

THOROFAN VOICE

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GETTING STARTED

The steps leading up to Tom Durkin calling “They’re at the Post” are very interesting. The next time you are at the track follow the movement of the starting gates. Between races the gate is moved to the proper pole according to the distance of the next race. The gate must be perfectly positioned to assure that the actual distance of each race is consistent to standards.

While the post parade is in progress you will see the head starter, Roy Robert Williamson and his crew of assistant starters walk to the gate. Next they will check their programs and arrange the numbers atop the gate according to the field for each race. Seldom will any two consecutive races require the same number configuration: they change according to the number of entries or if there are coupled entries. Take notice and you will see Roy reviewing a notebook. The starter keeps a file on every horse and before the horses are loaded, he reminds his assistants of certain idiosyncrasies of individual horses. The starter knows each horse as a teacher knows every member of a class.

If a horse misbehaves in the gate he is placed on the starter’s list. That means before he can start in another race the trainer must take him to the gates for morning schooling. This can vary as much as what a teacher may assign to bring a student up to pace. The starter and his assistants work with the trainers and riders in a manner resembling parents trying to solve behavioral problems in children. Usually the biggest factor is to make the horse feel comfortable in the gate so that his focus is on breaking alertly when the gates fly open and the bell sounds.

Bob Duncan was for many years the head starter for NYRA and now works as a consultant to them. Bob brought a philosophy of natural horsemanship to the New York starting crews. The most recognizable schools of this concept are those of Monty Roberts and Pat Perelli. The general mindset of all natural horsemanship involves learning to think like a horse. Over-constraint of horses or trying to over-power them is not part of these programs. Determining what the horse may be thinking requires a special discipline from horsemen.

One doesn’t have to have much imagination to understand that most horses initially find the starting gate intimidating. It takes a great deal of time, patience and knowledge to get a horse comfortable around these big, noisy contraptions. In and around the gate the chances for injury to both men and horses are extremely high. The level of horsemanship and teamwork required to minimize the risks and maximize the chances for each horse to get a clean break is a feat to acknowledge. To see a good crew orchestrate a successful start is a form of art which requires balance, grace and hidden strength.

The next time you see a field break in unison from the gates as you hear Tom Durkin call “And They’re Off” you can be sure that the crew behind the gates did their jobs well. Naturally, they deserve high fives from their starter. Every fan, jockey, horseman and owner is very fortunate that at NYRA tracks, horses are in very good hands when they’re at the post.



QUOTABLE

"The task of the writer is to seize the reader by the back of the neck and force him to love life" ~ Leo Tolstoy

This editor's task is to take fans by the forelock and lead them back to the traditions and joys of horseracing.