the tragedy and exploited the emotional aspect for every ounce of vitriol they could muster from both the radio station and the callers.

Fourth, message boards on the Internet provided a companion arena for the less audibly vocal to weigh in with their opinions about the filly's death, again going off on wild tangents and vilifying Mr. Jones.

Fifth, the Internet has spawned a new form of communication dubbed a blog, which is a potpourri of columns spiced with opinion, news items snagged from other sources and feedback from readers.

It's bad enough that the Turf Writers were not up to the task of covering the event with more knowledge and understanding. **op/ed cont.**

And few expected the general sports writers to be able to process the chain of events.

But the radio talk shows, message boards and blogs added kerosene to the fire, turned up the heat and, in the end, created an atmosphere that likely drove Mr. Jones to the sidelines.

When in an earlier time frame I had hoped to see an expanded media contribute to the fostering of newcomers to racing and to provide the fan base with added coverage that would enhance their experience in racing, it never dawned on me that it would take the form of talk radio, blogs or message boards.

There are plenty of talented Turf Writers. Ray Paulick has shown how valuable a blog can be. And some radio programs contribute a worthwhile texture to the game.

I grew up in an era when getting something published or getting one's by-line on a story in a recognized newspaper or journal was an achievement, because it signified that one had reached a certain level of professionalism.

For everybody that had a full-time job writing about horse racing or had a story published in a magazine or newspaper, there were several others that aspired to do so. When a freelance writer submitted a story for publication, he knew there was a distinct possibility it might be rejected. This check-and-balance system served to filter worthwhile communication from the substandard. It worked for more than 150 years in the United States.

In the earlier era, it cost a bundle to develop a means of disseminating creative material. Owning a newspaper or a magazine or a radio station took a lot of capital. The only way these enterprises could survive was if they sold enough advertising to stay afloat. So it was incumbent upon them to provide readers and listeners with content that was credible and entertaining. Only a few survived. It was capitalism at work.

Today, with the advent of message boards, blogs and talk radio, anybody can be a publisher, a writer or a media personality.

Making matters even more volatile, the Internet and radio allow contributors the luxury of anonymity, which emboldens these people to act less responsibly than their predecessors in the media.

It was in this atmosphere, when Eight Belles fell to ground in the Kentucky Derby, that the perfect storm struck racing and did so at a time when the game was at its most vulnerable.

So now, in addition to losing the best filly of her generation, racing has lost her developer.

It is hoped that Mr. Jones will decide after a brief respite to regroup and return to the sport. But others in the game that will have the spotlight shone on them should be aware of the incredibly intense and unfair amount of heat that can be generated by a media, both legitimate and underground, that can act as cruel and hit with the punch of Hurricane Katrina.

Anybody can diagnose a problem in racing. So I would like to conclude with a prescription that will allow readers to avoid discomfort from too much media.

As some folk have learned to do when watching certain telecasts by muting the sound to avoid ear pollution, I suggest that sources of irritants both on-line, on radio and in print be strictly avoided. This will lessen the need later on for medication, which can be costly.