

Owner Profile

Weekends at the Track

Dick Van Patten talks about Family, Acting, Business, and Horseracing

By Mary Forney

Just about any weekend that there's racing at Santa Anita or Hollywood Park, you can find actor Dick Van Patten in the turf club with his long-time buddy, Mel Brooks.

Best known for his role as Tom Bradford in the long-running TV series *Eight is Enough*, Van Patten has been acting virtually his entire life. From his start as a child actor, he has appeared in more than two dozen Broadway plays, 600 radio shows, seven TV series, and 24 feature films – most notably those of Brooks, including *High Anxiety*, *Spaceballs*, and *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*.

In a recent interview at Santa Anita, Van Patten spoke about his passion for acting, as well as his other passions – his pet food business, his family, and horse racing.

At 79, Van Patten is still very busy, working currently on three movies, including *Opposite Day*, also starring Renee Taylor, Ron Dickinson, and Pauly Shore, which will be released this Spring. "I'm working hard and am actually pretty busy," he said. "I don't want to retire." Like Brooks', Van Patten's busy work schedule leaves just the weekends for visits to the track.

"Every Saturday and Sunday Mel comes to the track with me," said Van Patten, who introduced Brooks to racing several years ago with a trip to the saddling paddock. "Mel came out, and Patrick Valenzuela was riding my horse. So before the race I introduced him to Patrick, and Mel said to him, 'If you win this race, I'll put you in my next movie!' So, Patrick wins the race, and he comes back to the winners' circle, sees Mel, and he



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Photography by Benoit & Associates



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shouts, 'I'm in the movie!' And Mel put him in the movie – it was *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*." Valenzuela played the part of "Lead Camel Jockey" in the 1993 film.

In addition to a full acting schedule, Van Patten oversees a pet food company he co-founded called Natural Balance. After developing a formula for a holistic dog food in the late 80's, they were able to convince PetCo to put the product in a few stores. "Not only did it do well," said Van Patten, "It went right through the roof! So they put us in 625 PetCo stores, and now we sell to Korea, Japan, Germany – all over the world." Their latest product is a zoological formula. "We started with the San Diego Zoo," he explained, "And now we supply zoos all across the country."

Van Patten is also a dedicated family man. He has been married for 53 years to Patricia Poole, and still gets a twinkle in his eye when talking about Pat: "My wife is so cute! She was a June Taylor dancer on the Jackie Gleason Show when I married her. She was also a Rockette at the Radio City Music Hall, and she's been in seven Broadway plays."

The couple has three sons: Nels, James, and Vincent. James and Vincent are actors like their father, and Nels is a tennis instructor at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Although a close-knit family is a rarity in Hollywood these days, the Van Pattens are just that. "We all get together a lot," said Van Patten, adding that Nels lives next door, James two blocks away, and Vincent just a few miles further.

Of his three sons, Vincent is the only one who shares his passion for horseracing. Another common interest is poker. Vincent is the commentator for the wildly popular World Poker Tour (WPT), which just celebrated its sixth year. "When Vincent first took the job six years ago, he had no idea it was going to be such a big hit show," said Van Patten. "But now it's tremendous." The elder Van Patten recently participated in a Celebrity Poker Tournament at the Commerce Club. "It's funny," he said, "I love the horses and poker, but I have no interest in any other kind of gambling. With poker you have to think, and same thing is true with handicapping – you study the *Form* – it's not just luck." He also attributes his own love of horse racing to his

father.

“My father was a horseplayer,” Van Patten said. “And he used to take me to the track on the weekends, back in New York – Jamaica, Belmont, Aqueduct. I really got hooked, I loved it!” Raised in Queens, Van Patten attended Richmond High School and, as soon as school was over would ride his bike out to the racetrack. “Kids weren’t allowed on the racetrack, you had to be 21. So I would go in the Infield, and I would send people over with my bets. And I would watch all the races from the Infield.”

“Later, when I was in Broadway shows,” Van Patten continued, “I used to work until 11:00 at night, and then I would get the *Racing Form* and read it before going to the track the next day.” It was at that time that he first became a horse owner. At the age of 18, he bought two yearlings – a colt named Penetrator and a filly named Miss Finale.

“I was the youngest horse owner in the country in 1946,” he said proudly. “They even wrote an article about it! They were both claimed from me, but I won with both of them.” As a matter of fact, Penetrator ran in the first race ever run at Monmouth Park in 1946, and finished second by the smallest of margins. “About two years ago,” said Van Patten, “I went to Monmouth Park, and as you enter there is a big picture of the

first race ever run at Monmouth – and there’s my horse getting beat by a nose!”

These days Van Patten is content with a small stable of horses in training with Bill Spawr and Herb Bacorn, including two in partnership with Jenny Craig. “Over the years, I’ve mostly had claimers,” he said, adding, “But I have had a lot of fun with them – and I’ve won with every horse I ever had. It’s so exciting, especially when you hear your horse’s name at the head of the stretch!”

Van Patten truly loves every aspect of the game. “This may sound corny,” he said, “but I would go to the races even if there was no betting. I think it’s so interesting – the different years, the three year olds, the four year olds, the Futurity, the Derby – it’s like a story each year. But the betting makes it even more fun! And jockeys,” he continued, “I have such respect for them.... No coward ever went out there on the racetrack and rode a horse.”

Van Patten should know. A few years back, he was asked to star in a made-for-television event called “War of the Stars,” in which he actually rode in a six-furlong match race at Hollywood Park against Chris McCarron. “I lost in a photo,” he said. “But it was a thrill!”

CHSA: *Leading the Way in Track Safety*

California is traditionally at the forefront of the development of new racing technologies – particularly when it comes to the health and welfare of our horses and riders. A case in point is a unique program – developed and run by the California Horsemen’s Safety Alliance (CHSA) – dedicated to lowering workers’ compensation costs by improving backstretch and track safety.

Formed in 2002 by TOC and the CTT (California Thoroughbred Trainers) to oversee California horsemen’s workers’ compensation insurance program, including the monitoring of claims and payroll data, the CHSA has taken an aggressive role in improving overall backstretch safety and the safety of jockeys and riders in particular.

According to Sonia Pishehvar, workers compensation program administrator for CHSA, the program has been working closely with American Safety Testing & Measurements (ASTM), to set safety standards for racing safety vests and helmets. A two-year study was conducted to gather statistics on types of injuries to jockeys and exercise riders. The results indicated that much of the equipment in use was substandard. Working in cooperation with the jockeys and manufacturers, prototypes were then developed for racing safety vests, which were then submitted to stringent testing. The resulting standard will be voted on, and hopefully adopted, at the ASTM conference in May, then brought back to the California Horse Racing Board for adoption.

Jockeys actively involved in the project were Paul Atkinson, Michael Baze, Russell Baze, Jon Court, Francisco Duran, and Luis Juaregui. According to Pishehvar, “This is the first time a user group has been actively involved in establishing a standard for their group.”

Testing has also recently been completed on the new safety helmets, which are designed to withstand enormous impact while providing the best possible protection to the rider’s skull. “A lot of riders still use the ‘Caliente’ helmet, which is

substandard,” said Pishehvar. “Our mission is to teach the riders the risk involved in using these pieces of equipment. The Caliente helmet has been used since the 70’s and the riders love the way it fits, but it offers very little – if any – protection.”

Also under way is a project to develop safety standards for reinforced reins. “We launched a 90-day pilot study last summer on the two different reinforced safety reins in existence,” Pishehvar explained. “Data was collected from trainers and riders, and we made suggestions to manufacturers.” The next step will be getting an ASTM standard, so that quality and control can be monitored in the manufacturing process.

The CHSA is just another example of the many, largely invisible, programs cooperatively run by the industry, for the benefit of the industry and all those in it. TOC and the CTT are proud of these efforts, and of the results the program has achieved in its relatively short existence. For more information, please feel free to contact either TOC or CTT management.

