

TRANSCRIPT OF BARRY IRWIN'S ADDRESS TO THE FARM MANAGERS AT THEIR MONTHLY MEETING AT KEENELAND ON JUNE 4, 2008

By a show of hands, how many of you here are in the horse business? All right, so am I.

But I wasn't always in the horse business.

I don't know about the rest of you, but as a kid I was attracted to horse racing by the sport, not the business.

Like a lot of kids of my generation—kids growing up in the 1950s—I got hooked on racing watching the Grey Ghost of Sagamore running on Saturday afternoons on television.

As a young adult, I wanted to write about horse racing, so I moved to Kentucky and wrote about stakes races and horse sales for *The Blood-Horse*.

My first wife can testify that the move to the bluegrass came about because her husband was horse crazy. Would a sane person give up a \$400 a-week job to work for \$100?

The next natural progression for me was a desire to get involved in the horse business. But that was only because I loved the sporting aspect of the game so much. I didn't just want to write about it, I wanted to be a player.

The aspect of the sporting nature of horse racing that I loved the most was following young horses and watching them progress as athletes.

The guardians of the sport—those dedicated men and women who bred the animals to carry their own stable colors into battle—were my heroes.

Because my heroes stocked their stables with horses they bred, their stables were only as good as their skill in coming up with the best individuals. If they did not breed with a purpose in mind, they failed and were unable to compete.

Among those that rose to the top were the Phippses, Calumet Farm, the Whitneys, King Ranch, the Galbreaths, to mention just a few. They rose to the top of the heap by dint of their sheer determination and dedication, as well as their undying respect for the Thoroughbred.

Today, one would need a search warrant from a judge in Bourbon, Woodford or Fayette County to locate breeders for whom the sport matters most.

In the year of my birth—1943—that's 65 years ago for the mathematically challenged among us—right here on these hallowed grounds of Keeneland, a bunch of hardboots was prevented from sending its yearlings to Saratoga because of a wartime restriction on rail transport.

So a yearling sale was held downstairs here in the paddock of Keeneland under a tent. Breeding back then to sell instead of race—or as we call it “commercial breeding”—bore no resemblance to what we have today.

But the confluence of a rare group of entrepreneurs and subsequently an untimely reversal of the Federal tax code changed the course of the Sport of Kings.

When the tax code was changed so that Uncle Sam was no longer quite so willing a partner of the game's wealthiest sporting families, the blue-blooded owners that bred to race began to disappear faster than you could say capital gains.

One by one the scions and daughters of the captains of industry traded in their split-pedigree binders for coupon clipping and retreated into the woodwork of the cozy dens at the family manses along Long Island sound and the Brandywine Valley of old Delaware.

Poised to replace the game's elite sportsmen were a group of fellows that were all too happy to breed to sell yearlings at Keeneland. Yearlings that would fill stalls on the backstretches of Belmont Park, Santa Anita and Saratoga were slicked up by some of the best hoss traders to ever come down the pike.

First came Leslie Combs. He was followed Tom Gentry...then there was John Gaines...and now we have The Taylor Brothers. With these new boots at the helm, the 1943 tent gave way to this temple we have today, where commercialism is worshipped as the new religion of our industry.

When the great families departed, their farms were gobbled up by people, both local and out of town, who wanted in on the good times that came from this cash crop of cranking out foals to sell as yearlings at Keeneland.

The professional horsemen that had spent their lives learning how to conceive, bred, foal, raise and prepare a Thoroughbred to win for breeders either went out on their own or began to work for the new brand of commercial yearling sellers.

As the enterprise of selling yearlings was developed into an art form that made car dealers green with envy, and the individual replaced pedigree as the flavor of the times, some entrepreneurs forgot the admonition from the margarine commercial that it was not "nice to fool Mother Nature" and began to fiddle with ways to turn out a more saleable product.

So, aided and abetted by a veterinary community that had taken an oath to "use its scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health," farm managers began to engage in all sorts of questionable practices to alter the appearance of yearlings—all done in the name of commercialism.

Chemically and surgically horsemen and vets pushed the envelope to create from the finest hot houses of Central Kentucky a product that bears only scant resemblance to its forbears.

This weekend the entire racing community will pray like hell that Big Brown wins the Belmont, providing our drug-addicted and surgically-hooked industry with a badly needed fix by becoming the first Triple Crown winner since Affirmed.

Affirmed was a homebred. He had the audacity to win the Triple Crown even though he was bred out of town in Florida. Horrors! His owner bred him from a homebred stallion that was a son of Raise a Native.

Raise a Native has come under quite a bit of heat lately, especially in that great periodical of the Turf the Wall St. Journal in a story written by a young man that before this year would have been more likely to read the word sire in a book about Camelot than in a stallion register.

Louis Wolfson knew the pros and cons of using the brilliance of Raise a Native. Affirmed was gifted by Wolfson with the type of dosage to make Franco Varola applaud from the grave, with 26 representatives centered smack dab in the middle of his dosage profile.

Affirmed was the thoroughly tested Champion of his generation at 2 and 3 and Champion Older Horse at 4. In 29 starts, he had 22 wins and 5 seconds.

Affirmed, as was common at the time, was a homebred in an era of homebred Classic winners. Affirmed was bred with the intention of being a top racehorse, not a sale's prospect.

Today, the vast majority of horses bred in Central Kentucky are produced by people with no intention of racing them unless they get stuck with them. Today most of the best-bred horses are produced to sell. They are prepared not with the Classics in mind, but the sales ring.

The less expensive ones are bought by pinhookers, horsemen that will try to push the envelope even farther to have them run as fast as their surgically altered legs and chemically enhanced flesh can propel them for a hell-bent furlong down the homestretch of a racetrack pounded down to resemble State Highway 64 rather than a stretch of cushioned soil on which regular racegoers would expect to see a Thoroughbred complete at the races.

The most expensive of these yearlings are bought by that rara avis known as the end user. Schmucks like me.

Guys like me that want to race horses and form partnerships to share ownership with others are the lucky bastards that get to fight over which of these hot-housed, chemically-pumped up, artificially-altered, treadmill-drilled, surgically cleaned-out athletes we like the best.

Horses from these sales are running almost 50-percent fewer times than their forbears. In all areas where science could have helped improve the breed and conditions under which these animals compete, today's equine athlete is less likely to run as long as his forbears by almost 100 percent.

There is more public auction of racing prospects than the racing of prospects. There is more business than sport. Even though without the sport, there can be no healthy business.

The torch to keep sport and the horses well has long since been passed from the great families and the stockmen with names like A. B. (Bull) Hancock, Henry White, Charlie Kenney and Charles Nuckols.

So, whom, may I ask, are the guardians of the sport today? Well, sports fans, they are seated right here in this room. Absentee business men rely on the decisions of their farm managers. Yep, you folks have morphed into the power behind the thrown. The decisions you people make drive a great deal of this industry and along with it the sport.

As we sit and dine here in one of the ante rooms inside this ultimate monument to commercialism, who among you is going to become that leader or group of leaders that decides to take back the game and keep sport alive?

Whether or not you want to face it is not relevant. It is a fact. You have the power to reform the modern Thoroughbred and along with it the entire sport, both commercially in the sales ring and for the sport on the track. Without the sport, nothing follows or flows. Without the sport there can be nothing that is commercially viable.

Commercialism is not an evil word. Not even in China or Russia! If things are done with the best interests of the horses as its core, more people will want to get involved in racing and breeding horses. You guys can restore the industry and the sport to its former glory. This can once again be the Sport of Kings if you step up to the plate, do the right thing by looking that devil of the quick buck in the eye and kicking his butt out the front gates.

It is time to take a long-range view of this game. If the people you work for don't want to operate in this responsible fashion, then maybe they should be doing something else, like selling SUVs. With gas headed to \$10 a gallon, that might could be profitable!