

When she's not working as a sports anchor for northeastern Pennsylvania's top-rated TV news station, Sharla McBride is reporting on harness racing for PA HarnessWeek.



SHARLA MCBRIDE

NOT HORSEING AROUND

Two of harness racing's top TV personalities talk horses, heroes and their determination to succeed in a male-dominated industry.



Many fans of the weekly TV horse racing show PA HarnessWeek have never even been to the track. So why do they tune in? Credit must go, at least in part, to the program's charismatic female on-air personalities: Heather Moffett, who co-hosts alongside Steve Ross, and Sharla McBride, who reports what happens on the track and beyond at Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs and Harrah's Chester Casino & Racetrack.

The unexpectedly popular show, which recently wrapped its fourth season on Comcast SportsNet Philadelphia, features recaps of the week's most exciting races plus interviews with top trainers and drivers. Thanks in part to a loyal fan base, it has even beaten World Series games in the ratings. Bruce Casella, the show's producer and an Emmy-winning ESPN alum, said, "Hardcore racing fans will always be the majority of our audience, but it's true, there's something engaging about the way we present racing that makes even non-fans tune in."

As a young girl, Heather Moffett was far from a racing fan even though her family owned and trained racehorses. "You couldn't get me near a barn at first," she said. "I never even imagined myself in this game. Then I fell in love with a horse named Spots N Dots and the rest is history. It's that love of horses that draws people into this sport." Today, along with her husband, Bill, she's a third generation owner and trainer.

A graduate of Monmouth University with a degree in communications, Moffett didn't set out to be a TV personality either. "My mom was one of the first hosts of Racing from the Meadowlands. I remember driving to the track and watching her, who I idolized, rehearsing her lines." Just as harness racing got into her blood, so did broadcasting. Over the years, she's appeared on Fox Sports, ESPN2 and most recently, on Canada's The Score Network. She also produces and hosts Post Time, a show dedicated to Delaware harness racing.

Sharla McBride, on the other hand, was always certain she wanted a career in broadcasting. A die-hard sports fan and athlete (her cell phone ringtone is the theme to Monday Night Football), the proud University of Georgia grad (her English bulldog is named Herschel Walker) worked her way through TV gigs in Georgia and her native Texas before finding her way to the highest-rated news show in northeastern Pennsylvania as a fulltime sports anchor.

McBride never had much exposure to harness racing before moving to the area. "It was basically nonexistent in Texas and Georgia," she said. Naturally, her love of sports eventually drew her to the local track, Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs, for live harness racing. She's been a fan ever since. Now, she devotes one day a week to reporting on the sport. "Getting to work on PA HarnessWeek has been a lot of fun because I'm learning new things with every story I do," she said. "As a show, we try to cover racing in a way that satisfies diehard fans but doesn't exclude novices. I think that's one of the reasons people like us."

"It's an interesting phenomenon," said Steve Ross, PA HarnessWeek's co-host. "Not a week goes by that we don't get emails from people who stumbled on the show and love it." A veteran of the racing scene, he's also a fixture on Philadelphia's airwaves and currently hosts Remember When with Jim Murray, former Philadelphia Eagles general manager, on CBS Radio's WPHT Philadelphia. What's his take on the show's popularity? "We have fun doing the program and I think that comes through to the audience. We take it seriously from a journalistic perspective, but the audience seems to like the back-and-forth between Heather and I, and Sharla's definitely a fresh face in a sport that, let's face it, is still mostly male dominated."

Both Moffett and McBride acknowledge some gender-related hurdles, none of which put the brakes on their careers. "Rejection has always motivated me to work harder," said McBride. "My family taught me never to give up and here I am, doing what I love every day." Moffett, meanwhile, faced the doubly daunting task of gaining acceptance as a horse owner and trainer and as a sports TV personality. "To do what I'm doing now, covering racing on TV, I really had to succeed at both racing and reporting. Let's face it, you don't see lousy former football players holding microphones. Credibility counts."

Though the 2011 season of PA HarnessWeek is over, fans can connect with Moffett and McBride all year long on the show's website, HarnessWeek.com or on Facebook. They can even watch every episode ever produced at YouTube.com/HarnessWeek. And though both 'horsecasters' (as they call themselves) shrugged off any suggestion that people tune in specifically to see them, Moffett did mention that she gets fan mail from every conceivable demographic – even inmates! "I thought you had to be, like, a movie star before you started getting letters from jail," she said, laughing. "When my co-host Steve gets mail from a women's prison, then I'll know we truly made it!"

RESOURCES:

HarnessWeek.com

Covers harness horse racing in Pennsylvania and worldwide.

DownsOTW.com

Live racing and off-track wagering in northeastern PA, Poconos and Lehigh Valley.

HarrahsChester.com

Live racing and off-track wagering in southeastern PA.

MeadowsGaming.com

Live racing and off-Track wagering in western PA, Pittsburgh suburbs.



Moffett co-hosts PA HarnessWeek, a weekly show dedicated to the best of Pennsylvania harness horse racing.

HEATHER MOFFETT