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THE BUSINESS OF HORSES

Conclusion of a series on equine-related careers

THIS MONTH'S CAREER: EQUINE JOURNALIST

BY KATE O'HARE

TRAVEL THE NATION AND EVEN the world; spend all your time around horses and horse people; know and be known throughout the horse community; get into events for free; stand at ringside—heck, stand in the ring!; go on the backstretch at the racetrack; sometimes even get free food.

The life of an equine journalist sounds just about perfect for any horse-loving individual who has a way with words. Unfortunately, like most things, it sometimes sounds a lot better than it really is.

One of the few making a living as an equine journalist (and now also in equine-related public relations) is Diana De Rosa of Huntington, Long Island. She has been writing about the equine industry since 1977. Since 1991 she's been president of her own public-relations firm, which began as Equine Data Bank and now is called Press Link and which is responsible for promoting the prestigious Hampton Classic Horse Show. De Rosa also has covered the horse world for television, both behind and in front of the cameras.

"I'll tell you," she says about her profession, "there's one negative, and it's sad. It's that it's a very poor-paying field. The same article that you write for an equine publication, you would get five times as much money doing it for another publication.

"The money you get for a photo, you'd get five times as much in a different field. And that's sad because it discourages people. There are a lot of would-be's who want to get involved and will do it for nothing, but after a while you can't keep doing it for nothing. So you have to become me, you have to become the Diana De Rosas, those people out there that are doing it as a profession.

"The only reason we stick to it is because we love it."

De Rosa didn't start out intending to be an equine journalist. She wanted to travel and was a language major in college. But at 21, her parents offered her the opportunity to run a riding school. De Rosa had a horse as a teen but was far from a professional rider.

She recalls, "But, I said, 'What the heck.'"

Soon after taking over the school, De Rosa took her first formal riding lesson and followed that with a series of three- and six-month courses on riding and horsemanship. Before long, De Rosa was approached by a local sports publication to do a column on horses.

It proved so successful that the publication ended up launching a horse magazine, first called *Long Island Horse World* then later *Eastern Horse World* and *Horse World USA*.

For the next thirteen years, De Rosa edited the magazine while still writing for other publications. She covered local, national, and international events, including, for *USA Today*, the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.

In 1991, she left to create her PR firm. "I started to get involved in PR because, when I was going to equine events, I would get frustrated because I saw they weren't giving me a lot of the material I needed easily so I could sit down and write my stories."

So De Rosa started putting together what she calls "fast facts"—packages of short, quickly accessible pieces of basic information on events, including location, attendance, number of entrants, etc.

Eventually she changed the company's name to Press Link in order to broaden its scope. In November, Press Link was responsible for electronic media at the National Horse Show, which returned this year to Madison Square Garden.

Fortunately for De Rosa and the National, super-racehorse Cigar appeared in a ceremony marking his retirement to stud in Kentucky. Also on hand were celebrities Christopher Reeve, Robin Quivers, Vanessa Williams, Loretta Swit and jockey Julie Krone. However, as De Rosa points out, her familiarity with the equine world and with journalism—print and television—helped her drum up widespread coverage for the show, not just for Cigar and the celebrity guests.

"We were able to get [segments] on over 100 programs," she says.

A lot of that is due to De Rosa's broad-ranging experience and expertise. "Our success at the National Horse Show was good for the equine industry. We seem to be very successful that way. One reason is because I am in the industry. I am a journalist. I can talk to these people on their level.

"I can say, 'If you sent a crew out and you don't have an on-camera person, I can do an off-camera interview for you. If you don't have someone to take photographs, I can get you the photographs. I have an album of photographs, and I am a professional photographer.

"So there is this combined thing where they feel that you understand their industry, but you also understand the sport."

> *"The most important quality for a journalist, equine or otherwise, is the ability to listen."*

For people interested in pursuing a career in equine journalism, De Rosa recommends taking it seriously as a profession. Don't just work for free, she says; find someone who will pay you. If you can't find work as a writer, be an intern or an employee at an equine publication.

"Work at a horse publication, or work at some place that's going to give you the mileage that you want and need. Or do it for a non-equine publication. But if you have the equine knowledge, bring it to the forefront, get the understanding of how you have to go about it."

De Rosa says that if she had planned to be a writer, she would have taken journalism courses. But most of her experience has come in the field, which is where lots of equine journalists spend their time.

Sometimes the field is ankle-deep in mud, mosquito infested, steaming hot, or biting cold. Sometimes it means working when you'd rather be enjoying the show, trudging around in search of interviews or class results, or ducking for cover in a sudden thunderstorm.

No matter the conditions, though, the deadline always must be met. Says De Rosa: "I know there were a number of people who went to the Atlanta Olympics that will never go again, from the horse world. They had no idea of how difficult it is.

"Literally, I had two to five hours of sleep a night. I kid you not. I was so exhausted I couldn't stand, but I had to file stories. Those people were counting on it. I was filing stories to the Internet.

"I knew when I got back from the Olympics, I had better have a lot of my work done because I had other things to jump into and there wasn't going to be the time.

"You try three weeks of two to five hours a night of sleep. It's exhausting. You do it for the memories. The Olympics is one of the most difficult things you'll ever have to do."

De Rosa believes it helps to be a rider, both in asking the right questions and in understanding the answers. But at the same time, she says, "you have to be careful when you write. If you're writing to our own, then fine, you can use the lingo; but if you're writing to a non-horse person, you have to keep those words in mind and realize how they would be interpreted."

But aside from knowledge, experience, a sturdy tape recorder or two, waterproof shoes, and a pen (De Rosa wears one around her neck), she believes the most important quality for a journalist, equine or otherwise, is the ability to listen.

"A good writer is somebody who can listen, someone who is sincerely interested. That's what makes a good writer. If you're really interested in your subject, then you know the questions to ask. They're the same questions that your readers want the answers to.

"You have to be truly interested yourself before you can be that good writer or good on-camera person."

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