



COURTESY OF MICHELLE PENNA

MAKING (AIR)WAVES

FOR HRRN'S MIKE PENNA PERSISTENCE PAYS OFF

Mike Penna, left, broadcasts from a studio high above Keeneland with former jockey Shane Sellers serving as a guest analyst.

By Claire Novak

When Massachusetts native Mike Penna moved to Lexington with his soon-to-be wife, Michelle, in 1997, they had one goal — to break into horse racing. “Just to get involved in the sport, somewhere,” Penna recalled one late winter morning from his Lexington studio. “We figured we would give it one year and take a shot.”

Eighteen years later the couple runs a pillar of the Thoroughbred racing media community — their Eclipse Award-winning Horse Racing Radio Network, which Penna developed from scratch with the late Pete Kules in 2005.

HRRN brings the excitement of live racing to fans while relaying the stories of the sport’s key players from the Breeders’ Cup to the Triple Crown. It’s hard to believe the 10-year-old network,

K spotlight on

HORSE RACING
RADIO NETWORK

now carried by more than 140 stations on Sirius XM nationwide and streaming to 160-plus countries was once only available on a single Lexington station, as few programmers were willing to take on a slate of horse racing shows.

But the determined Penna, who graduated from North Adams State University in Western Massachusetts with a marketing degree, had been selling products most of his adult life — and HRRN was his passion. A daunting challenge did not dissuade him.

“I started Googling different radio stations and would call them one by one,” Penna remembered. “It was a bit of a hard sell, but I would wear people out on the phone. I just kept calling until I got somebody who was receptive to the idea. We were able to get enough program directors at radio stations to understand the value of putting horse races on the air, that there is a niche out there and that people would be interested in that particular programming.

“When you think of where it came from just 10 years ago — you’re thinking of one AM station in Lexington,” he said. “It’s pretty remarkable.”

Reared about 70 minutes from Saratoga Springs, N.Y., Penna developed his love for Thoroughbreds at Saratoga Race Course, where his first racing memory was Easy Goer’s winning the 1989 Travers Stakes.

“I was 18 years old. I think I had \$2 across the board on him and won, and I was hooked,” he remembered. “I thought it was the greatest game ever.”

Not until several years later, however, did the future of this eventual broadcaster become clear. Following his stints with The Jockey Club and *Thoroughbred Times*, a lackluster season working the stock market made him realize how badly he missed the sport.

Penna got a job as a horse identifier in Keeneland’s racing office, and one day Kules invited him to be a guest on his local radio show, “From the Backstretch to the Winner’s Circle.”

“I had never done anything pertaining to broadcasting at all,” Penna recalled. “It wasn’t



While Mike Penna is the on-air talent, wife Michelle oversees the financial aspects of HRRN as well as makes travel arrangements.

even a blip on the radar. But I said, ‘Sure, I’ll give it a try.’ ”

Although Penna had had no previous experience, he forged a bond with the host while guesting on the program. Soon, Kules invited him to consider a more regular role, and in 2003 Penna began co-hosting the “Equine Forum” talk show on Saturday mornings, a program the award-winning Kules broadcast to Lexington for more than 20 years.

“I remember that first time sitting in the studio; I was shaking like a leaf, and he looked at me and he said, ‘Michael, nobody can see you,’ and I said, ‘Yeah, but they can hear me; I can still sound stupid!’ ” Penna said. “But he walked me through it. That was April of ‘03 when we did our first show, and it just went from there.”

Penna’s career path was set. He and Kules developed the Equine Forum to its current two-hour format, and in 2005 after Penna became interested in expanded coverage, they partnered to establish the Horse Racing Radio Network. Before long HRRN was broadcasting big events such as the Donn Handicap at Gulfstream Park and the Arlington Million from Arlington



Penna interviews trainer Art Sherman and assistant trainer Alan Sherman at the 2014 Kentucky Derby.

International Racecourse.

“It was tough at first because the tracks didn’t really know who we were,” Penna said. “For example, we had some issues getting into Gulfstream in 2006. But I ran into [Gulfstream owner] Frank Stronach at the Keeneland sale, and I said, ‘Frank, I’m trying to start this radio network ...’ and explained it to him, and Frank said, ‘You tell them I said you can come down there and do that. That’s good for the sport.’ ”

Around that same time, former trainer Jude Feld joined the HRRN team, first working as a paddock analyst and reporter, then serving as co-

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host when Kules' health began to decline. Their technology was far from state-of-the-art, but what they lacked in equipment they made up for with innovation. One summer around 2007 when Feld was conducting paddock interviews, he communicated with Penna by waving brightly colored flashcards in the air.

"We've done all different kinds of gyrations to communicate," Feld said with a laugh. "When we first started, part of it was lack of equipment and part of it was bad locations where the equipment wouldn't pick up signals. I remember the flashcards were kind of 'one if by land, two if by sea.' I had pink ones, yellow ones; I looked like a fricking soccer official."

Gone are the flashcards, replaced by high-tech equipment in HRRN's Lexington studio (built in 2012) and their sophisticated setup on the road.

"Mike spent a pretty decent amount of money to upgrade everything," Feld said. "He's very enthusiastic about what he does, very proud of it. He built it pretty much from scratch, and I'm proud to be a part of it as well."

Despite HRRN's limited equipment its really big break also came in 2007: The network got the rights to broadcast its first Triple Crown event — the Belmont Stakes won by Rags to Riches.

"I was just trying to cover our expenses on these trips; a lot of them I was losing money on," Penna said. "But we found a way to pay a little bit of a rights fee, and we got enough sponsorship to cover the broadcast and enough stations to carry it, and it was an outstanding race. John Velazquez came on the show



Above from left, Penna, Jude Feld, and Sean Clancy broadcast live from Belmont Park in 2012. Below, Penna is on the scene Derby week at Churchill Downs.



COURTESY OF MICHELLE PENNA

and walked through every step of winning the race with Rags to Riches. To hear him describe it, you actually felt like you were in the saddle with him."

In 2008 HRRN landed the rights to the Preakness. The Kentucky Derby followed in 2011. Rights to the Triple Crown opened doors to additional stations and fostered a relationship with Sirius XM Radio, which blossomed into six hours of horse racing coverage per week on

the satellite channel in addition to the race coverage the network provides.

Kules passed away in December 2010, but his legacy lives on in the thriving network.

"Pete was my mentor; he had a resumé as long as your arm, and he was not easy by any stretch of the imagination," Penna said. "He would tell me about pace, inflection, and tone, and I would go back and listen to my shows and try to get better. I still do. You never want to stop learning."

In 2007 HRRN produced its first Breeders' Cup broadcast from Monmouth Park. It has broadcast every edition of the World Championships since then and has won an Eclipse Award for coverage of the 2010 Breeders' Cup Classic battle between Zenyatta and Blame. Keeneland

track announcer Kurt Becker was part of that broadcast and is often involved in major coverage produced by HRRN.

"Just to be there and be a part of that was really special," Penna recalled. "Jude and Kurt were in the booth with me and Sean Clancy was down below, and I can remember Sean capturing



Far right, Penna was recognized for his work with an Eclipse Award.

the moment when Zenyatta came out onto the racetrack — he just described it so perfectly. Then watching Zenyatta make that charge and come up just a little bit short; we were all cheering for her to get there, and it would have been great to see it done. That, to me, was a race that really sticks out at the Breeders' Cup."

Feld also recalls several special Breeders' Cup memories, from Shared Account winning the 2012 Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Turf to Drosselmeyer and Royal Delta winning the Classic and Ladies' Classic for Hall of Fame trainer Bill Mott in 2011.

"When Shared Account won, that was a big moment for me — I actually got verklempt on the air — because my brother bought that horse, and it was a really big moment for our family and for Sagamore Farm," he said.

Today the HRRN team makes about 13-14 trips per year to different racetracks, covering Kentucky Derby prep season, the Triple Crown, Keeneland's spring and fall meets, and the Breeders' Cup. This year HRRN will partner with NBC Sports Radio to provide live radio coverage of the Triple Crown races. Penna is the powerhouse behind the operation, managing sponsorships and leading the broadcasts, while Michelle Penna oversees the financial aspects of the business and handles travel arrangements (she recently left her job with The Jockey Club to work full time with HRRN). Lee Dellapina and Shawn Seay are the network's full-time producers.

Along with Equine Forum the network produces "Jock Talk," a Tuesday night program co-hosted by former jockey Kristina McManigell, and "Trainer Talk," a Wednesday night show presented by Fasig-Tipton. On Thursdays there's the Brisnet call-in show, and on Friday the weekend's big races are discussed on the XpressBet preview show. The Permanently Disabled Jockeys' Fund is the network's charity of choice.

Penna eventually would like HRRN to go international to broadcast races such as the Arc de Triomphe or the Melbourne Cup.

"I'd also like to continue to work with Sirius XM to create a dedicated channel for horse racing," he added. "Right now our programming bounces around on different channels, but I'd like to have one designated channel for the sport, and they're on board with that concept, too."

Whatever the future holds, the network has not only a dedicated and talented couple at the helm but a company president whose love of the sport has never flagged.

"I just look at myself as a fan," Penna said. "I still love the opportunity to go to the races in shorts and flip-flops, put the ball cap on, and just go enjoy the day. I'm doing what I love, and I'm so blessed



Penna: "I just look at myself as a fan."



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spotlight on

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to be able to do it. It's kind of overwhelming when you sit back and think about where it was and where it is today."

Service to the People

HRRN broadcasts go out not only to fans around Lexington and across the nation, but to service men and women via Armed Services radio.

"I'm really proud of that fact," Feld remarked. "It's cool that people who can't be at the races in person or can't get to a TV can at least listen. With radio you have to describe things more; it's a little more artistic, in a way, to present things in a proper manner. Hopefully we present the races in a way that helps them feel like they're there."

Feld also noted the service provided to those working on horse farms across the country.

"A lot of people on horse farms really enjoy the fact that they can go out and feed the mares and they're not missing any racing," he said. "I think we do a tremendous service for people in the industry who are working on weekends and can't get to the races or be in front of a TV. I love that about what we do." **KM**



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Penna founded HRRN with the late Pete Kules.

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Listeners can tune into the Equine Forum live on HANK 96.1 FM in Lexington, Ky., every Saturday from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. ET or worldwide with free live streaming at <http://horseracingradio.net>. Podcasts of the show are also made available each week on the website.