

Interview with DAVID RAPHAEL

Race Caller, Hong Kong Jockey Club

Listen to David Raphael call a race and you'll fast realize why others in the Industry have alternatively called him "the life-blood of the Hong Kong Jockey Club commentary team", "a man with a flair and passion for race calling" and someone whose calls can be both "energetic and thrilling." I met with David earlier this year.

An ability to sketch the ever changing and colorful action of a race, whether to the person clutching a ticket in the grandstand, another listening to the radio or yet someone else watching the replay on the Internet, relies to a large extent on the innate skill of the race caller – their ability to accurately track the field, heighten the excitement for the listener, and capture the truly great moments that so often become immortalized in history. Who, for example can forget Chick Anderson calling Secretariat's world record win in the 1973 Belmont Stakes: "AND SECRETARIAT IS MOVING LIKE A TREMENDOUS MACHINE!"

Similarly, Arlington's track announcer Phil Georgeff has been frequently cited in the history books for his response to Dr Fager's tear away 10 length victory and world record time in the Washington Park Handicap in 1968. As Dr Fager pulled up, Phil's microphone fell silent. Moments later - one incredulous word: "Wow..." Phil had actually forgotten to turn off his microphone but in that split second mistake, the race caller managed to capture both the drama that had unfolded and the awe inspiring performance of the horse that had immortalized it.

From brevity to poetry – the man who sits across the table from me now has also recently captured history in his call of the HK\$4.5M Centenary Sprint Cup. On 12 March 2004, Hong Kong's sprint sensation – the Australian export Silent Witness – was out to equal the record of ten consecutive victories and in doing so put an indelible mark on his label of 'champion'.

As the son of El Moxie set his trade mark blistering pace down the straight David's voice overflowed with the emotion echoed by the tumultuous roar of the capacity Shatin crowd beneath him:

“400 to go and Silent Witness’ cruising ... FIREBOLT’S GONE AWAY FROM HIM THOUGH AND GETS HIS NOSE IN FRONT ... now Felix says GO CHAMPION! GO!

“CO-TACK’S GOT AN EQUAL! ... AND THE HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION OF THE WORLD RUNS AWAY FROM THEM! Silent Witness by 2 lengths ... I thought Pegasus was a myth. But I’ve seen him 10 times now in Hong Kong.”

Australia’s legendary race caller Bill Collins, who spent many years mentoring David and listening to his tapes during the earlier part of his career, and who always stood by the adage “imagine you’re calling to a blind person” would no doubt have given the nod of approval.

His young charge was doing just fine.

.....

Unlike many who share the same career path, David confesses that race calling was not something he felt an innate drive to pursue from a young age. Whilst other would-be callers consumed their childhood years hiding in the back yard (or up a tree) listening to radio broadcasts and memorizing the calls by heart, David was spending many an enjoyable afternoon learning to ride his Auntie’s 17hh “pony” at the local harness stable and dreaming of becoming a champion jockey or trots driver.

But as quickly as the 11-year old’s stature outgrew his career aspirations, so too did others around him realize that the young lad had an uncanny knack for remembering the names of the local trotters, their individual racing histories and their drivers. At 12 he was “given a go at a call” by the on-course barrier caller, and in doing so he discovered an affinity for a role which would one day lead him to call races not just in Hong Kong, but in 7 other countries around the world.

It was at this point that he started to emulate his ‘would-be commentator’ peers. He started to learn some of the more famous race calls by heart and “I’d have all my mates running in a circle and would pretend to call them in a race, or have them on their bikes going around the block and do the same thing”

From friends on bikes to his first barrier trials at Cranbourne, David progressed to calling the occasional picnic race and then restricted meetings. Meanwhile he had been offered an assistant’s position at Radio 3UZ which he summarizes good-humouredly as “basically

carrying around Bryan Martin's bag". It's a time in his life he reminisces over with warmth and respect having had the opportunity to learn under some of the true 'legends' of the Australian commentating world for a nine year period.

David called his first broadcast meeting at the Hamilton Trots in 1988, shortly thereafter a gallops meeting in Gippsland and in 1998 he was invited to Hong Kong to take over from the long serving Terry Spargo (another Australian who will be familiar to many as the voice behind the Dubai World Cup).

Like any career, he suggests that 'immersion' is the key. To that end, whilst there are only two race meetings a week in Hong Kong and a comparatively smaller population of horses compared to Australia, Europe or the States, he says that to stay on top of the sport requires constant homework. "It's ongoing and it never ends. It's like following a football team – you have to know the in's and outs."

He also says that race calling, by its very nature, can never be a part time career. "When the butcher calls the picnic races twice a year he's not a race caller. It's a profession. It's like anything. If you're not doing it full time to make your living out of it you can't claim that's what you do."

When asked what constitute the elements of a good race call that effervescent wit bubbles to the surface yet again.

"A good race?!" he quips.

He becomes more serious for a moment. "You can't make something better than it is. The key elements are clarity, accuracy, and being descriptive ... but what I always come back to is that whatever happens you just have to go with the flow. And don't make it bigger than it really is. I'm no genius. I just try and tell people what's happening. If I can get a buzz out of a race and someone else can pick that up from my call then that's good – I've done my job."

Like many Australians he is blessed with quick wit and a razor sharp sense of humour. He recalls the day when the Jockey Club opened the first McDonalds franchise at the Happy Valley track and "judging by the number of press releases and media hype you'd swear they were giving away 10 million dollars". During one of the races that evening when a horse

suddenly ran off the track at the top of the straight, David couldn't resist, piping into his call "he'll want some fries with that – to go please".

Whilst he is anxious not to be remembered solely for his humorous calls he admits that when the opportunity arises he usually can't help himself. It is this spontaneity that speaks volumes about the personality of the man behind the call and his at-times 'wild card' status that had the old-school frowning when he first took to the air waves.

"In Australia they told me to stop it because it 'wasn't the thing to do'" he says with a mock stern tone. "A young race caller learning to call a race wasn't supposed to be humorous."

In 1998 David was also approached to broadcast for the World Series. In addition to his role in Hong Kong, this opened the opportunity for him to call Group 1 races in Japan, Germany, Ireland, England, Canada, Australia, and South Africa. In so doing he has called some of the epic thoroughbred battles of recent years: Fantastic Light and Galileo in The King George; a repeat dual of the two champions in the Irish Champion Stakes; Golan and Nayef in The King George the following year and Northerly and Sunline (twice) in the Cox Plate.

Reporting on this heady overseas experience he readily admits that not all race courses offer the same ease of call as the broadcast boxes he is spoilt with in Hong Kong.

"I've had to call The King George from the box where the police normally sit – the one where they shoot whoever they think is a terrorist." He gestures to a mid-point on his chest "The box only comes up to here on me so I have to put a board on the window with my chest on the board, lean out the window with my glasses out the window like this [he mimics the action causing me to laugh] and try and call a mile and a half race ... it's woeful!"

Whilst he loves living in Hong Kong and readily places it in the category of 'one of the great cities of the world' David admits that feelings toward it can at times verge on the ambivalent: "One day it's Disneyland but the next day it's a dungeon," he says.

I query the dungeon reference.

"Well, you can't leave [Hong Kong] that easily ... and you can get a bit of Island Fever when things get tough. There is never an easy day here. I don't think many people overseas

realize what you have to give up when you're an expat. They look and just think how wonderful it is – what they don't realize is that actually it's not like that at all".

He admits to missing the Australian beaches, clean water for swimming, fresh air, "dare I say it – being able to get in a car and actually drive a long distance and go somewhere" and, a comment common to the many expatriates you speak to – his family and friends.

Despite holding a high profile position in the local racing industry, David says he still doesn't consider himself to be overtly in the public eye. But because (unlike many commentators) his 'on air' voice is very similar to his 'everyday' voice he says that a lot of people do look somewhat askance when they are introduced to him and say they know him from somewhere but they can't place where!

Summing up his role in the industry he says that a good race caller assists in making the race memorable. "The audience should remember a race because the race call builds their emotion and it's not just seen as two horses slugging their way down the straight. If you turned the volume off in such a case there would be nothing - it's that simple"

The interview comes to a close and as if on cue his mobile rings. He asks the caller where they are then hoots with laughter "I hope you've got money" he says to them "they don't give change for \$1000 bills in there!"

© **Katrina Partridge 2004**

www.athloneassociates.com