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Smile, you're on railbird camera

By JAY HOVDEY

ARCADIA, Calif. - At first glance, it would appear as if Richard Mandella has come to believe all the nice things that have been said about him and hired his own film crew. For the past month, as the freshly minted Hall of Fame trainer has gone about his business at Santa Anita, there has been a camera and microphone hovering nearby, capturing his every move.

See Mandella do the training chart.

See Mandella feel a leg.

See Mandella chase reporters off his newly planted grass.

In fact, Mandella is suffering through such attention for a very good cause. Independent documentarians Bill Yahraus and Robin Rosenthal approached him from out of the blue with their idea for an in-depth, behind-the-scenes look at the world of horse racing. Mandella was the guy who said, years ago, that the closest most Americans get to a horse anymore was a merry-go-round. He figured a well-made film could reach the right kind of audience.

And besides, the most recent work from Yahraus and Rosenthal was a PBS documentary about a circus, called "Travels With Tarzan." That alone qualified them for world of the backstretch.

"If we don't start winning some races soon, we might have to join the circus," Mandella said.

Rosenthal was raised in Cherry Hill, N.J., not far from what used to be Garden State Park. Yahraus is an Ohio native who went to school in Philadelphia and migrated to San Francisco before working his way to L.A. They live with their riding horses in the tiny town of Littlerock, Calif., just over the mountains from the Los Angeles basin.

"Bill teaches film at USC two days a week," said Robin. "That gives us the time to work on a project like this. I think people are already getting used to seeing us. When we showed up the other morning at about 7:30, we were greeted with, 'Good afternoon.'"

"The hardest thing is to make people just ignore us," Yahraus said. "At first, everyone treats us like a home movie, waving at the camera, saying things like, 'Did you get that?' Our job is to become invisible."

Actually, the hardest part is always financing. To maintain true independence, Yahraus and Rosenthal must take care to avoid funding that comes with strings attached, either real or perceived. An obvious backer, for instance, would be the NTRA.

"That just wouldn't work," Rosenthal said. "When we take our work to PBS, for instance, they want to be assured that we did not rely on support that created a potential conflict."

Rosenthal is a veteran editor who has worked on a number of television series, both network and cable. Yahraus has been shooting documentary film since the 1960's, when his subjects included such diverse personalities as free-speech movement leader Mario Savo and the rock group Jefferson Airplane.

The wild world of psychedelic rock would seem to be a long ride from the quiet rhythms of the backstretch. Yahraus loves the challenge.



"I've already learned 25,000 times more about racing than I thought I knew," he said. "You never want to go into a project with any preconceptions. You have to be ready for anything to happen."

Words to live by, brought home with full force in December of 1969 when Yahraus was hired to join a crew shooting footage for a documentary about the Rolling Stones. He was sent to Altamont Speedway, just east of San Francisco, where the Stones were playing in a free concert.

"It ended up being a very long day," Yahraus said. Historic, too, because that was the day the Hell's Angels security detail went medieval on a rowdy fan near the lip of the stage and stabbed him to death. The moment was captured as part of "Gimme Shelter," the anti-Woodstock of rock documentaries.

So far, neither drugs nor violent death has cropped up while following Mandella. He did flash his forearm, the one savagely scarred from an encounter with a nasty stallion in his youth. Then Rosenthal rolled up her left sleeve, displaying newly healed wounds, and even Mandella was impressed.

"It happened Sept. 11," she said. "After watching what happened in New York and Washington, I decided to take a ride, to get away from the horrible news for a little while. You know, clear my head."

It sounded like a good idea at the time. But out on the trail, Rosenthal's horse spooked and bolted. She was thrown, then tangled with her horse and a fence, and emerged with deep gashes at the elbow.

"So I ended Sept. 11 on a morphine drip, with Bill visiting me in the hospital."

Equipped with their working knowledge of horseflesh, and granted complete access through the California Horse Racing Board, Yahraus and Rosenthal will be pointing their camera in all directions as they follow the Mandella stable - as well as other stories - throughout the season. They view their footage each night, but the editing won't start until this fall.

"I guess that means we'll have to go to Del Mar," Yahraus said with a shrug. Obviously, they are willing to suffer for their art.



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