

Snow, White Loafers & a Roast Beef Sandwich — the Birth of the *MRN*

By Jerry Connors

When I think of the beginnings of the *Meadows Racing Network*, three images pop into my mind: white snow, white loafers and a roast beef and cheddar sandwich.

As you will read in the rest of this celebration of The Meadows' first 50 years, the track has always been in the forefront of racing innovations and experiments, starting with the Tartan Brand Surface. One of the reasons The Meadows has achieved such a lofty reputation among the trotting set is that it has not been afraid to try new things. As is to be expected with inventions, not all have turned out perfectly, but certainly enough have been successful and a few spectacularly so.

Among them is the *Meadows Racing Network*, now called *Meadows Live!*, which has had a dramatic, positive impact, not only on the local scene but throughout all racing as well. As The Meadows itself, the *MRN* this year is celebrating an anniversary, its 30th. *Meadows Live!* is a sharp, polished show, but during the first two *MRN* broadcasts, for which I was co-host, we were a little rough around the edges.

In 1983, The Meadows was determined to maximize the capacity of its new phone-betting system and, as noted, The Meadows seldom did anything in a small way. So the track planned to simulcast the races every night — viewers would need a special decoder to pull the scrambled signal from the sky — on the theory that people would wager, and wager more, on races they saw, which proved to be correct. A dry run of the system was conducted on 1983 Adios Day (which included Ralph Hanover's win and the famous Steeplejack/It's Fritz contest), and finally the target date of Tuesday, Nov. 1 was picked.

I had done some work with The Meadows in my capacity then with the USTA, so I had the honor of being alongside Roger Huston for the ship's christening. Preparations were mostly complete when the first of November hit. The camera and production crew were well trained and capable; commercials had been sold for airing between traces (more on that later), and the co-hosts seemed to be in sync.

One thing out of sync, however, was the construction of the booth from where the broadcasters would work. It wasn't so bad that the booth had an open window in front of the broadcasters so they could see the racetrack — that had been planned. What was a little disconcerting, though, was sitting in the new work area at 5:45 PM, getting ready for the shiny debut, with the sounds of power saws and hammers surrounding you. Yes, it was literally that close in making the box inhabitable and workable for the maiden voyage of the Starship Meadows.

The other thing out of sync was the snow. Remember, this was Nov. 1, and we were facing an open window for broadcasting. You'd watch the race, then turn back to your program on the counter in front of you — and you'd have to brush snow off the program before making your notes or marking times.

Perhaps it was the pervasive cold that led to my most bizarre comment that first broadcast. As I said, the Meadows staff had sold spots to advertisers — all four of them. Which meant that the same set of four 15-second commercials ran, in the same order, after every race. (Bob Prince was a pitchman for one of them.)

One of the advertisers, and the last of the four shown, was Arby's, which was introducing the beef-and-cheddar-sandwich-on-an-onion-roll that is still popular 30 years later. Roger and I had eaten before the broadcast, but it was getting on towards 9:30-10:00, and I was watching that commercial and salivating after every race. Finally, when we came back from commercial after maybe the 10th race, the very first words the audience heard were those of the whiney co-host: "Roger, I'm hungry!"

Never did get that beef-and-cheddar, but one appetite I learned to curb that night was being an amateur judge on air. There was an inquiry for bumping wheels in one of the races, and as we showed a replay of the incident, I saw what I thought was contact and blurted out, "And that's where it happened." Roger turned his mic off, turned mine off, and calmly noted, "You can't say that while the inquiry is ongoing; it can reflect on the judges." And he flipped the switches back and went on. Roger was absolutely right, of course. Having worked for racetracks, I should have thought of that myself. Even though I was right about the point of contact and the subsequent disqualification, I was wrong in the bigger sense, and I've become very, very cautious about opening my big trap when inappropriate.

The track was dark Wednesday but was back racing the next day, and I stayed on to co-host the second night. The weather had turned much warmer, and Roger, ever the fashion plate (How many announcers had a track-financed clothing allowance in 1983?), had slipped into a pair of white loafers for that evening's broadcast. It was a curious choice, since viewers wouldn't see Roger's shoes . . . unless he stuck his feet out the open broadcast window and dangled them a good eight inches over the edge.

That's exactly what he did. I caught it at the last moment and alerted the crew, and the first picture back from commercial was surely one of the most unusual ever at a racetrack — a disembodied pair of socks and ankles, with unquestionably white loafers (tassels too, I believe) at the end, all in sharp focus with the background deliberately fuzzed out. Quite the memorable shot.

I've had the good fortune to be on the *MRN* many times in the intervening years, although not as frequently recently, since my job at the PA Harness Racing Commission makes it unwise for me to offer public selections (possible perception of conflict). I've loved every minute of it and am grateful for the opportunity. And I think everyone in racing should be grateful that, from the first, the *MRN* was entrusted to the hands — and "Voice" — of Roger Huston. I can't think of anyone else who could have had the stamina and quality to make the *MRN* the class operation that it has been for three decades. The show and Roger were tailor-made for each other, and both have profited enormously from the partnership.