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SPECIAL TREAT FOR MOVIE FANS SUNDAY: THE 'MANDELLA' FLICK AIRS

In the year of "Seabiscuit," the movie, Del Mar comes galloping along this Sunday with a film treat that is original and unique, in addition to being a solid bet as a winner among serious racing fans as well as those who simply enjoy a well-crafted tale.

Shortly after the last race is run Sunday, the first hour of "On the Muscle: A Year Inside a Thoroughbred Racing Barn" will air on the big screen in Del Mar's picturesque paddock. The limited series documentary is the loving creation of a pair of award-winning filmmakers – Bill Yahraus and Robin Rosenthal – who spent a full year with the barn of trainer Richard Mandella, chronicling the ups, downs, ins and outs in the life of the Hall of Fame conditioner and his stable of Thoroughbreds.

"I have been making films for 35 years," said Yahraus, "but this is the most ambitious project I've ever worked on. The commitment of time and energy was enormous, both for us and Richard. I can't say enough about him. He was a man of his word; once he agreed to the project, he never backed off. I'm sure there were days when he thought 'Oh, no, here they come again,' but he never backed off his promise."

The filmmakers started their daily filming with the big meet at Santa Anita in January of 2002, then followed the Mandella horses to Hollywood Park, Kentucky, Del Mar, Oak Tree, the Breeders' Cup at Arlington Park in Chicago and finally back to Hollywood and Santa Anita to finish up the year.

"And he (Mandella) never once said 'Don't film this,'" Yahraus noted. "We asked him for total access and he allowed us that every day. He was completely open. We'd just show up and start filming; no phone calls, no warnings. He just stuck to his business and he let us do ours."

The storyline focuses on Mandella, of course, and a small cast of horses in his large stable. Viewers are taken through their care, training and racing, as well as surgeries and rehabilitations – a full gamut of life on the "backside." It is an unprecedented attempt at an extended and extensive look at the world of Thoroughbred racing, up close and very personal.

The idea for "On the Muscle" came to the husband/wife team of Yahraus/Rosenthal partially through their creation in 1999 of the highly successful PBS documentary "Travels With Tarzan," a film that told the story of a family-owned tent circus' season on the road.

"Both of the settings – the circus and the racetrack – are worlds unto themselves," Rosenthal said. "They are both exotic; they both have their own language. There are strong parallels there.

"And the challenge for us was to weed through so many choices and condense it into something both entertaining and informing. We wanted to be able to tell a story that people on the outside could understand, yet we didn't want to make it so simple that we were talking down to the insiders. We think we've done that with 'On the Muscle,' and one of the reasons is that we were working with Richard – an excellent horseman and an intelligent individual who has many levels to him. I think those who watch it will see that -- see what a special person he is."

Mandella, 52, is the son of a blacksmith who has spent most of his life around horses. He learned the Thoroughbred business from the bottom up and first hung out his own trainer's shingle in 1976. His always steady – and sometimes spectacular -- successes since then earned him the game's highest honor in 2001 when he was voted into racing's Hall of Fame.

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"When they (Yahraus/Rosenthal) approached me in the fall prior to starting this thing," Mandella said, "they told me they wanted to do a 'real life' documentary on racing. They said they wanted to do a sort of fly-on-the-wall thing; not one where they'd be doing a lot of interviews. Just sort of letting it happen.

"When I thought about it, I realized it might be a good thing for racing. Unfortunately, many of the movies I've seen about racing have to do with guys setting up scams or drugging horses. But, you know, there's a lot of hard, honest work in this

game. There's a lot of care given to horses. There's a lot of love of the game that goes into the business. So I thought that if they did something truthful – really showing what goes on on the backside on a regular basis -- I thought it would be a fair shot for racing; I thought it might be good for everyone involved. And if I could be part of that, I wanted to be involved. I have nothing to hide at my barn, so I told them 'Yes.'"

And, after sharing his life with the filmmakers for a year, what did the trainer learn from the process?

"Well, I haven't seen the piece yet, so I can't be too sure how it all came out," he said. "But they were good people to work with. They stayed out of my way as much as you can in that situation. And they made me realize I shouldn't cuss so much around the barn. And that's a good thing."

Working with a small digital camera, Yahraus/Rosenthal shot 260 hours of video. Their original plan was to whittle it all down to a two-hour movie.

"But once we got into the process, we learned we had an embarrassment of riches," Rosenthal said. "We tried, but we simply couldn't cut it to two hours. We finally settled on three and we're still working our way toward a final product.

"What we'll be showing at Del Mar is the first of three one-hour episodes. Normally, a one-hour documentary is about 52 minutes, but what you'll see that Sunday will be about 1:15. We're still scoring the music and adding final touches.

"The first hour consists of the stable's winter meet at Santa Anita and introduces the main characters – both human and equine. The second hour is Hollywood Park, Kentucky and opening day at Del Mar. And the third hour goes through Del Mar, Oak Tree, the Breeders' Cup and finishing out the year."

Yahraus, who made documentaries in San Francisco early in his career, then switched to editing films in Hollywood and currently teaches at USC's School of Cinema-Television, and Rosenthal, who parlayed a background in fine arts into her current film career, will be on hand for the Del Mar showing, as will Mandella. All three will be available for an audience question-and-answer session both before and after the screening on Sunday.

The filmmakers will be taking the first episode to Cannes, France to the big television market in October looking for a buyer for the series.

"I think we've put together a wonderful piece," said Yahraus. "The way we were able to work – very light and very mobile and with full access – allowed us to get a close-up of racing that normally isn't done. It is a very intimate film. It has the real texture of racing and the people and the horses. We're quite proud of it and I hope that people involved in the game will feel the same way."