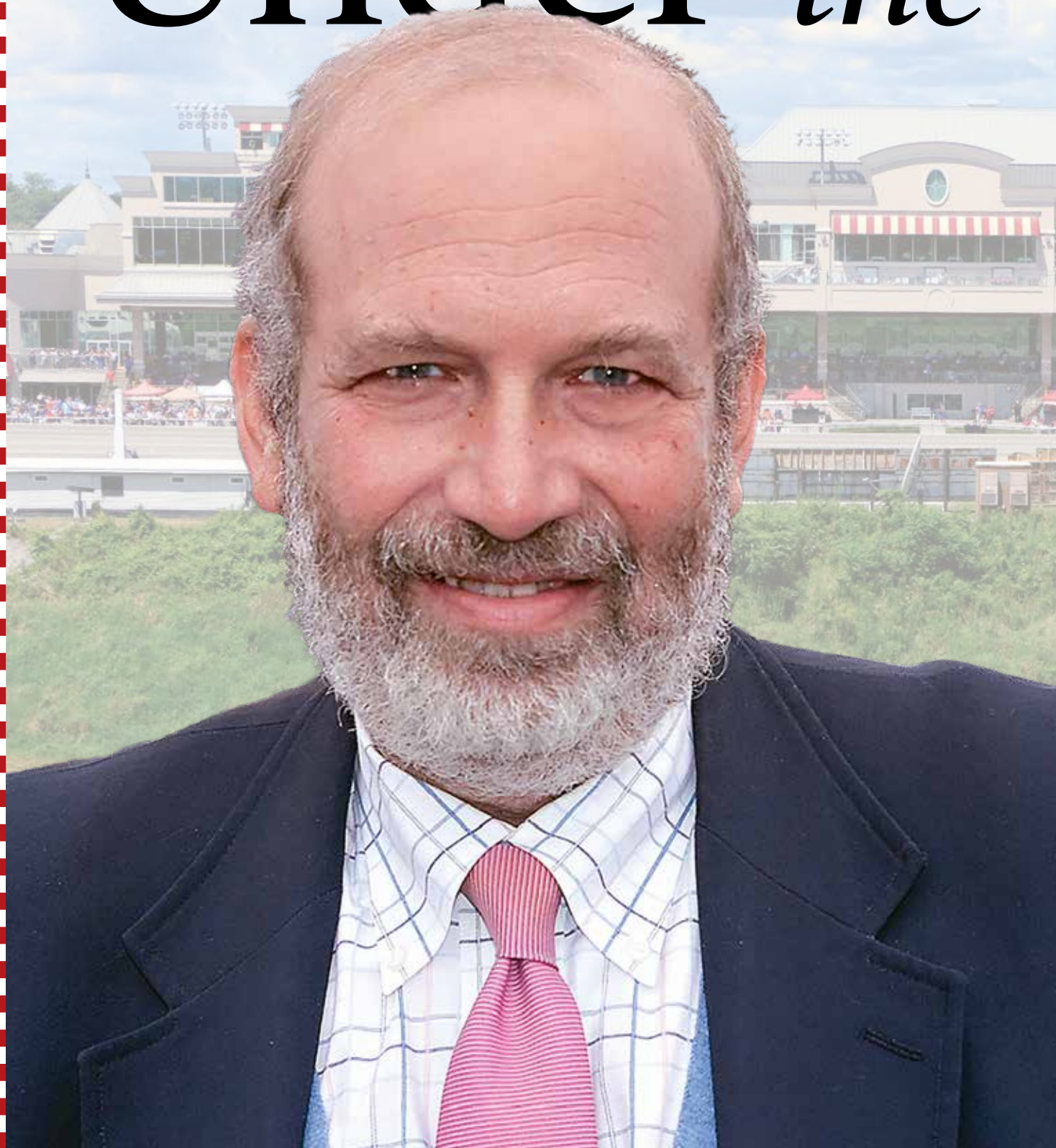


# Under *the* Radar

story by **James Witherite**

Often unseen, multi-faceted journalist **Evan Pattak** is a Meadows mainstay



*In his 1902* collection *Just So Stories*, English author Rudyard Kipling wrote:

*I keep six honest serving-men  
(They taught me all I knew);  
Their names are What and Why and When  
And How and Where and Who.*

. . . the very six questions at the core of any good journalist's work.

That fundamental tenet has guided Evan

Pattak through his life's work, as he has spent the past four decades dedicating his craft to growing and elevating harness racing's reach in western Pennsylvania.

From his work in journalism and public relations to his multi-faceted role with the innovative Meadows Racing Network, the Pittsburgh native has largely flown under the radar—but by design. Unwavering in his commitment to keeping the spotlight





directed on the sport's human and equine stars, Pattak's print and broadcast coverage of harness racing at The Meadows has been instrumental in the mid-major circuit achieving big-league credibility and a nationwide following.

And, to think, Pattak quite literally stumbled upon the sport by happenstance.

"Stumble" is a good word for it," said Pattak, with a chuckle. "Believe it or not, I didn't see a harness race until I was 18. And even then, it was quite by accident."

Pattak, a 1972 graduate of the University of Pittsburgh with a degree in political science, was working as a busboy in Atlantic City, N.J., one summer break.

"Some friends that I made there said, 'Hey, let's go out to the harness races on our day off,'" Pattak recalled. "I didn't know anything about it, but I was immediately attracted by the crowds and the sounds and the sight of the horses racing, and the complexity of the program appealed to me."

While he readily admits the program and its myriad data points are "a turn-off for many people," Pattak relished

the puzzle of handicapping the races. As fate would have it, he cashed his first bet—"a two-dollar show bet on a horse named Maynard Direct," he shared—and he was instantly hooked.

"If you're hooked as a bettor, OK, that's a nice form of entertainment for you," said Pattak. "But, really, I became more deeply attracted to the sport after—back then, The Meadows had backside tours. And not only that, you could get behind a horse and drive the horse. Of course, there was an experienced pro next to you. I was so impressed by the animal's power and by the people who trained them and cared for them and raised them. That became a love for the sport at a deeper level."

**MARKETING MAVEN / Above:** Pattak spoke at the retirement ceremony for Foiled Again, the leading money-winning Standardbred of all time, at the Meadows on Dec. 31, 2018. **Opposite:** Erwin Grossman, left, and Jerry Connors presented Pattak with the 2009 John Hervey News Commentary Award at the 2010 Dan Patch Awards Dinner at Yonkers Raceway in Yonkers, NY.

**I**n the early 1980s, Pattak was mighty busy away from the races—serving as a public relations consultant for Pittsburgh's Urban Redevelopment Authority and Robert Morris College, moonlighting for the National League as an official scorer for Pittsburgh Pirates home games, and training for and competing in marathons. This was all on top of his full-time job as a manager for cable television provider TCI of Pennsylvania.

"They had a unit that they called Home Sports Entertainment," Pattak shared. "We thought that Meadows programming—a recap show like they had for Roosevelt and Yonkers (on New York station WWOR)—would make great programming. You had Pirate games, but you need another program."

"So, we went out for a meeting with (Meadows co-owner) Ed Ryan. We thought, 'We're going to wow Ed Ryan, right?' And we made our proposal to him: 'Let's do a recap show.' And Ed looked at us and said, 'Oh, no, I want a live show that offers every race on every card.' And then, of course, we showed it on our air."

Thus, in November 1983—predating

interstate full-card simulcasting by over a decade—the Meadows Racing Network was born. And, be it in the board room across from Ed Ryan or on the broadcast set alongside Meadows announcer Roger Huston, Pattak was instrumental in putting harness racing from The Meadows in front of millions of television viewers for the better part of 35 years.

"That was a way of communicating directly with our most rabid fans," he said. "And to this day, when I walk through The Meadows to get a program, people stop me and tell me how much they loved the show and ask me for my picks. I ask them for their picks, and it's . . . We had a community there, and I do miss that."

**S**adly, the MRN (which became the Ladbroke Racing Network and later Meadows Live) as it was initially conceived went dark when Penn National Gaming purchased The Meadows in 2019. While Pattak's standing gig among the track's rotation of color commentators came to an end as a result, the Meadows Standardbred



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Owners Association (MSOA) was quick to recognize the worth of a veteran journalist and retained him to continue his public relations efforts on behalf of the track's horsepeople.

"Evan is one of the top writers in the country," said Kim Hankins, who served as the MSOA's executive director from 2007 through his retirement in July. "When he became available, I wanted to use his services and great expertise to further the cause of the MSOA."

"In the racino era, the marketing of racing has fallen to horsemen's associations," Pattak said, "because the casinos really don't want to spend any money on it. Racing generates a small, tiny portion of their income, and so, if it's going to be marketed, it's got to be done by the horsemen's associations. And I was very fortunate here in that the MSOA recognizes that need and hired me. They've been great to work with."

"Evan has been a huge part of racing at The Meadows for years," added Heather Wilder, president of the Keystone Chapter of the United States Harness Writers Association. "His wife,

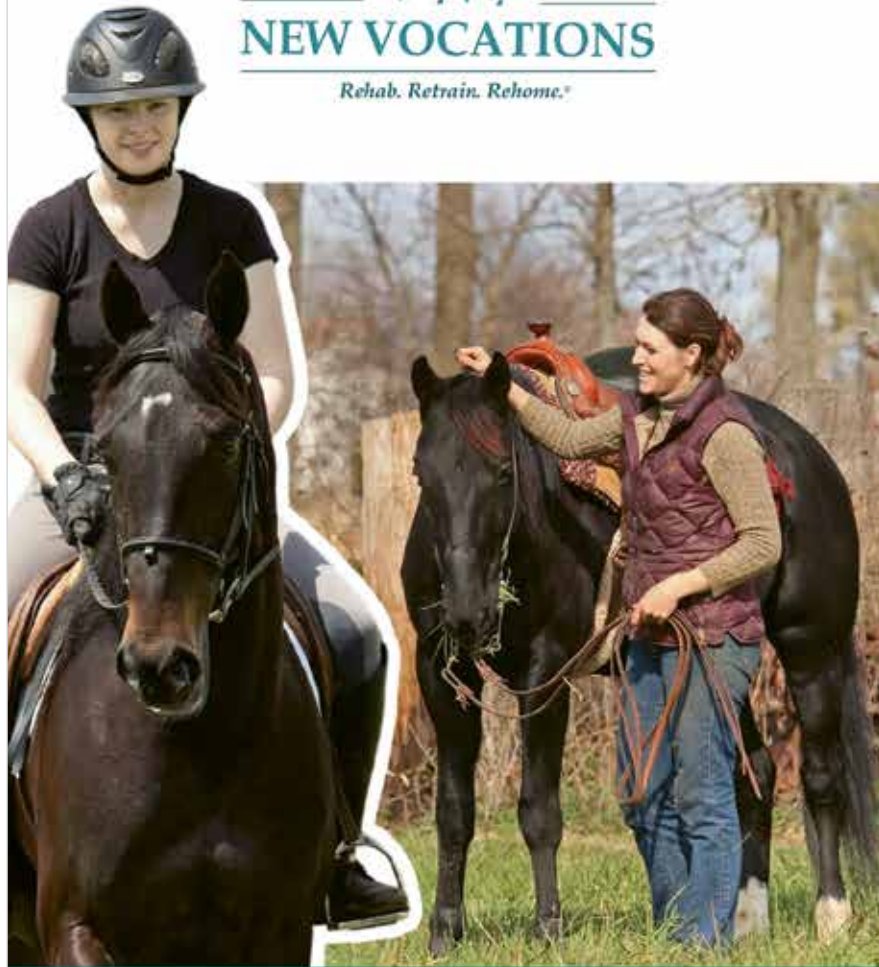
(retired *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* writer) Pohla Smith, is amazing, and for years we've had them both on the list for the Hall of Fame. I feel like Evan quietly goes about giving back to the industry. With the projects we've done over the years, he has served as an editor, written stories for us—he has done so much to keep The Meadows in the spotlight. Without him doing that, I don't know what would have happened to some of our greatest moments."

**I**n his current post with the MSOA, Pattak provides industry and Pittsburgh-area news outlets with daily recaps of feature races, human interest stories, and advance publicity of stakes races. Thanks to a half-century of journalistic sense, dating to his work with the Associated Press fresh out of college, Pattak reliably and consistently tells the stories that play out in front of him and has gained rapport with horsepeople and readers alike for his efforts.

"I learned very early in my career that not every piece I write is going to be worthy of a Pulitzer Prize," said Pattak, in his usual understated style. "If

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## Under the Radar

you can submit copy that's readable and clean, your editors will appreciate that. And so, very early on in the game—and we're talking about 50 years ago—I realized that my top priority had to be accurate, clean copy.

"I'm trying to find something interesting and different with every piece that I write. I cover the recap of the feature race each day, and the races sort of have some similarity to them—'Slowpoke Hanover erased a four-length deficit and won today's feature.' OK, all right, now I'm looking for something interesting. Is there something interesting about Slowpoke Hanover or his connections?"

**T**he other challenge Pattak faces as the public-facing communicator for the MSOA is that he is entrusted with serving many populations—horsepeople, breeders, track management, legislators, and, of course, horseplayers.

"There's no question that harness racing is complex, if you take the broad view of it," he said. "You've got the racing dimension of it. You've got the breeding aspect of it. You've got the care and the aftercare.

"There are a couple things that horsemen's associations have to do, and the MSOA has done it very, very well. I applaud them for that," continued Pattak, referencing the expanded role horsepeople have taken on amid the sport's shifting landscape. "You have to maintain your relationships with legislators. They have to know what's going on, they have to support you. You have to beat them over the head with your economic impact so that they continue to support you and require the casinos to stage harness racing.

"And the other thing we have to do is—as a harness publicist and sometimes marketer—we need to gear our marketing as best we can to bring people to the track. That's how people fall in love with the sport—when they see the horses, get up close and personal with it."

Just ask Evan Pattak—that's how he got hooked on harness racing, after all.

**HB**

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