

## COOKY'S CORNER



(Pennington Photo)

### BETTY YOPKO WEIBEL HAS BEEN SHOW JUMPING'S BEST FRIEND

The smile comes first: 1,000 megawatts beaming enough good will to melt the frowns off the faces of disgruntled reporters or curmudgeonly sponsors. That, coupled with a disposition unruffled by crisis and her unwavering mission to put equestrian events on the same footing as pro football, is why Betty Yopko Weibel has been show jumping's best friend for the past two decades.

Now head of her own public relations/marketing firm, this savvy Ohio native became head cheerleader for the sport when the media was still convinced it fell somewhere between society event and elitist hobby.

Today, her equestrian career has come full circle—she was involved in the formative years of the American Grandprix Association, and now the horse show of which she is co-chairman, The KeyBank Hunter Jumper Classic, has just returned to the AGA calendar. The \$35,000 KeyBank Cleveland Grandprix, July 18, is now an AGA event.

More often than not, Betty's campaign to equalize the Nations Cup with the Super Bowl in the eyes of hardened sports writers has been an uphill trot. She balances public relations dreams and nightmares in a single-minded quest to draw sponsors and spectators to events starring two- and four-legged athletes.

What helped her most?

"My experience as a cub reporter covering the police beat!" jokes the former public relations director of the AGA. "Working crime scenes gave me a frame of reference to deal with the tough reporters who wanted to be anywhere else but covering 'sissy' horse shows."

Perhaps if Betty's parents had dropped their 7-year-old daughter at a skating rink instead of a barn, she'd be organizing the Winter Olympics and spending her spare time practicing double axles.

"Unfortunately for them, I was hooked the minute I sat in the saddle," she says. Winning a blue ribbon in a walk-trot show ring debut sealed her fate.

President of Yopko Communications since 1994, Betty's years as vice president of Carlton & Douglas, the firm handling the AGA account, provided her with a broad canvas. She sketched the sport's extraordinary virtues and softened its occasional vices in her quest to lure a larger audience and much-needed sponsors.

Her friends agree Betty was born for the job.

"Well, you know how it is with horses," she says with a shrug, "you want everyone to love them as much as you do. It's a lifelong interest."

#### More Like Mania

Perhaps "interest" inadequately describes Betty's feeling about equines.

"I guess mania's more like it," she admits. "From the time I came face to face with a horse, I spent every free minute of my free time riding at Metropark Stables in Brecksville, or mucking stalls and doing odd jobs in return for lessons."

Before long she fell in love with her favorite school horse, Sand Pebbles. Determined to make him her own, she saved whatever money she earned to buy the gelding. Eventually, with the help of a supportive family, including two brothers who didn't even ride, 12-year-old Betty was able to buy Sand Pebbles.

"That horse was a dream come true," she recalls. "Because of him we cleaned up at regional shows in English and Western classes. There wasn't any Pony Club in our area, but I joined 4-H and we went to state finals in hunt seat equitation."

"When my folks moved to a place in the country on 20 acres that had a barn, I believed it was about as close to heaven as I'd ever live," she says.

With her horse now at home, did she get serious about showing?

"Not unless you consider my publishing the 'Yopko Family Newsletter,' listing a time schedule for preparing and leaving for shows and outlining duties for everyone in the family who offered to help really serious. Oh, they loved

me!" she recalls. "My father just resigned himself to taking a briefcase full of work to shows every weekend."

When it was time for Betty to go to college, the choice was simple. "I decided on Lake Erie's equestrian program," she says, "but my folks drew the line at sending Sand Pebbles. And they only agreed to let me go if I chose a double major—horses and something else. Anything else!"

Having been a high school reporter and yearbook editor, the teenager opted for equestrian studies and communications, affording the opportunity to hone her two favorite skills. Lake Erie's riding program proved tailor-made.

While still at Lake Erie, she took an internship at a daily newspaper. "All that agonizing I did over writing obituaries and weather reports taught me the basics," she admits.

Betty says her early career years were a patchwork quilt of jobs that, fortunately, fit into her background, including teaching riding part-time and covering the police beat, local politics, and—frosting on the journalistic cake—equestrian events.

#### Answering The Call

Opportunity knocked loudest with an offer of a copywriter's position at Carlton & Douglas. "[President] Jim Passant said I could start part-time, and when I asked him when, he just pointed to a stack of papers and said, 'sit down,'" she says.

Betty's background soon slid her into a full-time slot handling the 30-stop AGA series, juggling press releases, award standing points, travel plans, sponsor relations, and, what she considered paramount, media development.

"Show jumping was not well-known in 1982," Betty explains, adding: "and reporters had to be persuaded to cover grand prix [classes]. They were generally hardcore reporters familiar with football and hockey who never saw horses off the racetrack. The ones who had been assigned to cover the show ring were not happy campers."

And therein lay the challenge.

Taking the proverbial bit in her teeth, Betty set out to win them over. She shepherded reporters behind the scenes to give them a look at the "skinny" of the sport, how the pricey horses were cared for, introducing the people who cared for them. She dragged them on course to show them the power and skill such formidable fences required from horse and rider. She even searched out horses quiet enough for television aces to sit on while reporting.

Gradually, from Los Angeles to Denver to Tampa to New York, Betty helped open reporters'



Betty Yopko Weibel is at home in front of or behind the TV camera.

minds, sponsors' pocketbooks and spectators' enthusiasm to the sport.

"It didn't happen overnight," Betty admits, "but it happened."

The lion's share of credit for making reporters believers in those early days she insists belong to such articulate, knowledgeable riders as Katie Monahan Prudent, Melanie Smith Taylor, Michael Matz and Margie Goldstein-Engle. "They made my job so much easier," she says.

And then there were the ones who didn't. "I used to keep my fingers crossed certain riders wouldn't win," Betty confesses.

Getting them to answer questions, she says, was like pulling teeth. Turning on the smile wattage, she covered their lack of charisma and made excuses for the prima donnas who flatly refused to meet the press.

But her favorite times were with the Winter Equestrian Festival circuit in Wellington, Fla. "I worked separately for Gene Mische and Stadium Jumping," says Betty. "What a great way to spend the winter!"

At Mische's suggestion, Betty most enjoyed writing and editing the *WEF News* with the help of good friends Peter Doubleday and David Distler.

She recalls what it was like to work with sports television channel ESPN in their early days in the show ring when they "weren't real thrilled to be covering jumpers," she says with a wry grin. "But putting statistics about riders and horses on the screen and preparing the talent for interviews made the job easier and gave them a pretty quick grasp of the sport. Gradually, they seemed to come around."

ESPN's request for Betty to provide on-camera commentary surprised her, she adds, but figuring it was another one of those disguised op-

portunities tapping on her door, she quickly said yes.

"It was during the U.S. Olympic Festival, in Houston [1986], baking in July's heat and humidity. The opening and close-ups were agony," she recalls. "There I sat dripping and melting next to this beautiful co-commentator who never seemed to sweat, and I thought, 'What am I doing here?'"

But she was doing just fine, and ESPN continued hiring her during the early '80s. Their next request, another Olympic Festival, required Betty to hop on a horse she'd never laid eyes on and gallop him over a jump, between tractors, while the course was being set.

"They asked me to start speaking as I jumped the fence and rode toward the camera," she recalls. "Their only advice—just remember to look happy!"

#### They Will Come

Show jumping is a hard sell in a world where football, baseball and now soccer seem to rule the airwaves. But Betty says she still believes there are two keys to gaining fans and media coverage.

"First, make the sport easy to understand. We'll always have to work to overcome an elitist image, but if reporters are made to feel foolish asking questions, the sport will never advance."

Betty also firmly believes: entertain them and they will come. "An equestrian event has to offer more than equine competitions. Not everyone who comes to a show is a horse person," she says.

Her theory has been proven through co-chairing her pet project, the KeyBank Hunter Jumper Classic, organized by the Chagrin Valley PHA Horse Show, a volunteer team of local horsemen.

"I'd worked on the Classic when it was sponsored by Prescott in the '80s. Then I moved on and the show moved, and it wasn't held in 1995. In 1996, it

returned to Cleveland Metroparks Polo Field, and I knew it could be a tremendous success.

"Some of our board members thought I was nuts," she says, when she proposed special events to draw spectators to the show. But she was undeterred.

Betty convinced local merchants to hold a window-decorating contest to promote the event. Under Betty's guidance, the horse show established a structure of volunteer committees. Together they held a Youth Day, offering educational seminars and crafts for camps and youth organizations and behind-the-scenes guided tours of the show for the general public. They also designated a Family Day with a petting zoo, face painting, character appearances, rider autograph sessions and pony rides for kids.

The Chagrin Valley PHA invited boutiques to keep serious shoppers busy and instituted a celebrity riding invitational. They also added polo, hunting and dressage exhibitions, and a major competition featuring riders from the show's main beneficiary, the Therapeutic Riding Center.

To get the word out, Betty went to the local paper—where she'd once held a job—and convinced them to produce a show program that's now distributed to 80,000 homes and businesses. And, finally, she invited the U.S. Dog Agility Association to hold their national championships at the show, a move that drew a tremendous increase in spectators.

Through these efforts, attendance has grown each year, and in 1998 the event drew 33,000 spectators.

Although her friends and co-workers testify part of Betty's secret is her perpetual motion ("I've never seen her sit down at a show," said one), she pared her traveling schedule after marrying Cleveland attorney David Weibel. When their daughter, Claire, was born in 1993, the couple built a home on 90 acres in Geauga County, Ohio, with room for offices.

To maintain one of her major non-equine accounts, Dairy Mart Convenience Stores Inc., Betty eventually added three employees. She has a roster of clients, including special projects for Lake Erie College and old friend Marty Bauman's Classic Communications.

"We're all part of his team assisting accounts, like the USET, WEF, and the American Driving Society, so I still get to some of the national shows," says Betty.

And does her daughter exhibit any signs of her mother's horse mania?

"Claire rides beautifully but isn't very interested in horses. Someday she may want her own horse, and if she does she's going to have to save her pennies and work hard for it," says her mother.

"But right now," Betty adds with a chuckle, "she said she'd rather have a goat." □