

Spotlight On: FHBPA Board Member Tom Cannell

Everyone has a story about how they got into horse racing. Tom Cannell's introduction to the sport is one you probably haven't heard before.



"My mom and I would watch the replays from Thistledown on TV," Cannell reminisced. "It was like watching *Jeopardy* every night. We'd pick a number and watch the races together."

The Ohio native may not have learned as much from the recaps as he could from the iconic game show, but those early memories with his mother developed into a lifelong love of racing. Cannell went on to become a dedicated handicapper, a reporter covering

Thistledown for the local paper in Canton and, eventually, a horse owner. In 2009, he was persuaded to run for the Florida HBPA Board. He has served as an Owner/Director for 11 years, and Treasurer for the last three. Earlier this year, he was elected to the Board of the Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance.

"When I first joined the Board more than six years ago, it didn't take long before I realized Tom was the director with the voice of reason," Florida HBPA President Stephen Screnci said. "His quick wit and exceptional ability to offer solutions have been invaluable to the Board over his entire tenure."

Cannell has spent a lifetime gathering the knowledge and insight that have proved such an asset to the Florida HBPA. He attended Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, cracking the books by day and honing his handicapping skills at night. Franciscan happened to be just a half-hour drive from what was then known as Waterford Park (now Mountaineer).

"They raced at night, so we could get our school stuff done and then go to the track," he said. "In those days, they had three tiers of tables in the clubhouse, and they would be filled every weekend. The people came out - the atmosphere was great. I'd go with my friends, we'd be there with our *Racing Forms*, thinking we were hotshots.

"We didn't know what we didn't know," he added with a chuckle.

In addition to his studies, the sportsman played four years of varsity baseball and golf. After graduating with a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration, he spent a stint in the Army, then embarked on a career in insurance that would span more than five decades.

“When I got out of the Army, I started working with Kemper Insurance, that was in 1972,” he said. “From 1983 to ’86 I was the Assistant Director at the Ohio Department of Insurance. I worked in insurance at the executive level for the next 30 years.”

When he wasn’t studying actuarial tables, Cannell kept on playing the ponies, and he had a hand in a number of other sports as a journalist and broadcaster.

“I covered the Browns for *Pro Football Weekly* from 1978 until they left Cleveland in 1995,” he said. “We used to have to have our copy on a plane to Chicago by 6 p.m. From 1989 to 1995 I was also the broadcaster for the Cleveland Indians AA team in Canton. Players like Manny Ramirez and Jim Thome came through the system as young players. That was fun.”

The lifelong Buckeye had considerable ties to his home state, but a fortuitous career move to Florida near the end of the millennium brought Cannell more deeply into the racing fold. He took a job with Tower Hill Insurance in Gainesville, and bonded with the company’s owner, Bill Shively, over a love of the game.

“Bill, who now has Dixiana Farm, owned a nice horse called Personal First, and we would talk about him,” he recalled. “One conversation led to another, and he asked me to go down to Calder and interview some trainers for him.”

One of the trainers interviewed by Cannell was Bill White, and the connection to White would lead to his first foray into horse ownership. Cannell got a group of friends together, dubbed the partnership Windstorm Stable, and, with the help of the trainer, used their pooled resources to buy a colt bred by Donald Disney. Named Somes Sound, the gray broke his maiden at Calder on the day after Thanksgiving, 2006.

“That was really, really exciting,” Cannell said. “Like anything else in sports, you get that adrenaline rush when you win, and it doesn’t seem like it gets any better than that.”

The small stable has enjoyed quite a lot of success over the last 15 years.

“My best moment as an owner was my first win,” Cannell remarked. “That first win is kind of surreal. But I’ve had a lot of winners; I have a whole binder filled with win photos. If we win a stakes race with I Get It or an \$8,000 claimer with Smooth Valentine, the feeling is the same. Watching them win, walking to the winner’s circle, getting your picture taken, patting the horse, that’s what it’s all about. With all the ins and outs and ups and downs, with all that can go wrong, those moments are hard to replace.”

Cannell currently races under the We Got This Stables banner and has six horses in training. His advice to someone looking to get into racing for the first time?

“It’s a good idea to talk to another owner, talk to a trainer,” he said. “You have to have direction. Your patience will be tested, and you must understand that with every decision, the horse comes first. There will be setbacks, and you have to be able to roll with it. This isn’t Willy

Wonka's Golden Ticket. You don't know until the starting gate opens whether you have Mr. Ed or Secretariat. But it's a wonderful way to get your friends, your co-workers, your family involved and have fun."

It was just a few years after joining the ranks of Florida horse owners that Cannell found himself running for the HBPA Board. It was an eye-opening experience.

"A lot of people don't understand what the FHBPA does, how much time the Board puts in as volunteers to make sure we have a good, solid operation," he said. "This is not some novelty. If you're not interested in rolling up your sleeves and working for the cause, you're not going to be much help."

Cannell is dedicated to fighting for long-term growth and prosperity for the industry, and also to educating those outside the industry about the hard work and dedication of the backstretch community.

"There is so much happening on the backstretch in the mornings, preparing the horses to race," he said. "I was on the frontside, betting horses, and I had no idea. After we bought our first horse and I started spending time back there, I was astonished at the level of activity. It's a little city back there, people and horses are everywhere. It's just amazing to watch all that goes into it, from start to finish – the training on the track, the grooms caring for the horses at the barn, the hotwalkers. It's a special world, and most people don't get the chance to see it. I wish more people had the opportunity to spend time on the backstretch. People can be quick to criticize the treatment of the horses; they wouldn't if they could see the level of care they get."

Cannell, who lives in Dade City, ostensibly retired from the insurance business in 2012, but he isn't exactly wearing out a rocking chair. In addition to the considerable time he spends as an HBPA Owner/Director, he runs a small insurance claims company. He is also still active in sports broadcasting.

"We live next to St. Leo's University and for the last four years, I've broadcast their baseball games live on the internet," he said, adding, "I don't like to sit at home. I like to keep busy."

With everything he has on his plate – as well as four children and eight grandchildren – it's a wonder Cannell finds the time to focus on the issues facing Florida horsemen. He couldn't do it without the blessing of his wife, Barb.

"Kudos to Barb, who has patiently allowed me time to devote to the FHBPA Board," he said.