

Stable Views--Voices and Stories from the Thoroughbred Racetrack
Archie Green Fellows Project, 2012-2013
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**Robert Paterno interview, 2013-02-17 : interview conducted by Ellen E.
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INTERVIEW LOG

Interview with Robert Bob Paterno Tampa Bay Downs Interview – Part One 2/17/2013

00 Walking and getting situated. Talks about the flowers that had been used at that mornings Susan G. Komen race. The interview takes place in the headquarters of Robert (Bob) Paterno, who is a pony boy. He is located in a barn specifically set aside for this job and he has a small tack room and a few stalls for his base of operations. The interview is conducted in the tack room.

1:00 He introduces himself – Robert Paterno. He has been coming to Tampa Bay Downs since 1978, when he came for one or two winters. But he didn't come back again until 1990. He has been coming about 20 winters, with some winters spent in New Jersey. He comes in the winter time. He has trained horses, but mostly he is a pony person.

2:27 The horses they use are called ponies but they are not ponies. Ponies refer to being the lead horse, but most are retired race horses. They work for individual trainers. Each pony person has one to 10 different trainers. They lead the horses to the races, keep them quiet, keep the post parade in order, help the jockeys. The horses come out of the paddock in numerical order and they are supposed to keep in order. They get them to the races. Some trainers keep their own ponies. Some people gallop in the morning and then ride a pony in the afternoon. They have specific horses and trainers with whom they work. Sometimes they pick up the horse right at the barn and then they'll lead them to the track. They don't get them at the end of the race. Once they're in the starting gate, then the job of the pony boy is done. When the 'Overnight' – the race order - comes out they know when they are going to be needed and for which race. If they have 'doubles' (two horses in the same race) then then trade off with each other. A Stable Pony is the trainer's own pony.

6:08 Outriders lead the post parade and catch loose horse, if they are needed after the race by the jockey. They'll help after the race is concluded.

6:44 You never know what will happen because the horses haven't been in on the planning. It takes much to get horse to the race.

6:56 "It's a lot of work to get a horse to running a race. They just don't know how to do that automatically. It takes months and months of training. First they have to be, what they call, 'broke'. They have to be broke to ride – get used to the rider - and then they have to come to the racetrack. And get used to all the hustle and bustle of the other horses on the track. How to gallop around in a circle. How to gallop with horses on either side. They actually go through putting them in what we call 'sets', where there's two horses together, then three horses together, four horses together. This is months of work. Then they go through some fast, we call them 'breezes'. You could almost call them sort of training races, where they go as fast as they can for certain distances with horses beside them so they get used to running in a pack of horses. They will run in a pack of horses naturally, but to do it with a rider on your back safely around the racetrack takes a lot of training for them. But they accept it and they do it pretty well."

8:00 Bob was born in Detroit but grew up in Ontario Canada, he moved there at age 8. He was involved with a dairy farmer who had a trotter that he rode at the fair. In 1968, he was riding show horses. Then he found out that he could get paid to ride horses at the racetrack. He was always going to the racetrack when he was in school. He's ridden all his life.

10:01 They start real early. Especially if they are training – they open the track at 5:45.

10:28 Each racetrack has about 1000 horses and each has to be ridden every day. Training is from 6:00 – 10:00 a.m. then they have to get the track ready for the races in the afternoon. If you're out there at 6:00 that means you're at the barn at 5:30. Some grooms start as early as 4:00 a.m.

11:30 The trainer will make up sets, which is the order that the horses will go out so the grooms will know which one goes out when.

11:50 While the first horse is training, the groom will, if he hasn't cleaned the stall already earlier, he'll clean the stall and get the water ready for the bath. Put tack on the next horse for when that one comes back. And the other one is saddled up and the rider can get on that one and the second set will go out. And the third, fourth, fifth. So it's an early day. It starts early. And then if you have something in the races, you get all the horses done in the morning then you work on the horse or horses that are going to race that afternoon. But if you're a pony person, you work in the morning. You help the horses train in the morning. You either, what we call, 'pony them', which is take them around the racetrack next to your pony horse without a rider or just accompany the riders to help them get around the racetrack to go to the starting gate in the

morning. And then, once were done at 10:00 o'clock, quick something to eat, and tack up another horse to use all afternoon. To be a pony person, it's about the longest day on the racetrack.

13:07 Pony people try to out hustle each other for work. If they're there in the morning, they expect to do the work in the afternoon.

13:43 All ponies are owned by the individual pony people. It takes a quiet horse. A horse that won't kick another. It takes a specially quiet horse to be a pony. The thoroughbred horses make good ponies because they know the routine. A certain number of them will quiet down. He talks about his ponies. He has one horse that he's worked with for 23 years.

15:40 Robert goes to Tampa Bay in the wintertime, and then Colonial Downs in Virginia. And then he goes to Pennsylvania or to Ohio. It depends on where his clients go and this can change. It depends upon where his horses fit in. He talks about trainer Bobby Raymond.

17:50 He's ridden for 50 years.

18:19 To stay, you really have to like horses and like the job. He thinks that horses are well cared for. You have to like horses to do this as all you do is take care of them.

18:45 There are some people that think horse racing is hard on the horses and a little mean. Of course, we don't think that at all. We think they are very well cared for and we like them very much....You have to like horses to do this because you spend your whole day around them. All you do is take care of them. There is a saying around the racetrack: "The closer you stay to the horses, the less money you're going to make." Meaning- You don't get rich at the racetrack mostly – galloping horses, ponying horses. It's kind of piece work. You can make a decent amount of money and have rented an apartment and be able to have a vehicle.

19:43 That's what stops a lot of people. That's what makes people leave the racetrack. They'll get married , they'll have kids and they want to stay in one place. They might still stay around horses but they might go to one racetrack and just stay there, maybe it only races part of the year. Whereas a certain percentage of people stay on the racetrack all the time and we move all the time, but that's another lifestyle and you get used to it. It has its good point and bad points. A lot of people say when they get older they get tired of being on the road. I guess I haven't gotten tired of that. I'm a little tired of it. [pause] I still do it, so.

20:36 He talks about movement between racetracks. In the Northeast they're close enough to ship between them. No matter where I go, if I go to a racetrack I've never been at before, I know that sooner or later I'll run into somebody that I know. And sometimes I meet people that I haven't seen in twenty years. And it's just like we hadn't seen each other since yesterday. You basically

do the same thing at all race tracks. But Racetrackers are a little--they get antsy staying in one place. This is a fairly long meet [at Tampa Bay Downs] It's like 6 months we're down here, so at the end of six months, most of us are, 'uh, time to go!' Well just go somewhere else and do the same thing. But you look at a different tree or a different barn wherever you're going. Different scenery. But the routine stays pretty much the same. You have to have the routine to train all these horses in the amount of time we have. But it's good for the animals. They get used to the routine.

22:22 Talks about routine. If trainers feed at different times, then the horses in the same barn will catch on and complain if they're not getting fed with the others.

23:20 He talks about match races in Louisiana. About 30 years ago, they'd bet on a Saturday local meet. He describes a match race (although he's never seen one). He talks about good riders coming from Louisiana. You have to be fearless and be able to think on your feet. He talks about riding the Pony and needing also to be quick.

25:26 We have a saying: "Rule number one, don't panic. Rule number two, never forget rule number one." You have to think your way through what could be a dangerous system and you have to think fast. (We stop to listen to the race announcer.)

26:13 He talks about incidents with horses. He talks about when a horse bolts.

26:19 At the racetrack we have different lanes, too, in the morning for the training. The fastest horses go on the inside. The 'workers', we call them. They are going as fast as they can run. They have the inside lane. Then a couple lanes out would be a fast 'galloper'. And then the regular 'gallopers', and then ones who are just ponying on the outside. And everyone coming back to get off the racetrack would be going the other way and they get the outside part.

26:55 Talks about once when he was on a horse that was out of control. He says he doesn't gallop any more – too heavy to gallop any more.

28:00 Bob has done all the jobs on the backside: gallop, pony, train. His first job was as a groom and then he trained for several years. The pony business helps with cash flow. Some racetracks have more stabling accommodations and he'll train there. Mostly, he ponies now and trains his own horses.

29:07 He says there are more regulations now. Good for the safety of the horses and the safety of the riders. There used to be a lot more racetracks and more horses. Racing used to be the only legal gambling outlet. Now with lotteries and casinos, it takes people away from the racetrack. There are fans left but they are fans of horse racing, not just gamblers. He says that this is a

thinking man's gamble. There are a lot fewer horses. As you're farther away from agricultural society, horse racing diminishes. A lot of racetracks have been pushed away through housing development. There are a lot of differences in the care of the horses. In the past, people seemed to know more about animals when they started. If you want to get a job at the racetrack, you can do it and just walk off the street. In the past, more people were familiar with horses. Now, the old-time veterinary care of the horses doesn't happen – now there is a reliance upon medications.

33:00 He talks about bleeding in horses. If you run, then you break blood vessels. He talks about the use of lasik in horses. He talks about things a horse might do that gives you information. Fewer today have the ability to read a horse.

36:00 The Racetrack used to be a community unto itself, with barber shops, cafeteria. You could live on the racetrack and never leave it. Tampa just closed its kitchen.

End of interview Part I

Part II

00 - Bob Paterno gives a thorough description of a day's activity at the Racetrack, and the routine that is followed to take care of the horses.

5:00 He talks about horses and their different personalities.

8:00 He talks about different claiming prices. A 'claiming race' means that other owners and trainers can buy a horse after it wins a race. There are different grades of claiming races.

8:51 He talks about a friend of his who is a runner but doesn't really keep himself in shape. He talks about some horses just being naturally fast. If a horse is fast, then it'll win. Training has an effect, but it has to have some natural talent.

10:15 The claiming prices level things off. The Stakes races are the fastest.

10:38 When you put a horse in a claiming race, you are saying that you're willing to sell it. You have to sell it. Trainers claim off each other. Most horses run in claiming races.

11:55 People want to have a range of horses. One wants horses for different conditions within a stable.

13:00 The ideal stable size (for Bob Paterno) is 20 to 30. A lot of trainers now aren't as hands-on as they used to be. Trainers used to know all of their horses. Now some trainers may have 100

horses spread out over several tracks. They have assistant trainers who work for the trainer. The trainer may not ever see a horse in the big outfits.

14:36 There are help problems. Help is transient and it is a long day. You have to really like horses. Now there are lots of Latino workers from Mexico, Central and South America. Before that there were many Black grooms. Now they come from all over.

15:19 The biggest outfits at Tampa Bay Downs have 20-25 horses. Each horse has to be trained every day so that is a lot. The bigger you get, you need more help and better help. He says that 20 would be the most that he would like as a trainer. Bob said he's had as many as 25, but he likes to work directly with the horses. He prefers to do it all. When you have lots of grooms, they do the horse care.

17:15 End of Interview