



# John the Fair

Chief Steward Even-Handed in Enforcing Racing's Rules

By Ken Snyder

**H**igh above the Keeneland press box overlooking the track, John Veitch trained his binoculars on horses racing below him, looking for any action that might compromise a clean finish.

It is but one aspect of his position as chief steward for the Kentucky Horse Racing Authority, supervising racing not just at Keeneland but also at every other state racetrack. His job takes him to Churchill Downs in late spring and early summer, then to Ellis Park in western Kentucky until Labor Day. Veitch watches every race “live,” then scrutinizes video replays from several angles to review the riding conduct of jockeys. He has authority over licensing jockeys and, in fact, all permit holders connected to racing (trainers, for example, who must be licensed). He also conducts hearings and investigations into alleged misconduct and much, much more.

Having put down his binoculars, he modestly said the only difference between the race watching he does now versus what he did as a trainer is that he watches all of the horses in a race instead of just one.

But, oh, the single horses he watched: Davona Dale, Our Mims, Before Dawn, Sunshine Forever, and Alydar, to name only a few of the numerous champions and near-champions he trained during the glory years of Calumet and Darby Dan farms. He said those years, which helped earn him a place last year in the Racing Hall of Fame, “prepared me very well” for his current occupation.



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

John Veitch prepares to watch a race from the Keeneland stewards' stand.

Said Rogers Beasley, Keeneland's director of racing, “John brings 30-plus years of experience as a trainer to the stewards' stand. He continues the tradition of

integrity and fairness to the stand that we look for in a steward, which helps us maintain a high standard of racing here in the commonwealth.”

It would seem all of Veitch's life has prepared him for a role as Kentucky's top racing official, a position he has held since 2005, enforcing racing statutes and regulations.

Born in Lexington, where he now lives with his wife, Ellen, Veitch spent part of his childhood living in a cottage at Belmont Park in New York. The son of noted trainer Sylvester Veitch grew up among a "who's who" of racing history — people such as trainer "Sunny Jim" Fitzsimmons and patrician owners Ogden Phipps, C.V. Whitney, and many more.

"I'm a little boy at Belmont Park when children aren't supposed to go to the races, but I would go with my mother and father," Veitch recalled. "We're walking out of the paddock one day and I'm about 9-years-old. I'll never forget it: There's old man Fitzsimmons sitting on a bench, and as we walked by, he handed me a Hershey bar and said, 'I beat you today, little Veitch,' " referring to his horse's victory over one trained by Veitch's father.

The experiences, associations, and environment instilled early in Veitch a desire to follow in his father's footsteps and train Thoroughbreds. Education, at his father's insistence, had to come first, however. Secondary education included a

military school in Baltimore that Veitch called a "refuge of race-track brats" that included David Whitely, the son of trainer Frank Whitely; Bobby Arcaro, Eddie Arcaro's son; and many other sons of jockeys and trainers. From there Veitch went to Bradley University in Peoria, Ill., where he majored in international studies and history. Today he is an avid reader with a great knowledge of history.

Veitch's racing career began with assisting his father, who, Veitch said, instilled in him patience; an appreciation for the grooms, exercise riders, barn foremen and others that are part of a stable's operation; and last, but perhaps most important, honesty.

"There are a lot of things you can lose and get back, but one you can't get back is your integrity," said Veitch, who turns 63 in late June.

A four-year stint as an assistant to Elliot Burch after assisting his father preceded Veitch's opening his own public stable in 1974. This set the stage for Calumet and the premier years of his career.

Calumet Farm manager Melvin Cinnamon called Veitch late in 1975, asking if he might be interested in training for Calumet. Five months went by before Cinnamon called again to ask if Veitch could meet him and the Markeys at the Calumet owners' winter home in La Gorce Island in south Florida. "After lunch the Admiral goes to Melvin and says, 'You've spo-



Calumet's filly Davona Dale, whom Veitch trained to a championship in 1979

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ken and discussed with Mr. Veitch his salary, haven't you?" Veitch recalled. He had thought the lunch only an interview when, according to Cinnamon, he had had the job since December. Veitch recalled what Cinnamon told him next with particular fondness: "He said, Mrs. Markey's pretty old school and there really isn't a lot of salary."

"I'll tell you it was \$30,000," Veitch said. "I didn't tell Melvin, but I'd have done the job for free."

Excitement about training for the legendary farm led almost immediately to one of the lowest points in Veitch's career. "We had the worst year that Calumet had ever had," Veitch said, prompting him to attempt to resign after only nine months on the job. "Mrs. Markey wouldn't hear of it." He recalled her saying, "I gave you a lot of bad horses to train." What she next told Veitch may be one of the greatest understatements in the history of Thoroughbred racing: "Melvin Cinnamon tells me we've got a good group of yearlings this year."

The yearlings included a filly that Veitch remembered as a "little bit im-



ANNE W. EBERHARDT

Veitch and his fellow stewards review a race.



STEVE HASKIN

**Alydar finished second in all three Triple Crown races in 1978.**

mature” but had shown, as he recalled, “specks of brilliance.” She turned out to be Our Mims, champion 3-year-old filly in 1977. Almost as an afterthought Veitch added, “And then, of course, that year was 1977, which was Alydar’s 2-year-old year.”

A year later Alydar was to become the most famous second-place finisher in Triple Crown history, battling Affirmed in stirring stretch duels before achieving fame as an outstanding sire after his racing career.

The pain of Alydar’s finishes in racing’s three most important events, while keen for many years in their aftermath, has lessened, replaced by fonder memories surrounding Alydar’s Triple Crown campaign. Veitch speaks of Lucille Markey’s reaction to Alydar’s defeat in the Kentucky Derby and tells something never told before about that race: “At some part of the Kentucky Derby, Alydar got hit in the eye with either a clod or a rock. By the time we got him back to the barn to cool him out, his eye was fully closed. I told Mrs. Markey about it that evening and she asked, ‘Now, have you told anybody?’ I said, ‘No ma’am,’ and she said, ‘Well, I don’t want you to. I don’t want anyone to think we’re making excuses.’ ”

He regarded the instruction as illustrative of how the “great families” were taught to respond to racing fortune and

misfortune.

Veitch trained for Calumet until not long after Lucille Markey’s death in 1982 and then moved to Darby Dan for a number of years. Highlights from Veitch’s Darby Dan assignment include training 1985 Breeders’ Cup Classic winner Proud Truth and 1988 turf champion Sunshine Forever. Veitch could not have known at the time he was at the end of an era: the decline of great racing stables such as Calumet and Darby Dan that essentially produced their own racing stock from homebred stallions and mares. At most, Veitch trained 25 to 30 horses for Calumet, a far cry from today’s large public stables, where a trainer and multiple assistants condition as many as 200 horses at tracks all over the country for many different owners. Veitch’s place in time as one of the last trainers for family-owned racing stables provides a unique perspective on the state of racing today.

Referring to Darby Dan’s John Galbreath, the Markeys, and racing names that preceded them such as the Whitneys and Phipps, Veitch said, “One of their primary goals of those great families was to breed a better horse. They bought all of the best blood that was available in the world and brought it to the United States, intermingled that with our best blood, and produced the best racehorses in the world. We were breeding for soundness and improvement.

“Most of your racing stock now is ‘hothouse’ raised by people that are going to sell commercially, so they want them sleek and prepped up. Today you can’t let a horse go out in the field with

15 other horses and fight and get bloody with knots and bruises all over them — things that are superficial, but things that make them tough. A commercial product can’t be raised that way.”

Whatever the state of the breed, the state of racing, according to principals involved in its operation, benefits from Veitch as chief steward. An example of the regard with which he is held is an innovation introduced by Turfway Park; Veitch will explain to patrons via on-track television monitors the reason for a decision made after an inquiry into a race. “You have to have the capability to articulate the decision but also have the stature to have patrons believe in the explanation,” said Robert Elliston, Turfway Park president. “John has both.”

While Veitch’s role in racing today takes him to every Kentucky track, he unabashedly said Keeneland is his favorite. “There’s something about the people at Keeneland. The stone grandstand and clubhouse, that’s great, but what makes Keeneland are the people that work there. They go out of their way at Keeneland to make sure the horse comes first. You’re not going to find many places like that.” 🐾



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**From left, Veitch, trainer Shug McGaughey, and owner Stuart Janney in the paddock at Keeneland**