

Give track execs a pitchfork



ANNE LANG

Did you ever imagine trading places with someone for a day? It's not so far-fetched an idea.

One of the British Army's many long-standing traditions is an annual day of role-reversing among the ranks. Each year around Christmas, at British Army stations throughout the world, a special dinner is held in honor of the enlisted men. Preparing and serving food, assuming an air of humble servitude while dressed in their most formal uniforms, are the senior NCO's and officers.

You can imagine what this does for morale. What a glorious opportunity for the soldiers to be calling the shots after a year of unquestioningly following orders. Not to mention the event's usefulness in reminding top guns of what it's like to be at the receiving end of a command—even if it's only for a second helping of pie.

"The purpose of this tradition," explained Staff Sgt. Major Michael Lowery of the Army's British Embassy office in Washington, "is to demonstrate to the soldiers that their commanders

are concerned about their welfare. It's their way of saying thank-you to the lads."

So what does all this have to do with horseracing?

Well, let's face it—at racetracks all across America, there exists a vast social chasm between those who sweat on the shedrow and those who sweat the bottom line upstairs. Rarely do executive vice-presidents and hot-walkers arrange to do lunch. Your average parking attendant is not apt to play racquetball with the board chairman.

The class system inherent to racetracks is a logical reflection of the food-chain structure of corporations and businesses everywhere. That trend is never going to change. What needs changing is the ensuing state of tunnel vision that tends to prevail at every level, and the rampant misunderstanding and stereotypes that are spawned as a result.

Picture, if you will, an official day of job-switching at the racetrack. To keep it practical and safe, half the employees could observe the other half for a day, then trade off the next. Whatever works, but mix it up. Bring the suits down to ground level. Let the trainers see how tough the racing secretary has it.

Ideally, what would follow might be an outrider who discovers the ulcer-

producing decisions that preoccupy the top boss. A computer programmer who gets user-friendly with a pitchfork. A groom who gains empathy for the pressures of a mutuel clerk's job. An announcer who experiences first-hand the guts and agility required to work the starting gate.

Obviously, what I'm suggesting goes a step farther than the British Army's tradition. Their year-end ritual is highly successful in its message of appreciation, but that's its sole purpose. If track workers traded jobs for even just one day, or at least had a chance to observe the full spectrum of roles played by others in order to ensure a smooth-running machine, the resulting element of appreciation would be reinforced by understanding.

The public's lack of understanding for our sport is a frequent lament. Maybe if we understood more about each other's jobs, we'd be better equipped to enlighten those outside our gates.

Meanwhile, the publicity wizards could have a blast thinking up ways to lure patrons to "Switch Day" at the track.

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