



The Saratogian, April 15, 2008

Veitch: 'First Saturday' More than Just Roses

By Michael Veitch

I hope you will find some time for the new movie *The First Saturday in May*.

Even though the title refers to the Kentucky Derby, this documentary is about much more than the "Run for the Roses."

It opens at the Saratoga Film Forum on Apr. 24 at 8 p.m., and will also be shown on Apr. 25 and Apr. 27.

A portion of the box office revenue will go to the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation, for equine studies and research.

Filmed, directed and written by John and Brad Hennegan, the story is about six horses trying to qualify for the Kentucky Derby in 2006.

They were Achilles of Troy, trained by Frank Amonte; Barbaro, trained by Michael Matz; Brother Derek, trained by Dan Hendricks; Jazil, trained by Kiaran McLaughlin; Lawyer Ron, trained by Bob Holthus; and Sharp Humor, trained by Dale Romans.

The Hennegan brothers are sons of former New York Racing Association official John Hennegan.

With their connection to racing, the Hennegans succeeded in filming a story that captured the drama of backstretch life, particularly when it involves the annual dream of making it to Louisville.

There is Amonte in the winter cold at Aqueduct, sending out Achilles of Troy to win the Count Fleet Stakes in January, only to see everything fall apart when his horse suffers an injury in the Gotham Stakes two months later.

Matz is involved with one of my two favorite scenes.

He is shown teaching his son Alex how to pet Barbaro without being afraid, all the while giving the viewer a lesson in dealing with the thoroughbred.

My other favorite scene concerns Hendricks, who is paralyzed from the chest down.

His daily routine at the track takes place in a wheelchair, from which he cheerily directs the morning activities.

But when his chores are done, his crew takes him out of the wheelchair and hoists Hendricks on a pony for some exercise.

As a lifelong fan of the backstretch, I thank Hendricks for allowing us this moment.

Then there is the Oaklawn Park veteran Bob Holthus, who developed Lawyer Ron to win the Arkansas Derby in front of thousands of loyal fans.

Lawyer Ron's groom, Chuck Chambers, brightens everything with his infectious love of the horse, which is exactly what the backstretch is about.

If he doesn't cheer you up, you need a check-up.

Romans, a man of few words as my fellow turf writers know, is a study in the "keep your emotions in control" aspect of training thoroughbreds.

He also has a wonderful sense of humor.

Maybe not sharp, but certainly subliminal.

McLaughlin is shown trying to find the best possible scenario for Jazil, a late-bloomer who needs as much ground as a race will provide.

Jazil finishes fourth in a dead heat to Barbaro in the Derby, but later wins the Belmont Stakes at 1 ½ miles.

The Hennegans have delivered a film that shares the inner world of thoroughbred racing and training.

As regular readers of my column know, I think racing is not like other sports and should not try to portray itself that way.

It should be proud of its unique culture, which includes these wonderful people, as well as its own set of difficulties.

The First Saturday in May is a shining example.

The Blood-Horse, April 5, 2008

“First Saturday” First Class

By Lenny Shulman

After the soaring shots of Churchill Downs during Kentucky Derby time that begin the documentary *The First Saturday in May*, the scene suddenly shifts to Aqueduct on a bitterly cold, gray day as assistant trainer Frank Amonte yells at workers from a neighboring barn for dumping their trash in the wrong manure pile.

The skill inherent in such a transition could only come from filmmakers who are intimately associated with their subject matter, and that familiarity is on display throughout the 97-minute film that successfully humanizes the often intimidating sport of horse racing.

John (39) and Brad (36) Hennegan, who shot, directed, and co-wrote *The First Saturday in May*, were raised on the racetracks of New York. Their father spent 37 years working as an official for the New York Racing Association while his sons worked the ice cream stands, wiped off seats as ushers, and served as security guards.

“I walked Easy Goer through the crowd at the Travers,” John said recently, a mixture of pride and amusement in his voice.

Both Hennegans eventually found their way to film and television work for a decade. Then, tired of working for others, they decided to combine their media skills and racetrack knowledge, and after seeing the sensations caused by Funny Cide and Smarty Jones, they figured they could actually merge the two disciplines into a viable project. Following a dry run in 2005 where they followed Afleet Alex, they were ready, picking a half-dozen horses to document and shoot through the 2006 Derby trail. The fact they included Barbaro, Brother Derek, and Lawyer Ron certainly didn't hurt. All three started in the Derby, along with Sharp Humor and Jazil, the latter of whom wound up winning the Belmont Stakes (gr. I). Only Achilles of Troy failed to make the Big Dance, but he provided enough compelling footage along the way to be a worthy inclusion.

It is quite evident throughout the film the Hennegans knew exactly where to point their cameras. Not only do human-interest stories populate the work to overflowing, but the cinematography is equally alluring. The viewer is taken on an insider's ride through barns and box seats, family outings and intensely personal moments.

“All the trainers and horsemen were very supportive,” said John Hennegan. “They realized our goal was to make racing relevant again, especially to our generation. They let us put mikes on them at 4 a.m., and they realized that we knew our way around horses, and what to do and what not to do. Our goal all along was to appeal to the non-horse crowd, and make this a story about people that happened to be set at the racetrack.”

While humor is sprinkled throughout the film, the most powerful scenes contain a poignancy that is in ample supply around any racetrack. But the sure hands of the Hennegans bring the moments expertly to life. In pre-dawn darkness, trainer Michael Matz teaches his son Alex how to pet a

horse without being afraid. The loving moment is made all the more powerful when one realizes the horse he is petting is Barbaro.

Amonte takes his daughter for riding lessons, determined to give her the good things in life he never had. Groom Chuck Chambers talks to his horse, Lawyer Ron, as if he were a lifelong friend, and then celebrates the moment with his family, thinking ahead to their upcoming trip to Louisville, after the horse wins the Arkansas Derby (gr. II). Dan Hendricks, surrounded by his sons, thrills to the feats of Brother Derek even as he himself is confined to a wheelchair following a terrible motorcycle mishap.

Bob Holthus, the veteran trainer of Lawyer Ron, feels the love of the Oaklawn Park grandstand as he goes down to greet his victorious horse. Amonte stares in disbelief at the television monitor that is telling him his Derby dream is over. Dale Romans on Derby morning stares out from his barn, bewildered by his emotions. "I was handling it all pretty good till this morning," he manages.

After Barbaro's Derby victory, the details of the ensuing couple of weeks have to be chronicled as well, and this the Hennegan brothers do with taste and brevity. Horse racing, with its wildly vacillating ups and downs, is a natural to detail the ever-changing state of the human condition. The Hennegans have employed their unique genius to bring it all to light.

The First Saturday in May will have a special premiere screening in Louisville April 13, and will open in 18 markets April 18. The Hennegans are distributing the film along with Truly Indie and Churchill Downs Inc. The brothers have pledged a portion of the box office revenues to the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation.

Daily Racing Form, August 24, 2007

Filmmaking brothers get it right

By Steven Crist

The best horse racing movie of this or many other years is not a big-bucks Hollywood fantasy or one of those lavish Ruffian or Barbaro tear-jerkers from ESPN or HBO. It's "The First Saturday in May," a \$500,000 documentary shot in digital video by Brad and John Hennegan, sons of a longtime racetrack official who quit their video-production jobs two years ago to make their first film, a chronicle of the road to the 2006 Kentucky Derby.

You probably haven't seen it, and won't for a while, unless you're a film-festival buff. It made its debut last April at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York, where it finished second of 180 films in the voting for audience favorite. It will be shown at upcoming festivals in Newark, Del., Vancouver, and Hot Springs as the Hennegans try to line up a deal for a theatrical release next spring before the Derby.

"We're going to the major studios and we've had a couple of offers, but we really want to wait for the right one," John Hennegan said Friday while en route to Saratoga for the Travers. "Getting an indie film released the right way is always a challenge. We also have the option of releasing it ourselves."

The brothers, now 38 (John) and 35 (Brad), grew up around the racetrack as the sons of John Hennegan Sr., a placing and patrol judge at New York tracks for 37 years. They both ended up working at the College Sports Television Network but left their jobs in 2005 to chase their own dream of making a movie about racetrackers chasing theirs.

"We were tired of working for The Man," John Hennegan said. "I had a camera and I'd shot wedding videos. We wanted to do something for racing. We just felt that most movies and marketing people didn't 'get it' about racing. We want to make this game relevant to our generation and show people why the racetrack is the coolest place on the planet."

Their experience around the backstretch growing up meant they knew how to act around horses and horsemen, and they were granted extraordinary access by the trainers and Derby colts they ended up tailing for months: Frank Amonte and Achilles of Troy; Dan Hendricks and Brother Derek; Bob Holthus and Lawyer Ron; Kiaran McLaughlin and Jazil; Dale Romans and Sharp Humor; and, of course, Michael Matz and Barbaro. To their credit, they dealt with the subsequent Barbaro saga as an afternote rather than rearranging the entire movie around what might have been its most commercial hook.

The Hennegans are not only born racetrackers but born storytellers. They masterfully weave together the stories of the six horses and make you like their handlers so much that you find yourself rooting for all five who made it to the race, even though you know how it's going to turn out. The pacing is flawless, picking up as the story moves through the prep season with footage from Aqueduct, Gulfstream, Keeneland, Oaklawn, Santa Anita, and Dubai. By the time Derby Day arrives, you're as keyed up as the participants.

This is not a film that peers into dark corners. Topics such as medication, the economics of breeding and racing, and any mention of handicapping and betting are not part of their scope, but you don't miss it because the human-interest stories are so compelling. What makes them that way is that they are absolutely genuine, with no Hollywood bending of the facts, no made-for-TV forced pathos, and not a single tinkling piano riff to alert you to scripted emotions. In lesser hands, Hendricks's paralysis or McLaughlin's battle with multiple sclerosis could have been mawkish wallows, but here they are presented as facts of life being overcome by people who are still overjoyed to wake up every morning and work with good horses. The movie's ultimate triumph is that it makes you feel good about racing without a single staged feel-good moment.

"We wanted to keep it simple because we want this to be a crossover movie," Hennegan said.

"We want to do more and different things about racing in the future, but we wanted this to be straightforward: 40,000 horses born each year, 20 make it to the Derby, here's how they get there, here's why this is the coolest game in the world."

A DVD will be available sometime next year, and visitors to Saratoga will be able to see it for many summers thereafter: Showing an appreciation for the film as yet absent from the major studios, the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame here has already arranged with the Hennegan brothers to make regular screenings of the movie a permanent museum offering after its theatrical run.

It's the perfect venue: As racing movies go, this one's a Hall of Famer.

The Saratoga Special, August 22, 2007

Film deserves winner's circle

By Sean Clancy

The First Saturday in May, a documentary on last year's Kentucky Derby, premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in April. It premiered at the Hall of Fame yesterday.

The film needs to be in Hollywood.

John and Brad Hennegan set out on the road to the Kentucky Derby. With cameras rolling and feet moving, the brothers followed 12 trainers and their horses on a path that began last fall right around the Breeders' Cup. After 500 hours of filming, the Hennegans winnowed the story down to 97 minutes – six trainers and horses.

You couldn't guess the six with a program.

Of course, Michael Matz and Barbaro demand the main story line, but the good news is the Hennegans don't mention the plane crash and they don't romanticize the trainer or the horse. That's already been done. By the time it's over, you know as much about five other trainers and horses as you do about Matz and Barbaro.

That's the beauty of the film.

Sharp Humor and Dale Romans. Jazil and Kiaran McLaughlin. Brother Derek and Dan Hendricks. Lawyer Ron and Bob Holthus. Achilles Of Troy and Frank Amonte Jr. Yeah, it's the last one that sums up the film.

Amonte comes right out of Hollywood casting – get me a rough and ready racetracker, New Yorker at heart, a little bit shifty but likable at the same time. Amonte starts out as the assistant trainer in the wild and wooly Paraneck Stable. He is a true original, so unpredictable that you watch and cringe over what he's going to say next. You meet his son, who doesn't want to get his new sneakers dirty while at the barn and you go to a horse show at the riding academy off of the Belt Parkway with his daughter. It's classic racetrack, especially when you see Amonte wearing a "Gary Contessa Racing" jacket while training on his own. Amonte takes over as head trainer for Achilles Of Troy, the horse wins the Whirlaway and gets one step closer to the Derby.

In his next start, the Gotham, he doesn't fire, and you see the despair on Amonte's face, we've all been there before, watching the inexplicable losses that befuddle and betray you. The horse hurts his tendon and goes home in the horse ambulance. You know it's the last you'll see of Amonte and you kind of miss him.

Dale Romans puts on a good show but nothing like his friend, "Cousin" Paul Parrish and his son, Jake. Parrish plays the class clown, Jake plays the future sharpie at one point rolling out a wad of cash like a bookie. While watching last year's Triple Crown, many discounted Sharp Humor as just another speedball; when you see Romans slump off after the Derby, you realize what it all meant to him. Again, that's the film's true weight.

Kieran McLaughlin and his family surge through the film, at one point, McLaughlin kneels down in the stall with Jazil, showing a rare moment between horse and trainer. Another moment, Jazil holds a mint between his front teeth, just holds it there without letting go. Along with the character of the people, it's the moments with the horses that make the film.

Instead of languishing over Dan Hendricks' motorcycle accident when he was paralyzed from his chest down, the film focuses on a trainer and a horse. It's Hendricks being a trainer and a father. Brother Derek's exercise rider Cisco Alvarado spars with the stable goat, vintage stuff.

Bob Holthus and Lawyer Ron's groom Chuck Chambers provide the poignancy of the Triple Crown. Obviously in the twilights of their careers, Holthus and Chambers talk straight and true about their horse, their life, their families. When Chambers' family buys Derby outfits and watches the Derby, nearly alone, in the caverns of Churchill Downs, you see the touch of the racetrack. After Lawyer Ron finishes 12th, you see Chambers hug his family and turn to get his horse and you see Holthus walk out of the Churchill paddock, you see it all.

The film shows the real racetrack; constant hopes, race-by-race theater, dirty backsides, broken horses, shattered dreams, hangers on, sharp kids, a dash of drinking, cursing and smoking. But none of those are over-done.

If you've lived the racetrack, you'll love this film. There is no sensationalism, there is no graphic footage of a Ruffian breakdown. No Sam Shepard playing an old racetracker; Bob Holthus plays himself.

As the Hennegan Brothers said, when you put a microphone on somebody, they forget about it in five minutes. Thankfully.

When the film was over, an 11-year-old viewer turned to Brad Hennegan.

"I want to see it in the theater."

Not as much as the Hennegan brothers.

Ohmy Movies International, October 4, 2007

'The First Saturday in May'

By Howard Schumann

Every year since 1875 the first Saturday in May has been the time for the Kentucky Derby, a race of 3-year-old thoroughbred horses over a mile-and-a-quarter track that has been called the most exciting two minutes in all of sports.

Forty thousand thoroughbreds are born each year. Of these 23,000 will race and of those only 20 will make it to the Derby. For owners, trainers, grooms and jockeys it is the World Series, the Indy 500 and the Super Bowl all combined into one.

Brothers John and Brad Hennegan followed the daily activities of the horses and their trainers they thought had a chance to make it to Churchill Downs for two years, shooting over 500 hours of film on a minimal budget in diverse locations such as New York, Florida, California, Arkansas, Kentucky and Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The result is "The First Saturday in May," a buoyant and energizing film experience that may just be the best documentary of the year.

"First Saturday" is primarily a film about horses but it is also about families and especially children, who provide some of the most entertaining moments of the film. The Hennegans show the ups and downs of the path to the "run for the roses" and the emotional investment of the trainers and their families preparing their horses for the ride of their life. Trainers include Dale Romans, who grew up only a few miles from Churchill Downs; trainer of Brother Derek, Dan Hendricks, who is paralyzed from the waist down; Kiaran McLaughlin, who suffers from multiple sclerosis; trainer of Barbaro, Michael Matz, who won an Olympic medal as an equestrian; and others. Another human-interest story is that of 61-year-old groom Chuck Chambers, who has worked tirelessly all of his life for this opportunity.

In order to qualify for the Derby, horses have to compete in stakes races scattered throughout the country and only the top twenty 3-year-olds in earnings will qualify. The film follows six horses, Barbaro, Achilles of Troy, Brother Derek, Lawyer Ron, Jazil and Sharp Humor, through their months of preparation and shows us races -- lots of races -- in which survival in the derby competition is at stake. These include the Wood Memorial, the Santa Anita Derby, the Gotham Stakes and many others -- each race more heart pounding than the previous one. For some there is triumph and for others, tragedy, as one horse on the verge of qualifying breaks down during a race and is pulled from further competition.

The most emotionally compelling moments in the film are those showing the rise and fall of the horse Barbaro from his astonishing 6-and-a-half-length win in the 2006 Kentucky Derby to his breakdown in Pimlico and his subsequent fight for survival. The sequences are shown with admiration and respect for the suffering of the horse and the breakdown is hidden from the camera.

The film does not touch issues such as gambling and race fixing, told and retold in Hollywood

films until they have become a cliché.

The Hennegans' father was a racing official at Belmont Park. They have had a lifelong interest in the sport and wanted to show the positive aspects of racing, the excitement it generates and the lives of the real people involved. Of course all roads lead to Louisville, and the thrilling 2006 derby run is one of the highlights.

The film ends on an upbeat note informing us of the subsequent successes of the individuals shown in the film and the birth of Barbaro's brother Nicanor, a potential Kentucky Derby participant in 2009. "The First Saturday in May" may not be the most publicized documentary of the year but, like "Hoop Dreams" in 1994, once it finds its audience it will be a swift ride to the winner's circle.

Quotes and Awards

Winner Best Documentary
2007 Savannah Film Festival

Winner HBO Producer Award
2007 Savannah Film Festival

Winner Special Jury Award
2007 Austin Film Festival

"Engrossing ... Three Stars (Out Of Four)."
- Sports Illustrated

"Wonderful ... a Splendid movie that reminds us why the racetrack can be the most magical of all sports stages."
- New York Post

"Riveting ... Compelling, Expertly Paced."
- Washington Post

"Sterling ... in the tradition of 'Hoop Dreams'. "
- Newsday

"Beautifully Observed ... Rich and Funny."
- Fort Worth Star-Telegram

"The best horse racing movie of this or many other years ... the Hennegan brothers are not only born racetrackers but born storytellers."
- Steven Crist, Daily Racing Form

"A work of art that will raise thoroughbred racing to another level."
- The Blood-Horse

"A Masterpiece on film you shouldn't miss."
- Dan Shapiro , KentuckyDerby.com

"The consummate documentary on the sport of kings."
- Vancouver Courier

"A buoyant and energizing film experience that may just be the best Documentary of the year."
- Howard Schumann, Ohmy News International