





# DEAN OF RACING

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ERCEL ELLIS, POPULAR HOST OF THE LONG-RUNNING RADIO PROGRAM “HORSE TALES,” DELIGHTS FANS WEEK AFTER WEEK WITH HOMESPUN STORIES AND INTERESTING GUESTS

By Cynthia Grisolia | Photos by Jonathan Palmer

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**At The Thoroughbred Center on Paris Pike near Lexington, the screen door of a little stone building swings open.** A blast of warm air blows through, rustling papers on a card table where Ercel Ellis, 86, the host of iHeartRadio’s Saturday morning show “Horse Tales,” sits opposite his wife and radio sidekick, Jackie. They are poised in front of microphones not yet hot.

It’s 7:30 a.m. They hit the airwaves at 8, but no one’s prepping copy or going over a segment schedule. Instead, producer Ressie Dukes is putting a heating pad in the microwave for Jackie’s sore arm. Show regular Michael Blowen is chatting on his cell phone. (“I’m a permanent guest,” joked Blowen,

who runs the Thoroughbred retirement facility Old Friends. “I’m like Ed McMahon.”) Folks wander in. Outside, horses clip-clop to and from the barns of The Training Center.

The mood is so darn downhome that an observer wouldn’t be surprised if Aunt Bee and Opie walked through the

door carrying an apple pie.

Ellis has hosted his two-hour “Horse Tales” show since 1998, most recently from the undersized offices of the Horsemen’s Benevolent and Protective Association at the Keeneland-owned The Thoroughbred Center. Its laid-back, folksy blend of special guests, chirpy banter, and homespun stories — sprung mostly from the depths of Ellis’ encyclopedic memory of horse racing and breeding history — have turned the show into a must-listen among insiders and the host himself into a Bluegrass icon.

“We don’t have many like Ercel in the sport today,” said longtime Thoroughbred journalist Mark Simon, “particularly when it comes to being able to tell the story of racing as oral history. His knowledge spans generations, both of people and horses.”

Indeed, what people tune into “Horse Tales” for is, well, the tales. As the clock strikes 8, Ellis kicks off the show with an ad for the Airdrie Stud stallion Upstart. He reads the promo — that he penned himself and clacked out on his old IBM Selectric — in his throaty drawl that’s so deep and silver-tongued it could lower your blood pressure, and soon after the yarns are flowing.

Blowen recalls a chance meeting with the daughter of film-theory pioneer Hugo Münsterberg; Jackie Ellis recalls meeting Russian families who escaped from the Revolution that ended up working in Kentucky coal mines. But before long listeners get what they came for: Ellis reminiscing about a horse. “That Ben Strome, well, he started out real slow at stud, but then he ended up topping the sire list in 1903. He sired Roseben. The ‘big train’ is what they called him! He stood 17.3 hands and he was a sprinter. He won under 147 pounds. He set a new world record for seven furlongs at Belmont Park of 1.22 flat, which stood until it was broken



Ellis writes his own scripts and advertising copy. Most of the stories he knows by heart.

by Bold Ruler in 1957.”

How Ellis became the “dean” of Thoroughbred racing is a tall tale in itself, and it started when he was born into the industry in 1931 in Fayette County. At the time his father, Ercel Ellis Sr., worked for August Belmont Jr.’s Nursery Stud, and was — as the oft-told story goes — there the day Man o’ War was born. He even slipped the first halter over the ears of the foal that would grow into one of the greatest racehorses of all time. Years later Ellis’ father became farm manager at Dixiana Farm, but the legacy of Big Red still lingered. “The first time he took me out to Faraway Farm [where Man o’ War stood at stud] I was about 6, and Man o’ War was about 20,” said Ellis. “My dad said, ‘Take a good look at this horse, boy, because you will never see another one like him’ — and he was right.”

By the time he was 9, Ellis was mucking stalls, had a broodmare of his own to care for, and often made the rounds with his father via horseback across Dixiana’s 1,200 acres. “The fun part was when we had to move cattle and I got to play cowboy,” Ellis said with a laugh.

As a young man, Ellis also worked for Dixiana until he was offered a job in advertising at the BloodHorse



A captivating drawl sets Ellis apart.





where his sister Peg worked as a researcher. “It was more money, and I thought why not; I’ll give it a try,” said Ellis. “That was in 1958.” At the BloodHorse Ellis ventured into radio, filling in on occasion for Art Baumohl, who had a 15-minute show called “Post Time,” which featured race results from around the country. “But it ended up flopping around,” said Ellis. “I was doing the show, and Art was filling in for me. Finally he quit doing the show all together.”

On “Post Time” Ellis would read results rolling in on an Associated Press teletype machine. He would refer to the Daily Racing Form for background on the winners, pedigrees, and such, and highlight the statistics that related to Kentucky. “It was a really popular show in the ’60s and ’70s because it was the first place you could find race results,” said Ellis. The show also became a source for breeders looking to identify the next

big stallion. “We meet people now who say they would be around the dinner table or something, and their dad or somebody would say, ‘Shut up. The race results are on,’ ” said Jackie, who besides co-hosting the show is also a lawyer. “During the show nobody could talk.”

Ellis arrives at the offices of the Horsemen’s Benevolent and Protective Association where for two hours he handicaps races and relays interesting anecdotes, chats with local guests, and promotes loyal advertisers, many of whom have been with him for years.

Baumohl and Ellis also had opened an advertising agency together — Colin Advertising — but when their relationship soured, Ellis decided to move on. “I had no idea what I was going to do,” said Ellis,

“but it wasn’t two days later that I got a call from New York and it was the Daily Racing Form. They were looking for somebody to work in the Kentucky bureau. Their offices at the time were at Keeneland — we had three stalls,” Ellis said with a laugh. At the DRF, Ellis built up the ad sales division and wrote a weekly column called “Kentucky Notebook,” which soon earned him a reputation as a Kentucky authority. “You had to read it to know what was going on in breeding here,” said Simon, “He was unabashedly a homer for the state.”

In between, Ellis found the time to get his trainer’s license and start a small racing and breeding operation. He saddled his last horse, Tackle Eligible, in 2002, a year after he won an allowance race at Keeneland. “I bought him for \$1,” said Ellis, “and he won me a julep cup at Keeneland!” (Tackle Eligible, now 22, is retired and lives at Erceel and Jackie’s 22-acre Bourbon County farm with their three other horses.)

But Ellis’ knack for sales, his broadcast experience, and

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Old Friend's founder Michael Blowen, center, is a frequent guest on "Horse Tales."



Ellis is respected for his profound knowledge of Thoroughbreds.

his growing database of knowledge soon converged. While still hosting "Post Time," which aired on Sports Radio 1300 AM, Ellis was approached by the station manager there about doing a two-hour show. "I said, "Two hours?" I was used to getting on there and talking as fast as I could," Ellis said. "What am I going to do for two hours?" What he did was talk about what he knew and loved best: horses.

Since then "Horse Tales" has moved up and down the radio dial, landing of late at iHeart Radio's 105.5 FM. But one thing that hasn't changed is the loyal base of advertisers. Most have been with Ellis for decades, since "Post Time" (which had its last broadcast in 2010), among them Claiborne Farm, Airdrie Stud, Pin Oak, Sallee Horse Vans, and Ashford Stud. Ellis now produces the show himself by buying air time from the station and selling

## CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?



**THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY** to listen to "Horse Tales with Ercel Ellis." The show can be heard live worldwide on Saturday morning from 8 to 10 on iHeartRadio's Rewind 105.5 FM. "I love it because

the signal is great," said Ellis. "People can listen in China!" Tim Ansted, iHeart-Media program director, confirms the global audience. "It can be heard in any country as long as their Internet allows it," he said. "It can be heard in Ireland, and we know many farm people there like to listen when their Irish farm managers here are on air."

Meanwhile, the technological-inclined can stream the show on the iHeartRadio app, which can be downloaded from any app store, or listen via personal computer at [www.rewind1055.com](http://www.rewind1055.com). Interested fans with time on their hands can find podcasts of every show since February 2011 online at [www.ercelellishorsetales.com](http://www.ercelellishorsetales.com). Shows are uploaded weekly and can be heard in their entirety. —CG

and writing every ad spot for all 20 of his sponsors. "Whenever I moved stations, the sponsors all went with me," said Ellis. "And I don't know why, but it stays sold out."

The "why," it appears, is pretty apparent to everyone else: Ellis is what you call a straight shooter. "We met at Keeneland many years ago," said Airdrie owner and former Kentucky Gov. Brereton Jones, "and it was immediately obvious that he was one of the good guys. In all businesses there are good guys, and some guys that are

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Ellis, who began his professional career at the BloodHorse in the late 1950s, got his start in radio filling in for an acquaintance.

not quite so good," Jones added. "He's a great guy, and I don't know anyone more committed to our industry."

Claiborne Farm's Bernie Sams agrees, calling Ellis "a classic" and the show "a very good value. There's a wide variety of listeners who respect him and have an appreciation for his knowledge," said Sams. "As an advertiser, you just catch a lot of people you wouldn't catch otherwise. Plus," added Sams, "It's a unique opportunity to have somebody like him telling our stories. There are not many people left like him out there."

Indeed, there are not. And a future without Erceel Ellis weaving his tales of bloodlines, memorable mares, and startling track records is a dark prospect among his friends and fans. "There is literally nobody like him," said Blowen "He's the living repository of so much. He's done everything in racing: He worked on a farm; he's foaled horses; he's trained horses; he's a terrific writer. I can't think of anything he hasn't done. Everybody's been after him to write a book or record a book or something."

Though Ellis admits he has been attempting to put his wit and



The Keeneland Library is archiving a collection of Ellis' radio shows.



wisdom down on paper, he concedes: "I'm having a hard time with it."

Just in case that doesn't work out the Keeneland Library has made sure that Ellis' horse tales have a place of permanency. In 2002 former Keeneland President Nick Nicholson inaugurated a collection of Ellis' radio shows at the Keeneland library.

According to Library Director Becky Ryder, "the body of the 'Ellis Archives' now weaves a rich tapestry of more than 15 years of breeding, racing, boarding, and the overall Central Kentucky equine industry." Ryder adds that the library is also working to make the files more user friendly in the coming years by creating searchable online archives.

Back at the HPBA offices, it's nearly 10 a.m. and a few more fabulous Ercel Ellis horse tales are ready to be collected for posterity. But ask Ellis about the impact



Despite encouragement, Ellis is not sure he can put his horse tales in a book format.

of his knowledge and he demurs. He's not a pedigree expert, he insisted; it's just all about time and, well, love.

"Let me tell you about that — I've lived a long time," he said. "I'm 86 years

old and the things I remember are things that, at some time, have touched me. Reading books, too, but all these stories," he added with a touch of poignancy, "It's all personal." **KM**

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