

Missing Persons

Why the younger generation is absent at the racetrack
By Bana Varnon

Anybody who knows horse racing knows that it's somewhat of a niche sport. It's a tough industry to break into, and an even harder one to stay in. But once you're hooked, you're in it for life.

Chances are, anyone reading this already knows that. For those in the industry, horses and racing coexist in a natural way of life. It's part of the routine grind, and not a day passes that they don't interact with or at least think about a horse.

For the rest of the world, it's not so universal. Sure, people will pay attention to the Kentucky Derby and maybe even the Preakness and Belmont, but after that, attention is diverted away from horse racing and back to the heavyweights of American sports like football, baseball and basketball.

Especially among the younger generation, even when their parents might be avid horse racing enthusiasts. Maybe those parents bring their kids to a few races, taking advantage of those 50-cent Fridays to get some cheap hot dogs, but then it stops at a certain point. Kids grow up, things change, and after a point, many of them lose interest.

And that's only the kids who grow up in the industry. Take those who weren't brought up with horses, have no knowledge of the sport and have never attended a race in their young life. Those are the ones who aren't showing up at the tracks; those are the ones who are sincerely missing out and those are the ones who should be targeted.

But then again, I'm biased.

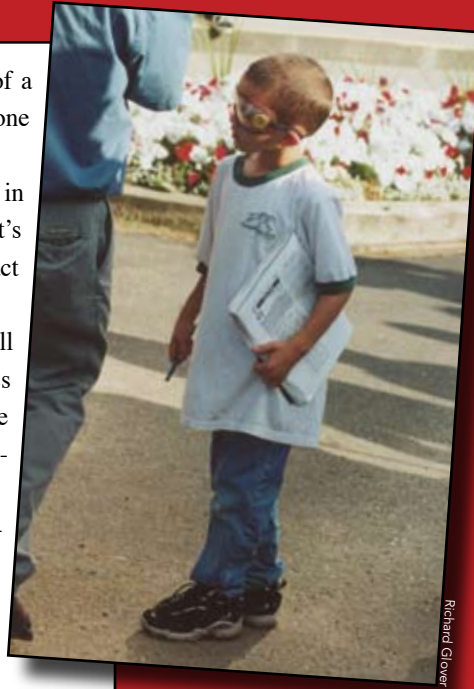
In January 2007, I came to the Texas Thoroughbred Association as a fledgling journalism intern with no knowledge of or experience with horses. I knew I wanted to write, but I couldn't put my finger on what I wanted to write about.

Then a sophomore at the University of Texas, I met with magazine editor Denis Blake for my interview, where I made one thing crystal clear.

"I've got to be honest with you, I don't know anything about horses or racing," I said.

"That's okay, you'll

Bana Varnon, editorial assistant for *The Texas Thoroughbred*, was honored by American Horse Publications as the 2008 Student Award Winner. The University of Texas at Austin student received a \$1,000 cash award plus an all-expense paid trip to AHP's annual meeting and seminar held on June 19-21 in Saratoga Springs, New York. Publishers Press Inc. also presented Varnon with a trip to one of their customer education seminars later this year in Louisville, Kentucky. Varnon began working at the TTA as an intern in January 2007 and now works 20 hours a week as an editorial assistant for the magazine while attending school and full time when school is not in session.



Richard Glover

Capturing the attention of young fans is one of the biggest challenges facing the horse racing industry.



Daniel K. Law



Dennis Blake

learn,” he said. And I did. I really did.

It seemed like everything flooded in at once during that first week on the job, from writing stakes race recaps, to editing copy, to trying to figure out what a Valid Expectations was and why it was everywhere, to learning new vocabulary

hear, I’m part of the same generation all the racetracks keep saying they want to target, and I can see why.

It’s simple. The industry needs to bring in the 20-somethings who can bet and will bring their friends into the industry. But to do that, one stereotype has to be broken: of the old and wealthy horseman.

Sadly enough, I’d say that’s what people outside of this industry think, and if that’s true it heavily alienates the one group tracks are trying to bring in to the races—the young who aren’t wealthy. And to prove it, I asked around my school, surveying people on what they know and think about horse racing.

When asked to name a few of the greats of Thoroughbred racing, most people could only think of Barbaro, but a few threw out some old legends like Secretariat and Seabiscuit. In general, most of the people I surveyed had some knowledge of Big Brown’s Kentucky Derby win and the Eight Belles tragedy, but their views on the sport as a whole is another story entirely.

If horsemen wanted to know the ‘young perspective’ of horse racing, here’s the general breakdown: young people who weren’t born into the industry don’t take interest because they can’t relate. And they don’t relate because they don’t have access.

If their parents aren’t patrons of the track, kids won’t be either. And since horse racing only appears on network television a handful of times each year, people need to see it themselves to get interested. They need to be there and hear the sound of thundering hooves as they vie for the win at the wire. And if the younger generations are what this industry needs to target, I’d say they could start at the bottom and work their way up.

Take what one student said: “I’ve never owned a horse; I don’t know anything about horses. It seems

“If their parents aren’t patrons of the track, kids won’t be either.”

like it’s geared to a specific type of person.”

So how can we relate it to the pizza and rock generation? Exposure and education.

“A good way to get the younger generation—including myself—into the sport would be to actually get them to an event so they can see it in person, not just on TV,” said the student. “That changes everything.”

One way would be to work with area youth groups and offer complimentary student tickets for a day of racing. Invite

While being a jockey might be a career goal for a kid growing up on a horse farm, it’s usually not on the mind of a youngster raised in the suburbs.

like stakes, black type, furlong and exacta, to differentiating between “out of” and “by”... Seriously, the list goes on and on. And on and on.

Embarrassingly enough, I didn’t even know what a sire was! But with 18 months and my handy copy of *Betting on Horse Racing for Dummies* stashed underneath my desk at work, I’ve learned more than I ever thought I would about Thoroughbred racing.

I confess my past ignorance not to shame myself (of which I’m sure I’ve done a splendid job already), but to highlight how much I’ve truly discovered about this industry and the sport in my past year and a half working here.

And had I not gotten a job here, I would have never taken such an interest in the sport like I do now, and I’m not even old enough to bet yet (the minimum age in Texas is 21).

Generation Next

I’m a 20-year-old college student who loves rock music, text messages and pizza. I’m a child of the technological world, and as far as ‘Generation Y’ goes, I’m living it. From what I

your neighbors for a day at the track. Take a soccer team field trip to Lone Star, Sam Houston or Retama. Basically, the possibilities are endless, but they all need to involve literally bringing a new and younger audience to the track to see the sport live and in person.

Seeing is believing, and once the younger generation gets involved, they'll stay involved. After all, once you're hooked, you're in it for life. I'm still here at TTA; so far, so good for me! ★

Say What?

Here's an unscientific but revealing look at some answers from the younger generation about what they think about horse racing...

Why do you think not many younger people really take an interest in horse racing?

"It's not a sport to which we are exposed in high school or college. We see football, volleyball, soccer, track and field, cross country, basketball, baseball, swimming, but unless we have a parent who's into horse racing, we never see it."

"I think we feel disconnected from the sport. Horse racing isn't really trying to capture our attention."

"Most sports can be played by younger children, like football and soccer, but you never see horse racing with young children, so because we're not exposed to it, we don't develop a liking or knowledge about the sport."

Is there anything that might make you more interested in this sport?

"I'd be open to learning more about it. I read a lot about how things work through the newspaper, so if the newspapers ran an article showing how the horses are bred, how the betting process works, how the race itself works, etc., I'd be more interested."

"More ads promoting races so that I know when the races come on and what channel to watch."

So in general, how do you feel about horse racing?

"I think it is somewhat interesting. I follow the Triple Crown every year when it comes around, but other than that, I don't follow horse racing much."

"It seems like there are only really three main events a year, so I don't know much about horse racing because I haven't seen much of it before."

"I actually think it's cool, but I almost never watch it. That's mostly because I never know when it comes on TV because I almost never see ads promoting races. It also seems like they're rarely on major networks."