

Filmmakers following Mandella get dream ending when trainer wins four Breeders' Cup races

Perfect Scenario

BY CRAIG HARZMANN

It was a tender scene really, the kind Bill Yahraus and Robin Rosenthal were hoping to capture. For over a year, they had been fixtures at the track, Yahraus with his Sony digital camera in hand, Rosenthal alongside with a shotgun microphone and field mixer, shadowing the every move of trainer Richard Mandella.

Now they were geared up once more, this time for the Oct. 25 Breeders' Cup World Thoroughbred Championships and the beauty of the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies (gr. I). Mandella and owner Alain Wertheimer emoting over how their star Halfbridled filled their order perfectly.

"One winner's circle picture. That's all I wanted," Yahraus recently confessed. "At the end of Halfbridled's race, I had gotten what I came for."

By day's end, they'd about run out of tape. Mandella's Breeders' Cup onslaught hit close to the heart for Yahraus and Rosenthal, husband-and-wife filmmakers who tracked the Mandella stable throughout 2002. Their forthcoming documentary on the experience, entitled "On the Muscle: A Year Inside a Thoroughbred Racing Barn," is now nearing completion.

From a numbers standpoint, the project has been overwhelming. "On the Muscle" is a three-year undertaking from inception to airing—three years of groundwork, shooting, logging, splicing, editing, and promoting, with an estimated budget of almost \$500,000. After nearly 15 months behind the camera, compiling 369 videotapes with 260 hours of material—"And we're not counting the race footage which we get from the tracks," noted Yahraus—the pair are finally heading into the homestretch. The end result, a three-hour, three-chapter film, will not be a biography of Mandella or an overview of the sport itself. Rather, "On the Muscle" will play out as a carefully crafted drama, one that brings the unpredictable and humbling arena of Thoroughbred racing to viewers worldwide.

"I would like them to feel that they're seeing a good story first of all, but behind the story, that they're seeing the caring and level of horsemanship that goes into racing," explained Rosenthal. "And also to see the man, Richard Mandella, and what kind of a person is making all this happen. This is a little piece in time of real history, but it has a dramatic structure like a fiction film. You want to feel what the people are going through. That's what we aim for."

"Basically, these are equine athletes being fine-tuned to their best performances by people who really care, and that's what I want people to see," added Yahraus, who teaches courses in beginning and intermediate film production at the University of

Southern California. "But you also get the next level, which is something to care about. I think what's really interesting about Richard Mandella is that he got it. He never ever, not once, said, 'Don't film this.' Never."

The couple's first collaboration, "A Circus Season: Travels with Tarzan," featured an in-depth look at the Tarzan Zerbini circus and its tight-knit troupe of performers—bears, elephants, white tigers, and horses included. Chronicling the show's 15,000-mile, seven-month loop through the central United States and Canada, the 90-minute documentary aired on PBS in 1999.

Like "On the Muscle," "A Circus Season" demanded a similar time commitment. Yahraus and Rosenthal shot three times as much footage with Mandella, however, and currently, they are in the midst of piecing together material for the second and final parts of the series. The first segment, which drew high praise at a Del Mar showing in early September, is already being shopped around as a pilot for domestic broadcast. Additionally, the pair want to make the video available at track gift shops around the country and are looking for overseas television markets as well.

Though "On the Muscle" weaves together the tales of such notables as The Tin Man, Johar, Redattore, and Kudos, perhaps it is the path of Pleasantly Perfect—nicknamed "The Director" for his general nosiness during filming—that will be its most captivating storyline. While the camera closely followed the careers of his more-heralded stablemates early on, Pleasantly Perfect ultimately emerges as a key character toward the end of the movie. It is there that the vicissitudes of his fall '02 campaign, from the thrill of his smashing win in the Goodwood Breeders' Cup Handicap (gr. II) to the letdown of his exclusion from last year's Breeders' Cup Classic (gr. I), are vividly portrayed. That Pleasantly Perfect returned and shook off his Breeders' Cup woes this October—with Yahraus and Rosenthal recording it first-hand—now gives "On the Muscle" an ideal epilogue.

"It was good before then and it's just unthinkably good now," smiled Rosenthal. "Just having him run again this year was great coda material, let alone what happened. I mean it blew our minds. We could never have scripted it."

"It could be a terrific ending," Yahraus said. "In a way, we sort of mimic our own experience, and if we can, at the end of the third piece, mimic the building euphoria and surprise that we went through on Breeders' Cup day, culminating with Pleasantly Perfect, our big hero guy, winning the Classic, then it will be amazing." 



Filmmakers Bill Yahraus and Robin Rosenthal followed Richard Mandella (left) for 15 months