

BEEN THERE, BOUGHT THE T-SHIRT:

The Relevance of Trademark Race Calls

BY MELISSA KEITH

Tom Durkin once said calling a race means sticking to the narrative or developing the plot. Trademarks often take the latter in a familiar but crowd-pleasing direction.

There are plenty of accurate race calls every day, throughout North America. Then there are the kind of race calls that communicate much more than the action of horses and drivers on the track — they communicate, and generate, emotion. Sometimes it's an epic race that provides track announcers with a moment deserving special treatment. Trevor Denman's call of the 2009 Breeders' Cup Classic finish ("THIS IS UN-BE-LIVE-ABLE! ZEN-YAT-TA!") is almost as memorable as the great thoroughbred mare's historic victory. Roger Huston's words roused an already-pumped Jug Day crowd as Falcon Seelster drew away in the 1985 Invitational Pace at Delaware, Ohio: "If you're not already on your feet, YOU BETTER GET UP NOW!"

Track announcers naturally have favourites of their own. Buffalo Raceway and Shenendoah County Fair's Michael Carter has praise for a specific Mohawk Racetrack memory. "One of the biggest races that has really stood out was the 2007 Breeders' Crown where Equinox Bi was defeated at the wire, but Corleone Kosmos jumped off stride at the wire. Ken Middleton called this race and it stuck out because of his professionalism, but he also made it a point to inform the public of what was going on, which as an announcer is a huge thing to do!" No trademark call was required, because accuracy and good "flow" during a race are universally valued, especially in the midst of such rapidly-changing circumstances. When it comes to signature catch phrases, opinions are more divided.

Ken Middleton himself falls into the "less is more" camp. The Woodbine/Mohawk announcer cites "Dave Johnson's booming delivery of 'And down the stretch they come'" as "a household phrase that most people would associate to horse racing—both thoroughbred and standardbred", naming "John Bothe's 'Zooooooming by', Vance Cameron's 'Boom! Just like that' and Dan Loiselle's 'Picture time'" as others that come to mind. Yet he admits he doesn't want to be known for any trademarks. "I just try to be creative, accurate and fresh. Every now and then you'll think of

*"If you're not
already on your
feet, **YOU BETTER
GET UP NOW!"***

ROGER HUSTON



different ways of saying things so it doesn't become repetitive. But I don't think there's a trademark line I use on a regular basis like some announcers."

Not all racecallers need a trademark, although Middleton suggests the racecallers who use them are among those who motivate newcomers. "I think I speak for most announcers when I say most people that try announcing will emulate someone—or a number of other announcers—when they start out. I know I used to imitate other announcers when I was younger and calling races on the rooftop of the grandstand."

As The Raceway at Western Fair's Shannon "Sugar" Doyle points out, you know it's one (a trademark call) when you see it on a t-shirt. The former voice of Northlands Park says he doesn't have one characteristic phrase he's known for (at least yet), although he has a few favourites and is constantly compiling ideas for future use. Like a late-charging closer, inspiration can appear unexpectedly.

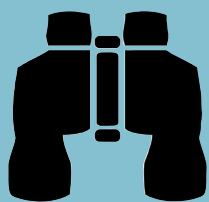
"I remember that spring of '08 at Northlands Park, and the miles were going pretty fast, and I was thinking that the chance of a track record being broken was fairly good. We were getting near the end of the meet, it was getting into May then, and we were out at karaoke. We're sitting around and of course

Mike Hennessey has to do his 'Piano Man', and he does a fine job. Then of course at the end of it, Brandon Campbell stood up on a chair and hollered for everybody in the restaurant, 'THAT JUST HAPPENED!'"

To most, Campbell's words would be one Alberta driver's entertaining take on another's karaoke prowess; to Doyle, they were golden. "I'm sitting with Ryan Grundy, and I look over and say, 'That's the track record call!' and he said, 'That might work!'" A few days afterward, the track record indeed fell and Doyle saw his opportunity: "'Tajma Hall, 1:50.3 — THAT JUST HAPPENED!' It went over real good."

Carter says developing a personal style as an announcer takes work. "It can be [challenging]; when I first got my start I loved (and still do love) Sam McKee. I loved the fact that he would say a horse was 'CHARGING hard down the lane'; it was a very exciting thing, but you have to come up with your own style to make it in this business. Some announcers can do impressions, which is great, but what I emphasize to upcoming race-callers is just try to be yourself and you will find your own phrasing."

He's unconvinced that he, or other harness race-callers, must coin unique expressions in order to stand out. "It can help, but



**"THIS IS UN-BE-
LIEVABLE! ZEN-
YAT-TA!"**

TREVOR DENMAN

having a distinct voice and correctly calling the race is what I focus on,” notes the Buffalo Raceway announcer. “My trademark is always at the end of the card where I say ‘Final field for a [particular] night sent on their way.’ That way I keep it simple.”

Clear play-by-play analysis in a radio-worthy voice is one proven way to call a race. Yet as anyone who’s attended the Little Brown Jug, Gold Cup and Saucer, or the 2014 Prix d’Ete revival knows, this style of announcing has a flamboyant cousin. Think of those trademark lines appearing as t-shirt slogans: Roger Huston’s “Don’t get shut out! Wager NOW!”; Vance Cameron’s “BOOM! Just like that!”; Guy Lafontaine’s “Hippity Hippity Houw BOOM!” (All three are really available on t-shirts at the Delaware Fairgrounds, Charlottetown Driving Park and Hippodrome 3R respectively.)

Track announcers can find creative lines, and potential future trademarks, anywhere. “I love music, I love going home and listening to the sports replays, and I pick up off of that,” says Doyle. “One thing I jotted down — there was a song on the radio a lot last year, Carrie Underwood’s ‘Good Girl.’ There’s a line in there talking about ‘goodbye shoes’, and I’m thinking, ‘Wow, that’s kind of got a nice ring on it, to maybe put on a filly that’s com-

ing home to win a race!’ So I’ve used that in a race, something like, ‘Regal Roxy’s got her goodbye shoes on tonight — GONE!’”

Former Hippodrome de Montreal race-caller Danny Emond is another sports fan, inspired by his sportswriter father’s work. “My Dad, when he had a day off, he used to take me to Saratoga — the harness racing though. He loved the harness, not the thoroughbred,” he tells *TROT*. Emond says Tom Durkin’s phrasings impressed him: “Like the ‘ding-dong battle’ and ‘Rrrrrrobie Davis’ — he used to stretch the name. I learned from the best. I think he’s one of the best announcers I ever heard.”

The outspoken Emond argues that harness racing could use more, not less, outrageousness and colour behind the mic. Trademarks are an important ingredient in that kind of presentation. He gives the “unbelievable” example of an announcer treating a very fast three-quarter mile clocking the same way as an average or slow fraction, suggesting such lack of emotion discredits the horses and drivers, as well as the game itself. “Look at sports like football — football is two years ahead of everybody else—baseball with the home runs, hockey when a guy scores... we’re [harness racing] still in the ‘50s and the ‘60s! Come on! It’s 2015, wake up!”



Before his 2006 departure from the Montreal racetrack, Emond says he debated with a fellow announcer about rationing out enthusiasm and trademarks based on the relative importance of a given race. “He said, ‘You can’t announce all the time like that, putting the action in the race’ and I said, ‘Why not? Guy wins one race in his whole life, why can’t he feel like that?’” Emond says the excitement of a colour-filled race call extends to the bettors as well. “The guy who comes to the racetrack and puts \$20 to Win on his horse” in an overnight race still deserves a good show, perhaps even a “BOOM!” call, notes the opinionated ex-announcer.

The thrill of the race call is a marketing tool par excellence for any racetrack that opts to allow it, suggests Emond. As a guest on a Montreal sports radio show, he says the power of announcing became apparent: when he broke out his race-calling skills, the host commented, “You give me goosebumps. I can’t believe it — I never went to the races, but I’m excited listening to you.” Communicating that feeling to the next generation should be part of an announcer’s role, argues the man who started his trade at the old Jonquiere, Quebec track. Later on, when he shared Montreal microphone duty with Jean Desautels, Emond says he would often allow young fans into the booth to watch while he called races.

Despite spending the last five years out of the racing game, Emond says he’s seen what



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MICHAEL CARTER

“...I realized over time it’s the horses that are putting on the show, and the announcer is just a minor part of the action. **We’re just there to describe what’s going on.**”

SHANNON ‘SUGAR’ DOYLE



works and what doesn’t, in terms of firing up a crowd and winning over new fans. He gives credit to his stepfather’s skills during the Blue Bonnets and Hippodrome de Montreal years. “Donald [Pinard] was one of the good announcers for that, because he was one of the guys who put in action. Me, I mixed the two of them: I put Donald’s action with Jean Desautels’ voice, because Jean had a very nice voice.” Among current harness announcers, Emond is partial to Ken Warkentin’s style, although in general he finds that harness racing could use an infusion of Kentucky Derby-esque drama. “I have an American-style mentality—I like the spectacular!”

Is there ever just “too much of a good thing” in the announcer’s booth? Too much exuberance, too much use of popular trademark calls, too creative a trademark? Doyle, who has called races professionally since 2006, offers his take. “I don’t overuse these trademark calls. They’re original enough that I’m happy to use them, but I don’t overuse them. There’s calls that people do want to hear: for my big races out in Alberta, I always used, at the start, ‘They’re off and IT IS ON!’ It’s just a nice start to a race. Nobody’s ever used it, it’s just one of my own.”

He has since used the distinctive line to start the Molson Pace at Western Fair, in recognition of the event’s importance. Predictable use of certain phrases may generate crowd reaction, however Doyle argues that ‘keeping things fresh’ every race is what

matters. “You listen to some guys and it’s the same thing: ‘they’re off and pacing’ or ‘they’re off and racing,’” he points out. “That’s just not me. I try to change it up: ‘Race nine in London starts NOW!’ or ‘They’re off and it’s ON!’ or ‘There they go!’ I don’t like being repetitive.”

How do announcers keep tabs on what their audience thinks about trademark (and non-trademark) calls? “This is a very good question,” replies Carter. “It’s always hard to gauge what the public thinks of certain things you do unless you communicate with them. I work in the office at the racetrack as well and really try to connect with the patrons, and they are VERY honest about what they like and don’t like.” Add the impact of social media and today’s announcers are well-equipped to get all the feedback they want. “I take a lot of it as constructive criticism,” says the relatively trademark-free New York State race-caller, himself an active participant on Twitter (@mcarte1). “Some of it really helps in the long run.”

Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but among racecallers, originality is king. Carter says he doesn’t think it’s helpful to borrow from anyone else’s playbook. “I feel like you should be able to relate to a call where you have some weird names or something really crazy happens, like when Larry Collmus had the two ‘wife’ horses,” he notes, referencing the Monmouth Park announcer’s clever handling of a 2010 stretch duel between thoroughbreds *The Wife Doesn’t Know* and *My Wife*

Knows Everything. Aspiring to deliver a race call as proficiently as Collmus is very different from copying Collmus, suggests Carter. “Again in this situation, you just want to be yourself.”

In his 2002 book “And They’re Off! My Years as the Voice of Thoroughbred Race Racing”, legend Phil Georgeff (who also called standardbreds at Egyptian Downs at Washington Park and Maywood Park) explains his most distinctive turn of phrase: “I adopted my trademark, ‘Here they come, spinning out the turn!’ for two reasons. One, to add color and excitement with a personal, special cachet; two, to provide a special hook for film or video-tape coverage.” He writes that using that line prevented video coverage of races from picking up the race call at an awkward moment: “Often, the film would catch the announcer between words and horses. With my call, technicians knew there was that slight pause before I’d utter ‘Here they come...’”

His trademark phrase was secondary to Georgeff’s preferred tactic. “I might’ve done more, but I was committed to voice and vocal intonation in describing races,” he writes. “Others did it with words; I chose to do it with sound.” He notes he was told he had to tone down his enthusiasm when John J. Mooney became Arlington Racetrack president. The reason? Paraphrasing Mooney, the author-announcer describes being told that entertaining race calls were a mere distraction, because “out east, tracks are considered betting factories.”

“He said, ‘You can’t announce all the time like that, putting the action in the race’ and I said, ‘Why not? Guy wins one race in his whole life, why can’t he feel like that?’”

DANNY EMOND

Mooney was incorrect: even when bettors are betting on Canada’s east coast, Vance Cameron’s race calls are a highlight of Old Home Week and year-round live cards at Red Shores Summerside and Charlottetown. Cameron has a number of go-to phrases enjoyed by racegoers, such as when a front-end duel develops into what he terms “AN OLD-FASHIONED BROUHAHA!” He’s known for an exciting style that brings drama to even the ‘bottom claimers’ (another Cameronism). But more than anything else, the famous “BOOM!” call gets the fans going.

That call first became familiar to racing fans at Hippodrome de Montreal. Danny Emond says while he may have shook up some of the more traditional-minded in his time behind the mic, his trademarks appealed to the younger crowd. “I’ll never compare myself to Elvis, but a lot of people said to me, ‘The way you started announcing was different, and the older people didn’t like it!’” the now 47-year old recalls with a laugh. “At the time I was young; I was always in a good mood.” Among Emond’s talents was whipping up memorable names for local horsemen. “When Rick Zeron used to win races [at Montreal], I was one of the first ones giving nicknames, like ‘Rick the Whip’. He had his whip and he’d look at me and I’d say ‘Third win tonight for Rrrrick the Whip Zeron!’”

“All these expressions — ‘Can’t get better

than this!’, ‘The greatest game in the world!’ — I did so much,” says Emond, who adds that sports commentators outside of racing often influenced his calls. His famed “BOOM! JUST LIKE THAT!” has its origins in football. “Remember John Madden? He was one of the colour guys in the ‘80s,” explains Emond of ABC television’s Monday Night Football commentator. “When a guy used to get hit hard, he used to go ‘BOOM!’ He didn’t say the ‘Just like that!’” On one occasion, Emond was calling a quick opening quarter after watching football earlier in the day. He found himself automatically freestyling with Madden’s terminology. “A horse went in :26.3 and it just came out: ‘BOOM! JUST LIKE THAT! Vingt-six et trois! Twenty-six and three!’”

Public response was swift as well. “After you’re finished your job, and you’re going down the stairs at Montreal, and a couple of people are saying ‘BOOM! JUST LIKE THAT Danny!’, I said ‘Oh, I have something there!’,” he laughs. “Right after that, it became my trademark. It was 15 or 20 years ago I started that.”

“To have a special call like that and to want to use it all the time, it might get old,” cautions Doyle, not specifically referring to Emond. He prefers to reserve fan-favourite calls for special occasions. “I don’t want people to know ahead of time what I’m about to say. There’s some race-callers I can listen to and I can pretty much figure out what he’s going to say next.”

Growing up idolizing Charlottetown Driving Park announcer Kevin “Boomer” Gallant (who incidentally has no connection to the “BOOM!” call), Doyle recalls tuning in on the radio during Old Home Week, never wanting to miss a race. “I was just in awe of listening to him call a race—he had such a big voice, and it was clear. I think when you think of a good race-caller, you want to be able to close your eyes and see the action.” Trademark calls usually don’t contribute to that sense of clarity; he says it’s the “big voice” and “great adjectives” of Ken Warkentin and Tom Durkin that made them two of his more recent favourites. There’s also an element of emotional restraint; as Doyle puts it, “If they’re getting

excited, you know there’s something happening in the race.”

Trademark calls, however beloved in certain circles, are optional. “I think if a guy doesn’t have that trademark call that people know him by or whatever; if an announcer has a really good voice for calling races; if he’s going to be enjoyable to listen to, you don’t need all the bells and whistles to go along with it,” explains Doyle. “When I first began race-calling, I thought that might be a good way to step into things — maybe come up with ideas, catch phrases and stuff and do my thing — but I realized over time it’s the horses that are putting on the show, and the announcer is just a minor part of the action. We’re just there to describe what’s going on.”

Too much colour and a race-caller risks turning off an important part of a track’s audience, adds the voice of The Raceway at Western Fair. “Especially now, with simulcasts being such a big player in the market, you don’t want people turning away from your track because, ‘We can’t stand listening to this guy!’” he deadpans. “You know, I’m sure



KEN MIDDLETON

there are people who are not a fan of Sugar Doyle. They may have me on mute here and there; they may have me on mute at home." Being approachable and interactive with Western Fair players around North America during live cards (he's @SugarDoyle on Twitter) is important to him. "The odd time I'll get a comment from someone saying 'nice call on that last one' or whatever. That means a lot."

What about the most colourful callers? Doyle suggests it's little coincidence that Vance Cameron and Roger Huston work the mic at two of the sport's highest-attended events. After his inaugural trip to the Little Brown Jug in 2014, Doyle says he better understands Huston's style. "I can now see why people walk around with the t-shirt that says 'Don't be shut out! Wager NOW!' When you're there, on track, and you're listening to him do his thing, you can really appreciate it." Trademark calls and an excited style are perfect accompaniments to the festive outdoor atmosphere at the Jug and the Gold

Cup and Saucer.

Middleton says the audience, not the announcer, decides what makes a trademark a winner or an also-ran. "Some lines are so appropriate that they win people over. Bothe's 'zooooooming by' was one of my favourites. It was appropriate, funny and you could almost predict it before the words came out of his mouth. You were waiting for him to say it when a horse was flying up on the outside getting ready to make a big stretch surge." Even with catchy, meaningful trademarks like Bothe's, there's an annoyance factor to consider. "For every three people that would get a kick out of hearing a catchphrase every single race, there are three different people that would hate it," explains the man who calls the races at Canada's two biggest harness tracks.

The last word goes to Doyle, who seems destined to one day have a call on a t-shirt himself. "Not every race deserves a big trademark call or whatever, but if the race sets up

in the early going or the late going that you can use something, then all the power to you. Just use them sparingly!" **T**



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