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First Person: Kurt Becker

As told to John O'Connor

Kurt Becker drills the horses' names into his head so that during the race he can keep his eyes on the field

The first horse race I ever attended was in 1973. I was four years old. My mother took me to the county fair in our hometown of Altamont, Illinois. There was a white picket fence around the racetrack, and I remember my mother parking the car, walking up to the edge of the fence and picking me up so I could see over it. The feel of the horses turning for home, the sound of their hooves hitting the track, the drivers yelling at one another, it was all incredibly colourful and exciting. From that moment I was hooked.

My father breeds standardbred horses – those used for harness racing. He is also a track announcer at county and state fairs in the Midwest. By the time I was 10, he allowed me to tag along with him to races. Announcing just clicked with me from the start. I was not an athletic kid – I've never even been on horseback. But I loved what my father did.



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Before a race Kurt Becker studies the programme to drill the horses' names into his head

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One day in 1985 – I was 16 – my dad was overbooked. He was scheduled to announce harness races at two different tracks at the same time. I said, “Well, if you’re really in a bind, maybe I could give it a shot.” That was how my first job came about. I was incredibly nervous, but the largest field of horses that day was four, which made my job a lot easier. I lucked out.

The transition to thoroughbreds presented serious challenges. Harness races tend to be in single-file formation without much changing of position, and you generally get the same drivers with the same racing colours. In thoroughbred racing, jockeys change silks from race to race, and keeping the names of horses straight is much harder. Things can change in a few seconds.

I call every race from memory. Fortunately, memorisation comes naturally to me. The day before a race I study the programme to drill horses’ names into my head, so that during the race I can keep my eyes on the field. Once you look at the programme you lose your train of thought. I’ll also watch video footage of each horse to get a feel for their running style – do they have early speed, or do they prefer to wait and come off the pace? On race day I’ll study horses in the paddock and note the silks of the jockeys. But once the horses break from the gate I never look at the programme again. I call about 10 races a day, and at the end I’m mentally exhausted.

My first rule is: get through the whole field by the first quarter-mile, making sure that every horse gets at least one mention. That helps me relax. Then I can get into my rhythm and pick and choose the battles unfolding. The most important part is the finish, and specifically which horses are going to be factors in the final furlong. There’s nothing more embarrassing than for a horse to make a big move and for you to be the last guy in the house to see it happening.

My primary goal is to be accurate. You have to be crisp and tight and clear with the race call. If you try to fill time with a lot of fluff, the betting public will know and you will not last at this level.

At Keeneland, in Kentucky, there are just two three-week meets every year, one in April and one in October. Both are high-profile, with a lot of money at stake. I’m thrown right into the fire. The day before the meet opens I’ll think to myself, can I still do this?

The decision to hire me at Keeneland wasn’t popular. Keeneland is steeped in tradition. At the time – in 1997 – it was the only track in the country without a public address system. The day I started was literally the first day with a PA. I was just 28. It’s unusual to start so young at such an important track. Some announcers toil in obscurity for years at small tracks before getting a break. But I didn’t think, I’ve arrived. I thought, I’d better come prepared. It took 10 years before I believed in my heart that the public accepted me. In this business you’re only as good as your last race call.