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Columnists | Posted 10/7/2002, 12:00 am



Lights! Cameras! Mandella!

By JAY HOVDEY

ARCADIA, Calif. - In "Travels With Tarzan: A Circus Season," a 1998 PBS documentary by Bill Yahraus and Robin Rosenthal, impresario Tarzan Zerbini describes his show as the "largest one-ring circus in North America."

"You cannot find another guy who will do the same stuff that I do," says Zerbini. "It's always action. It's always moving. It's always different."

White tigers, dancing bears, performing elephants, and daredevil acrobats provide plenty of entertainment, no question. But lately, Rosenthal and Yahraus have been on the trail of a very different one-ring circus - a year in the life of the racetrack - and on Sunday at Santa Anita, their big top really rocked.

Yahraus has been pointing his Sony digital video camera at the people and horses of the Richard Mandella stable all season long. "Shakespearean" is how Yahraus describes their unscripted fortunes, with highs and lows that would rival the plot of any Elizabethan tragedy.

"That's okay," said Yahraus, whose previous subjects included a rock band, anti-war activists, and L.A. street gangs. "Any good story has its peaks and valleys."

Pleasantly Perfect and The Tin Man provided the Mandella troupe with a pair of dizzy peaks Sunday by winning the \$500,000 Goodwood Handicap and the \$300,000 Clement L. Hirsch Memorial Turf Championship in the space of half an hour. Stir in their solid third from Listen Indy in Saturday's Norfolk Stakes, and there was no denying Rosenthal's excitement as she pointed her directional microphone toward the winner's circle scene.

"It looks like we're going to the Breeders' Cup," she said.

No question, the fever was rampant. Anyone with a glimmer of a chance to make the big day at Arlington Park on Oct. 26 had to deal with Cup expectations.

Take the case of Nick Canani, who sent out Night Patrol to win the Oak Tree Mile on Saturday, with its \$200,000 purse supplemented by \$50,000 in Breeders' Cup stakes funds. Canani was allowed barely a moment to savor the race before he was being shoved toward Chicago with all the force the racing media could muster. (Trainers should understand - the press gets a percentage of all starting fees.)

Night Patrol, a son of Storm Boot, is a real grinder. At the age of 6, he has run 45 times, East Coast and West, and now suddenly he gets his turn in the spotlight. The morning after the race, Canani was still celebrating the fact that Night Patrol was eligible for the winner's share of the extra 50 grand, since he was made eligible for the Breeders' Cup six years ago by his owner and breeder, Jeff Nielsen.

"People don't realize what a tough horse he is," Canani said. "But when I looked up and saw he was 15-1 early [he ended up 9-1], I wondered what they knew that I didn't. I thought he should have been no worse than second or third choice."

It may be time to change the name of the race to the Canani Mile. Julio Canani, Nick's father, won it in 1999 with Silic and then in 2001 with Val Royal. Both of those horses went on to win the Breeders' Cup Mile as well.

"I haven't seen anything out here he should be afraid of," said Jose Valdivia, who rode Val Royal for father and rides Night Patrol for son.

"He's a free-running kind of horse, but you can take a little hold, and he will rate for you very kind."

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Nick wanted to give it a week before he and Nielsen make up their minds about Chicago. Weather is a factor - Night Patrol sank like a rock on soft ground in Delaware - but Valdivia recalled similar worries last year when Val Royal was heading from California to New York.

"They talked about rain for a week," the jockey said. "It never came, and the course at Belmont was like concrete."

Arlington's vast grass course holds mixed memories for the Mandella crew. They won the Beverly D. in 1990 with Reluctant Guest, and for three solid years, from 1995 through 1997, they tried to win the Arlington Million with Sandpit. He finished second twice and third the other time.

Then there was Matiara, the brilliant European mare who was on her way to a championship in 1996 when she fractured her pelvis during the Beverly D. It seemed like an innocent enough injury until she collapsed at Mandella's side on the ambulance ride back to the barn. The fracture had nicked an artery. She died from the internal hemorrhage.

"How can you ever forget something like that happening, and to such a sweet mare," Mandella says whenever he is reminded.

Racetrackers, like circus folk, tend to live in a mix of giddy hope and constant trepidation. Sunday was nice - the show was a hit - but nothing is guaranteed in the next town, even though performers like Listen Indy, Possibly Perfect, and The Tin Man put the Mandella team in the thick of Breeders' Cup contention. Yahraus and Rosenthal will be there for the climax, tape rolling and ready for anything.

"What's the matter?" Yahraus said Sunday as twilight fell on the Mandella barn. "You've never heard of a happy ending?"



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