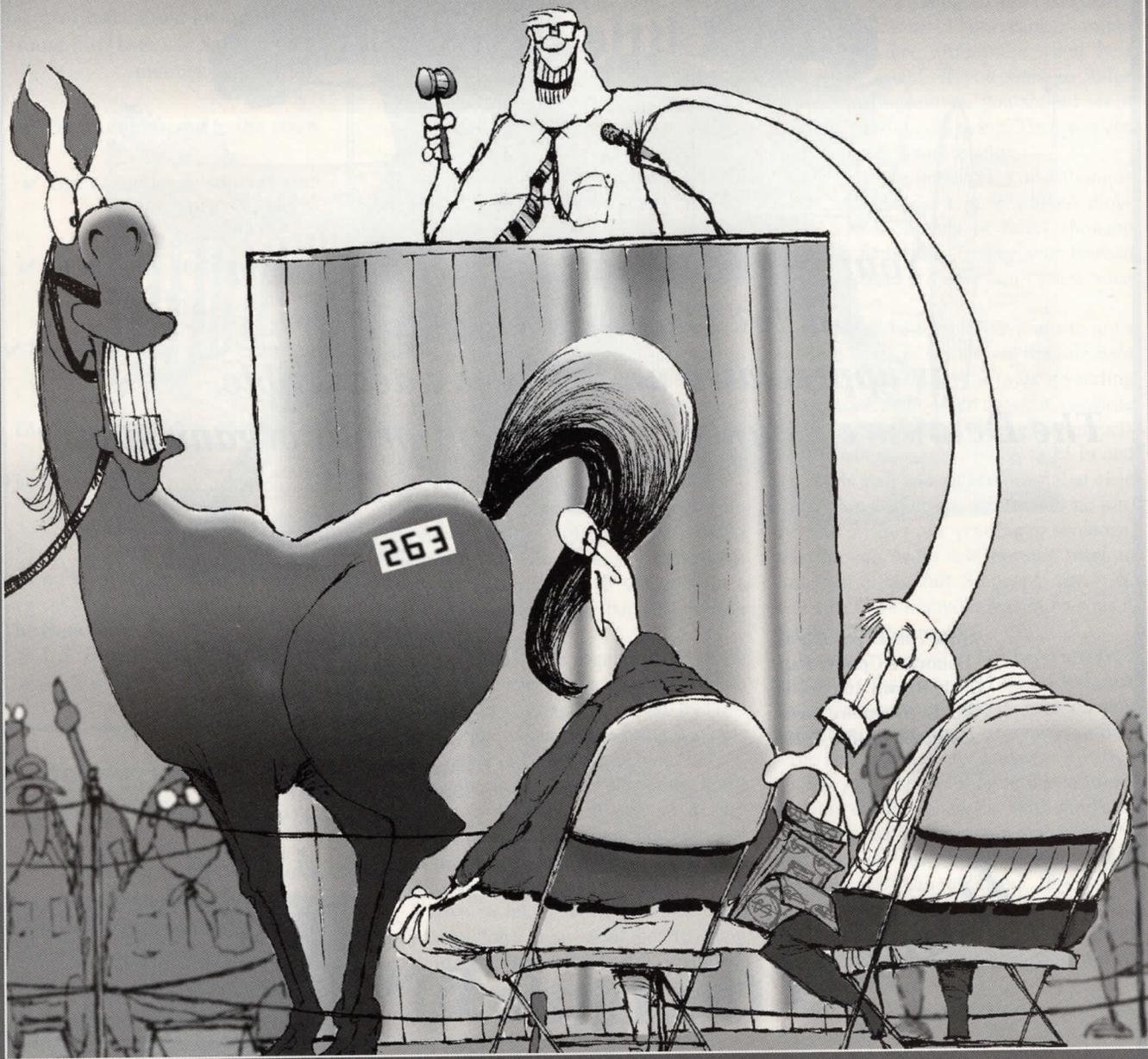


STROMMEYER

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Clayton Strohmeier

**IT'S A QUESTION** so simple: "What'll ya give?"

The answer is sought with forceful speed in sales rings across North America. Some 30 Standardbreds an hour are sold at these bustling venues, and for a few intense minutes, each could be anyone's horse.

The auctioneer's chant booms through the atmosphere; ringmen shout and pump the air with each bid they field. All around them, armed with catalogs, observations, and wallets of various depths, a sea of horsemen contemplates and sweats, speculates, and bids.

With hearts and hammers slamming, an auction seems far removed from the simplicity of the question it answers. Why sell a horse at auction, anyway?

# The **Psychology** of Auctions

Auctioneers share their secrets of a lively trade

by Ardith Carlton

"An auction brings buyers and sellers together," explained long-time auctioneer Vernon Martin, a gavel-wielder at Harrisburg's Standardbred Horse Sales Company auction and the Garden State Horse Sales. "If the seller would sell privately, how would he know somebody else out there wouldn't give more? And by the same token, how does the buyer know what somebody else would pay? An auction is an advantage to both the buyer and seller; it gives everybody a chance."

Buyers and sellers all want to make their chance the most fruitful it can be. And that's where the auctioneer comes in.

#### **The auctioneer's instruments**

Tom Caldwell views the auctioneer's role as that of a mediator. His voice is one of vast experience: He has auctioneered at the Tattersalls Select Yearling Sale for 41 years and spent 35 years on the stand at Harrisburg. He hammered down the first \$100,000 Standardbred yearling, Dancer

Hanover; the all-time top-priced yearling of the breed in \$625,000 filly Laugh A Day; and the highest-priced Standardbred ever auctioned, \$800,000 broodmare Winky's Gill.

In addition, he has sold Thoroughbred record-setters in his decades of duties with that breed's Keeneland sales, includ-

## The Psychology of Auctions

ing the Secretariat son Canadian Bound, the first \$1 million yearling; and the all-time priciest yearling, Seattle Dancer, a Nijinsky II half-brother to Seattle Slew who sold for \$13.1 million.

"When you act as mediator between the buyer and seller, you've got to be fair to both parties," stressed Caldwell. "It's a great challenge, because you want to get a good price for the seller, and you want the buyer to be happy with his purchase."

That resolute sense of fairness is the bedrock of an auctioneer's character. But coupled with it is a trait every bit as vital: a burning streak of salesmanship.

"Your total obligation is to represent the seller and be fair with the buyers," said Brooks Wells, for 30 years the auctioneer at the Blooded Horse Sale in Delaware, Ohio. "At an auction, the entire crowd is one customer made up of 500 to 600 people with different personalities. The goal is to sell that customer."

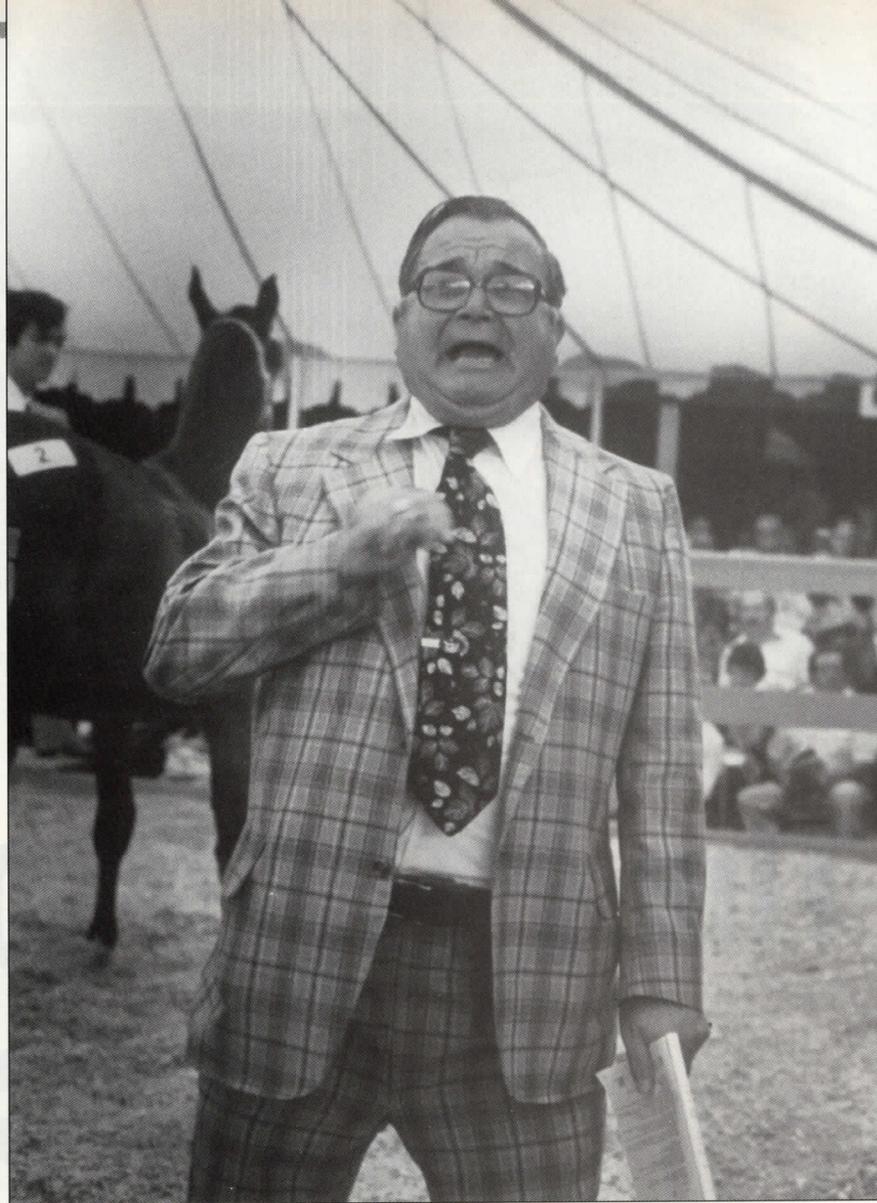
To sell the customer, the auctioneer must grab and hold the interest of the crowd—horse after horse, hour after hour. Keeping things entertaining and moving briskly is the key, and the auctioneer does both with his rhythmic, rapid-fire chant.

According to the National Auctioneers Association, it's unknown just where or when the auctioneer's chant first began. It evolved as a way to sell items more speedily, and nearly every North American auctioneer uses it today, with voice power coming from the diaphragm to spare the throat.

"The chant is a motivational thing," explained Dan Green, who auctioneers at the Kentucky Standardbred Sale and Harrisburg. "It's a little bit intimidating in that it puts a real hurriedness to all of it—you've only got a little window of time to do your bidding, or you don't get that horse."

"I think for some buyers, it's a rather nerve-wracking experience to try and bid and get something bought," said Martin. "I don't like to say we put them under pressure, but we do want to keep people anxious to bid."

Although the chant used in horse auctions is not nearly as quick as that used at tobacco auctions (which uses codes that buyers have been trained to understand), its speed may be intimidating to auction newcomers. However, the only really rapid—at times difficult-to-discern—words are those spoken in between the actual numbers. These "filler" words cre-



George Smallsreed

ate a rhythm around the numbers; the numbers themselves are pronounced as clearly as possible.

"Years ago at a sale, we were into maybe the sixth or seventh hour, and we were all getting a little bit numb," recalled Caldwell. "I had \$46,000 on a horse and was asking for \$47,000, but I was being a little less than clear, and we didn't have a toteboard.

"One man raised his hand. I said, '47?' and he nodded, and I said, 'Thank you, \$47,000'—and he fell over backwards; he thought he was bidding \$4,700! It gave me a good lesson in making myself plainer and more distinct, and we repeat the hundreds and thousands a little more often than we used to."

Tone of voice is another tool the auctioneer uses to keep the crowd's attention. "A monotone can be detrimental to a sale," pointed out Wells. "You should change the inflections of your voice; keep

Exuberant ringmen stoke the crowd's enthusiasm with every bid they field. Paul Martin, above, was a ringman supreme for decades, keeping bidders entertained and optimistic, and his sons Larry, Paul Jr., and Vernon have all followed him into the auction business.

that excitement going."

Helping stoke the tempo set by the auctioneer are the ringmen, or bid spotters, stationed throughout the venue. Loud and lively, they relay bids from their section of the crowd.

They're every bit the salesmen that the auctioneer is, too. "By working that section, bid spotters become familiar with buyers that are out there, and buyers become familiar with them," noted Green. "You rely on the bid spotter to let them know whether they're in or out on a horse. And when a horse is struggling, they may know someone in their section to maybe egg on to get in."

Caldwell cited now-retired ringman Paul Martin, long a regular at top Standardbred sales, as a master of the bid spotter's art. "Enthusiasm is contagious in the auction business, and he was so enthusiastic, he *made* people want to bid to him," he said. "That's the prime job of every ringman."

Martin's sons Larry, Paul Jr., and Vernon all followed him into the auction business. Vernon worked 10 years as a bid spotter before ascending the auction stand, and found it to be "a great training ground" to develop another crucial component of a Standardbred auctioneer: a rapport with the people in the industry.

"Knowing the people and knowing how they bid, and being able to read people, their body language—maybe subconsciously you factor it in," he said.

When it comes to knowing the people, noted Caldwell, "that's our job. After you've been doing it a while, you know in many cases who has had success with that particular bloodline. The man who's bidding on the horse may own his sibling, and you can maybe get them to bid once or twice more than they would just by saying, 'You know the family, and I hate to see you lose this opportunity.'

"If they don't have any of the family, you have to rely on what you know about the potential buyer, or what you know about the bloodline in the ring."

Knowing the potential buyer, however, rarely extends to a personal exchange between auctioneer and bidder. Things were different when legendary auctioneer George Swinebroad ruled Standardbred

**"Every auction has peaks and valleys. Potential buyers consistently come back to the auctions because they figure there's going to be soft spots. I try to smooth the valleys out as much as I can."**

—TOM CALDWELL

sales rings until his death in 1975.

"He would cajole, plead, humiliate—whatever it took to get another bid," recalled *Hoof Beats* Executive Editor Dean A. Hoffman, while ringman Howard Jewell added, "He was rough; he'd call you anything he'd want to call you."

But today's auctioneers have not emulated that aspect of Swinebroad's style.

"Many people would feel embarrassed or angered if you singled them out of an audience, even in a kind way," said Caldwell, who served as Swinebroad's assistant for nearly two decades. "If the auctioneer says, 'Hey, Mr. Smith, bid one more time,' Mr. Smith may not have liked people to know he was bidding against Johnny Brown, his neighbor.

"It boils down to knowing your potential buyer, and their likes and dislikes."

Hammered down to Castleton Farm for \$800,000 in 1986, broodmare Winky's Gill 3,1:55.2 (\$472,154) remains the all-time highest-priced Standardbred sold at auction. The Bonefish mare's first foal, Supergill 3,1:53.3 (\$664,194), topped all sale yearlings that year at \$500,000.

To hold onto the audience, the auctioneer must have their respect as someone well aware of the value of each horse. Of course, until the hammer falls, the value of any yearling can only be guessed—but auctioneers make the most educated guess they can.

"We study the previous years: 'This sire averaged so much, and this is an A, B, C, or D female, [so] we should get about this average,'" explained Caldwell. "I think of it as trying to match the conformation to the pedigree and getting a general range we should be shooting for, then relying on the people over and above that."

To form his "guesstimate," Green said he studies trends in the market as well as racing performance. "Something can happen in the family that automatically adds value to this yearling, right up to sale time," he said. "You also need to be able to look at the horse physically, and usually prior to the sale we make our rounds through the barn area.

"We don't have any figures that we know or write down. It's just a so-called educated opinion, a feeling you have that a horse could bring in a certain price range. Sometimes it happens and sometimes it doesn't."

On average, less than a dozen yearlings a day have been assigned a reserve, or minimum selling price, by their consignors.

"They bring them in to sell them and leave it up to the people that are bidding as to what the real value is," Martin explained. "They're willing most of the time to accept that judgement."

"That's a great thing, because they're truly trusting that I'll do my job well and the market will bear what that yearling is worth at that time," added Green.

#### All aboard!

As a horse is led into the sales ring, the pedigree reader details high points of the animal's heritage. The pedigree reader—sometimes known as the announcer—is



Dean A. Hoffman

**"The good [bid spotters] will kind of chase you a little bit, and the auctioneer can influence people; I see it happen constantly."**

—CHRIS BORING

the keeper of the facts, and careful horsemen know to listen when he speaks.

"Any announcement he makes that first 30 to 40 seconds is very, very important," cautioned longtime horseman Bruce Nickells. "It might be a ridgeling, might have a spot in its eye—and if you aren't listening, you won't hear it. They tape all the announcements and all the bidding, and that stops a lot of disputes later."

Since, according to Caldwell, "you can't engender much bidding if you start at the top," the auctioneer usually opens the bidding by asking for an inviting figure, one that buyers would feel comfortable bidding more than. The action often takes off from there—but not always.

When no first bid is forthcoming, the auctioneer acts swiftly, drawing on his knowledge of the crowd's buying habits to avoid a momentum-marring lull.

"There are buyers for horses to a certain price," explained Green. "You learn who they are, so that if a horse is struggling getting started, there's a buyer you're familiar with who will pay up to \$3,000 on any horse that comes in, and you can rely on that person and get started for that kind of price. The horse will go on to bring a price much higher than that."

But what happens when there isn't such a person in the crowd and asking for a rock-bottom bid hasn't gotten a response?

"Sometimes, you start it yourself," admitted Jewell, who conducted auctions of all kinds until retiring in 1981. "Make it low enough so you won't own it, and they'll all get in."

"Starting" a bid, he pointed out, is a single bid to get things going—not to be confused with "running" a bid, the unethical practice of bidding the price up. The vast majority of auctioneers will not do such a thing; "you've got to protect your honesty," Jewell stressed.

Despite the relentless pace and excitement, every auction suffers an occasional, inexplicable "soft" spot.

"Every auction has peaks and valleys," explained Caldwell. "Potential buyers

consistently come back to the auctions because they figure there's going to be soft spots. I try to smooth the valleys out as much as I can."

"Sometimes you hit a spot in the sale where it's just not chiming, and there's no explanation for it," said Green. "So you try all the things you can do, throw it back to the announcer to say what he can, and get everybody's concentration focused again. Maybe something can happen in that five seconds; what have you got to lose?"

"Sometimes it just shoots off from there. But sometimes you realize this is as good as it gets; work as hard as you can, sell it, and go on to the next horse. You won't know why it happened. And the next horse will come in, and it's an entirely different environment again."

After the hammer falls, the commotion kicked up by an exceptionally high price could also stall a sale's momentum, if not for the auctioneer regaining command. "The next horse could suffer, but I don't allow that to happen," said Green. "I'll stop and get [the crowd's] attention focused back on the horse in the ring."

"Crowd control is very important," Wells agreed. "You need to have a friendly, firm attitude that you're in control, and go from there."

Most of the time, an auction barrels along like a freight train, its pace pressuring bidders to take part before it's too late. The auctioneer and ringmen add to the urgency by doing more than fielding the bids; they actively flush them out.

"Some people seem hesitant to bid themselves," said Wells, "so the auctioneer should always be watching. Sometimes I have an eerie feeling because I can see from the intensity of their stare, that person is *it*. They almost seem larger than the rest of the crowd."

A big believer in body language, Wells wheedles further bids by cupping his hand in a coaxing "come on" motion, or by raising his arm as if about to sell the horse.

A few auctioneers, like Wells, don't announce that they're about to sell a

horse, teaching prospective buyers that they don't dare wait to bid. "We don't beg," said Wells, "and it has worked beautifully for us."

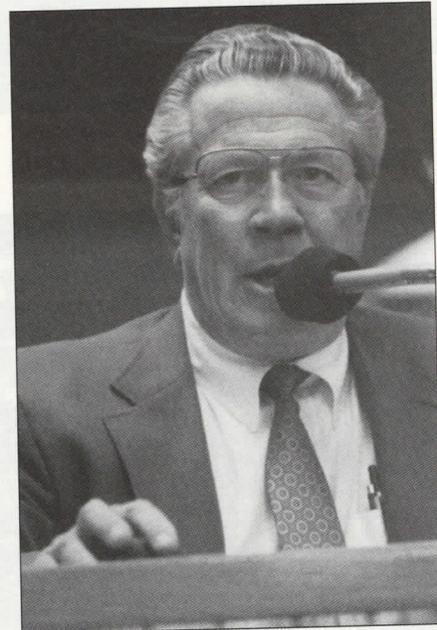
"Buyers and bidders respect the industry enough that they don't want you to keep begging and pleading for another raise beyond the normal limits," added Caldwell. "You've still got to think about the tail end of the sale; the minute you slow down, everybody else slows down."

### Making chicken salad

As the auction train rolls along, with its engineer of an auctioneer working to keep momentum up, it's a ride that many of the folks in the seats have spent weeks, sometimes months, preparing for.

"Anyone that trains yearlings and 2-year-olds, the most important thing you can do is look at them as yearlings and buy the right one," stressed trainer-driver Ed Lohmeyer. "You can't make chicken salad out of chicken feathers; you've got to have something there to start with, and the most important thing is *buying* a great horse. That's where it counts."

Lohmeyer shops at the Lexington and Harrisburg sales, but before purchasing the annual dozen-or-so youngsters for his owners, the New Jersey horseman has left few stones unturned. "It's very time-con-



Ed Keys

Tom Caldwell has sold art, antiques, and real estate, "but my love has always been horses," he said. "It's hard to remember all the good ones I've sold, but you never forget the first one like Dancer Hanover, the first \$100,000 yearling. I still have the old signed picture of Dancer from Mr. [Lawrence] Sheppard."



Ed Keys

suming because you have to be there inspecting each one that sells, and hundreds of them sell," he said.

"I don't buy a horse I haven't completely examined. Even if he looks great in the ring and on paper, I'll pass him up."

"If you look at a thousand horses, you might end up with four or five, but you've got to look at all of them," agreed Nickells, who does plenty of advance scouting. "I spend three weeks in Lexington just going to all the farms, and after Lexington I go to the farms up East.

"You've got to do a lot of looking, and somehow figure out what you think that horse is worth. But if you've done your homework, that's where your bargains are—not buying something you haven't looked at; that's a real no-no."

That homework involves plenty of hitting the books, as Pennsylvania horseman Dan Altmeyer can attest. "As soon as I get the catalogs, I work hours on them, going through the bloodlines," he said. "I like sticking with the families that have done well for me; I like to bet on the surest thing I can."

Altmeyer tries to further improve the odds by targeting youngsters he thinks will be in his "medium-priced" range. "I don't look at horses out of my price range," he said, "because if [it turns out] I can afford them, I don't want them."

While he buys for several owners, Altmeyer also owns a piece of the approx-

"The auctioneer should always be watching [for bidders]," said Brooks Wells, who wields the gavel at the Blooded Horse Sale in Delaware, Ohio. "Sometimes I have an eerie feeling because I can see from the intensity of their stare, that person is *it*. They almost seem larger than the rest of the crowd."

imately 15 yearlings he purchases each fall, and that personal stake makes him extra-selective. "You're planning for the future," he emphasized, "and probably I make or break my whole year at those auctions."

That's the case for many horsemen across North America. And as if having the fortunes of the near future ride on their yearling selections isn't stressful enough, they won't even get to bring those horses home if they're outgunned in the bidding.

How it turns out is a combination of luck, strategy, and pure adrenaline.

### Backbones and billfolds

When it comes to bidding, techniques and tactics vary.

At the major yearling sales, Ohio-based Grand Circuit horseman Ivan Sugg can often be found sitting right up front, close to the ring. "That's where I pick out most of my horses," he explained.

Among the yearlings Sugg has picked out are Jug elimination heat winner Crouch p,3,1:51.4 (\$577,379), a \$10,000

colt who won nearly \$125,000 for Sugg in his first two months at the races before being sold for an undisclosed sum to Rose Guida; Joyous Wish p,3,1:54 (\$440,649), netted for \$2,000; and a \$4,700 prize who's a sophomore this season, NJSS winner New Yorktowne 3,1:58.1 (\$78,226).

Sugg buys for himself, and when an interesting animal is in the ring, he waits for the bidding to slow. "You've got to have a lot of patience and wait, and when they go by you, they go by you," he said. When one hasn't climbed beyond his range, though, he's ready to bid by nodding; "you might have to wave your hand to get the bid spotter's attention the first time," he noted, "but after that, they know where you're at."

While Sugg is savvy to the auctioneer's tone—"you can kind of pick out when he's going to sell a horse and when he's going to go a little further"—he isn't immune to that siren song. "They get you to go on a little bit," he conceded, "and there [are] horses I've got that way.

"It boils down to who's got the most determination or thinks that much of that horse, although I guess your backbone kind of matches your billfold."

Another horseman who prefers the waiting game is Grand Circuit horseman Chris Boring, who buys about a dozen yearlings each fall for his owners.

"Sometimes if they're really rolling,

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## The Psychology of Auctions

by the time you get your hand up and you think you're bidding \$20,000, you're in at \$24,000," he said, "so it's better for me if I'm patient. Once it slows down, if it's still where I'm competitive, I'll get in then."

He sees no need to be furtive in bidding. "A lot of people try to be half-sneaky," he said, "but at the major auctions, there's so many major players in there, I don't think you have to be that way. I get myself where the bid spotter can see me at all times. I want to be right there in front of them and know exactly what I'm doing."

"The good [bid spotters] will kind of chase you a little bit, and the auctioneer can influence people; I see it happen constantly," he said. "I might go a little more than what I've got written down."

A rare case where Boring bid much more than planned came at the 1982 Harrisburg sale. He and owner Michael Shapira were on a quest for an Albatross colt, a commodity in hot demand.

"We hit on a couple Albatrosses and missed," Boring recalled. "It was kind of getting late into what was left of the Albatrosses, so we just took a shot on one."

Howland Hanover was the horse. Shapira called off the chase at \$80,000, but after being goaded by fellow Michigander Doug Ackerman, Boring and Shapira landed the colt with a last-ditch bid of \$82,000.

"Shapira turned white, he was just so shaken about having to pay that much," Ackerman remembered. "I turned to him and said, 'You didn't overpay—you stole that horse!'"

"You stole that horse" became a running joke whenever the colt raced, and Ackerman turned out to be right. Renamed Colt Fortysix, the colt put Boring and Shapira in the record books, circling Springfield in 1:50.3—then history's fastest race mile—and winning the Little Brown Jug in straight heats on his way to \$232,538 in earnings.

As happens to even the most poker-faced bidders, from the time a coveted horse strides into that ring, a surge of adrenaline has Boring charged up inside. "More so than I'd like to be," he conceded. "I try to act like I'm not excited, but the closer it comes to final hammer, the more excited you get, hoping that you'll be able to get the job done."

"I've never talked to any other trainers about that; maybe everybody gets a little

nervous and excited. Maybe that's why we do it, partially—for the excitement."

"Once in a while you get yourself a little hyper," admitted Nickells, who prefers to let the bidding get started before jumping in.

The trainer of such great fillies as Miss Easy, Immortality, and Follow My Star usually bids to a spotter; "I can keep track of things better, and he keeps track of me," he said appreciatively. "When you only go to a sale every now and then, they're more on the ball than you are."

Nickells doesn't mind if people know he's bidding (although, he pointed out, "you don't whistle at the guy and wave your arms"), but he's one of the many that hates unexpected company to drop in: "The worst thing is when the hammer is about to come down and knock that horse off to you, and a guy makes a bid from out of the bleachers!"

That guy could be Ed Lohmeyer.

In 1982, Lohmeyer bid once on yearling Vanston Hanover—and signed the resulting \$325,000 ticket. "I waited until the very last," he laughed. "I don't like to get in early."

Vanston Hanover p,4,1:53.4 couldn't quite earn back his purchase price, but banked \$252,202 for his owners, the New Dynasty Stable, before going to Australia for stud duty, where he has sired the winners of more than \$4 million in a 10-year career.

A steep purchase price can be hard to recoup. Just ask the five priciest yearling pacing colts of all time: Mustang Almahurst sold for \$430,000 and never earned a dime; Albatrage p,4,1:55.2 (\$161,513 in nine years) and Silk Spats p,3,2:03.1f (\$3,876 in three lifetime starts) each brought \$400,000; Clear And Crisp p,7,1:54.3f (\$29,608 in six years) sold for \$390,000; and Cobra Almahurst p,3,2:04.1f (\$2,973 in his eight starts over three years) sold for \$385,000.

The top-priced yearling of 1994, Spin Doctor p,2,1:55.3, is toiling to repay his \$220,000 purchase price in conditioned classes at Saratoga. Meanwhile, Raycer Thad p,3,1:52.1, who topped the 1995 sales at \$210,000, took just 14 starts to recoup his owner's money, helped along by his victory in the Berry's Creek final. You just never know.

Three years before Vanston Hanover, Lohmeyer landed another big-ticket item for the New Dynasty Stable and found his pot of gold. Tammany Hall, a \$290,000 Meadow Skipper yearling, was the sport's

most expensive yearling of 1979. Renamed Landslide, he earned \$162,835 on the track but did it in a spectacular 13-11-1-0 career, and went on to be syndicated for \$3.6 million.

Going into an auction, "It's hard to put a price on a yearling before you see how they're selling that year; they may all be selling 20 percent higher," Lohmeyer explained. In such a case, he said, he goes with the market flow and adjusts his own sights 20 percent north.

And then there's Dan Altmeyer, whose top yearling bargains include \$17,000 purchase Slick Pavement p,5,1:51.2 (\$571,383), Exotic Earl p,4,1:50.2 (\$412,165) for \$57,000, and a Cam Fella colt named Gulf Shore.

When Gulf Shore went through the Kentucky Standardbred Sale ring, the crowd just wasn't keen on him. "He was out of a Harold J. mare, and that wasn't a fashionable breed at that time," explained Altmeyer. "He was a nice-looking colt, fairly nice size and everything, so I can't say that anything else kept his price down."

Altmeyer's reliance on past experiences gave him an insight: "I was turned on to him because I raced against his mother [Oxford Mary Ann] a lot, so I wasn't afraid of the Harold J. [blood]." The final bid of \$40,000 was his, and Gulf Shore, renamed Cambest, went on to win \$1,444,835—over \$650,000 of it with Altmeyer—and stun the racing world with his 1:46.1 time trial.

Like some other horsemen, Altmeyer doesn't mind if anyone sees him bid. Yet when one of his selections comes into the ring, the man who carefully chooses the "surest thing" to gamble on does something most buyers avoid: He wades right into the bidding.

"I like to get in there early," said Altmeyer. "If there's a lot of bidding early, I think it keeps some people out from getting in."

It turns out his choice of strategy is the "surest thing" in many auctioneers' estimation, too.

"I don't think any one strategy applies to all situations, but the best buyer strategy would be to evidence your interest in a horse in a normal manner, rather than wait until the last minute and take a chance on losing the horse," Caldwell affirmed. Auctioneers also appreciate it; "we try to maintain as much pace as we can, so it's helpful for a buyer to assert himself in this kind of situation," he said.



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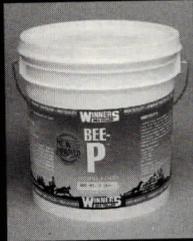
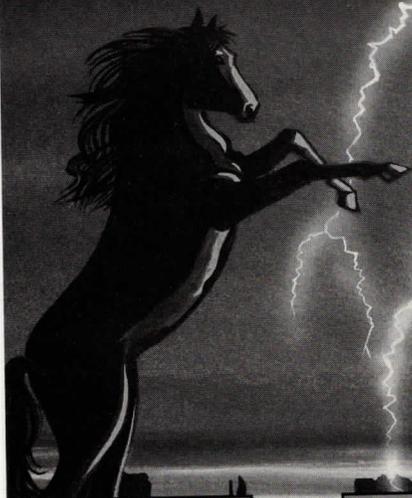
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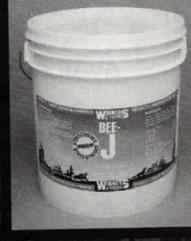
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## STANDARDBRED EQUESTRIAN PROGRAM MEMBER OF THE MONTH PROFILE JODY L. PARK

**Residence:** Oak Harbor, Ohio

**Horse's Name:** TangotoVegas (Vegas), a 7-year-old bay gelding

**Activities with her Standardbred:** Jody and Vegas are training for a career in the show ring and possibly eventing sometime in the future.

**How did you come to find/meet/own your first Standardbred:** "I had searched for a year...I decided to call Scioto Downs...the next day I received a phone call from his owner...she was looking for a good home. Two days later, I went to see him, and without my trainer seeing him, I bought him."

**Fondest experience with Standardbreds:** "The first couple of times I rode him...He's really quite a character, and is more than willing. I have never enjoyed a horse so much. Whenever I'm with him, he makes me laugh about something he's done, or is up to doing."



To find out how you can get involved in the Standardbred Equestrian Program, contact Karen Beach at 614-224-2291, ext. 3260, or write SEP, U.S. Trotting Association, 750 Michigan Ave., Columbus, OH 43215. E-mail: [sep@ustrotting.com](mailto:sep@ustrotting.com)

Every so often, a bidder is extra-assertive, employing a strategy intended to scare off rivals.

"Occasionally someone will start it with a big bid—say, \$100,000," explained Green. "If I allow that to go unnoticed, sometimes it can squelch the bid. Even if people were willing to give more, their attention is like, 'Who did that?!'"

"So when that happens, it's my job to understand that kind of psychology, to stop and say the right things to get everyone's attention back to the sales ring and the reality of what we're doing.

"I'll say, 'Folks, don't let them scare you off, we're going on with the bidding.' Once you give them time to refocus, the bidding resumes to how it would have progressed from the \$25,000 point."

If auctioneers could change some bidders' habits, they'd like to cut down on some jarring pauses.

"I'd prefer that they not wait until the very end to bid and give a real slow response," said Green. "It doesn't happen very often—if you sell 100 horses one night, you might have that situation on maybe five horses—but you don't want to miss that bid for the consignor; you have to give them a few seconds so it's a clean sale and the best money you could get."

"We like to have people say yes or no that they're through bidding; we don't like to sell anything until we know they're through," said Martin. "Sometimes somebody just sits there and doesn't give you any kind of indication."

Those pauses, though, are rare off-notes in the auctioneer's orchestration of tone, tempo, and salesmanship.

"It does feel a lot of the time like you are the conductor," mused Caldwell. "It's a responsibility—not a great one, but an enjoyable one, if you're prepared to do your job.

"You reach for a lot of stars, trying to figure out what you can do to smooth out the performance. You pray a lot, and you search your memory for something that you can say to alleviate the stressful moment.

"And a lot of people enjoy going to an auction even if they aren't planing to buy a horse," he added. "In a way, it's a pleasant hypnosis you get as a spectator."

Perhaps that "pleasant hypnosis" is shared at the source, by those caught up in conducting a symphony of salesmanship. As Brooks Wells joked, "To be an auctioneer, just get your brain in neutral and your tongue in high, and take off!" **HB**