



LITTLE BROWN JUG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of Jay Wolf

April 19, 2019

Delaware County Historical Society

Delaware, Oh

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Jay Wolf, publicity director for the Little Brown Jug, conducted by Dr. Kyle McDaniel on April 19, 2019 at the Log Cabin at Delaware County Fairgrounds.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The following transcript has been created by Richard Leavy and has been edited for clarity only.

Transcriptionist	Richard Leavy
Transcription Date	August 13, 2019
Interviewee	Jay Wolf
Interviewer	Dr. Kyle McDaniel, Ohio Wesleyan Department of Communications and Journalism
Interview Location	Log Cabin at Delaware County Fairgrounds
Interview Date:	April 19, 2019

Jay Wolf Transcript

Q: Tell us about your earliest involvement with the Little Brown Jug. You know, the year would be great.

A: OK

Q: In your own words

A: Are you ready? OK. My first Little Brown Jug as a spectator was 1981. My father was a local attorney and on the Jug Society and the Fair Board. He was in the lottery for box seats so when they added the addition to the west side of the grandstand in 1980, we had a box seat as a family. So 1981 was my first year as a spectator.

In 1997, David Miller, a driver from Columbus, Ohio, won seven races in one day and Roger Huston, the track announcer says, "We think it's a record." After the races, I ran into Roger and said, "Weren't you embarrassed to say 'I think it was a record'?" And he says, Well we don't have any proof. I took it as a little embarrassment for the city of Delaware and the Little Brown Jug that they weren't sure if seven wins in a day was a record. So that fall and summer I would go every day at lunch to the local library and work, would look up the results from microfiche. Sure enough, we came back the next year, I was proud to say it was a record. After that, Roger started asking me more questions. So, by doing all that research, the I was able to put together a library, if you will, of the winners in the races at Delaware.

Q: In those early years, sounds like the early 80s, what was the atmosphere at the races like?

A: Well, in 1981, I was an 11-year-old, so as an 11 year old kid any time you have 40,000 people around it's something to be seen. You know, the only other event you attend there's college football games with that many people. So with having 40,000 people it was electric. You got out of school. What could better than getting out of school goin' to the horse races? So, I was always amazed by the size of it. As a kid, I was always attending local county fairs around the state with a big crowd at those fairs would be 500 people, so any time we get 40,000 people it was (unintelligible).

Q: Did the race and the fans, the culture, seem to grow as the years passed as you continued to attend the race? If so, how so?

A: In the 1980s, I mean, unfortunately today technology has sort of affected the Little Brown Jug. In the 1980s it was continuing to grow all the way up to the mid-1990s. Two things have really affected the Little Brown Jug, in my opinion and that's been technology and simulcasting. Let's say you live in London, Ohio. It's a 45-minute drive to Delaware County Fairgrounds or a

45-minute drive to the Old Lebanon Raceway. You can bet, you can watch whatever you want at Lebanon Raceway, so it de-emphasized the importance of being here. So, I'm always saying that simulcast really affected it. Now it's technology. We don't have as many reporters and individuals coming because, honestly, they can write about the race by watching it on the internet. We have more I-phones in the winner's circle than we do professional photographers. So, with the social media aspect of it, you could do a lot more with social media than you can with typewriters in the 70s and 80s. Sports Illustrated used to send a reporter every year to the Little Brown Jug. That stopped in the mid-1990s.

Technology. Obviously, it's been great for civilization, but it's really affected the Little Brown Jug.

Q: In terms of the early years---you can speak of the 80s, the 90s, any of the years pre-social media, pre-big media booms. What, in those years, did you consider the most special thing about the Jug itself?

A: The things that's wonderful about the Jug is it's something new every year. We've had long shots and we've had the favorites win. We've had horses that weren't entered until the very last minute, the last, you know. So every year it's different. You'd think that after 75 years, we would have, you know, the same old story and we're fortunate that we don't have the same old story each year.

Q: Was there anything specific you remember about the crowds, the atmosphere, something that kept you personally involved and interested that kept you coming back?

A: In 1998, I was asked by the Delaware Gazette newspaper to sorta help supplement their reporting of the Jug, so in 1998 I actually watched the races from the press box and a few years later I was asked by Tom Wright, the publicity director at the time to help him. So I was the assistant publicity director for Tom for a number of years. In 2013 or so I became the fulltime publicity director. It's been a lot of fun. You get to meet a lot of great people. The Jug is special. As you can see over my shoulders, fans can walk up...fans can't walk into the locker room at the Super Bowl, but you can walk up into the Jug Barn before the race. The drivers walk through to crowds. The only thing that's close to us is NASCAR, if you get in the pits before the race, but literally up until the horses get onto the track, you can walk up and touch the horses. That's something special in sports.

Q: In 1997, in the 1990s, I believe ESPN covered the race.

A: 1995.

Q: OK

A: That was the 50th anniversary and that year it was on ESPN.

Q: OK. 1995. Do you remember that year?

A: Absolutely

Q: What do you remember about it?

A: Yeah. Obviously, it's a great feather in your cap to have your event on ESPN. A couple unique things about the Little Brown Jug. Back then, a horse had to win two heats to win the Jug, so, at the time, there was a chance that for an if-necessary race maybe 45 minutes after the second heat. It would only involve 2, 3, or 4 horses so it was very difficult. ESPN couldn't understand, you know, they show highlights of the Kentucky Derby--- when a horse crosses the finish line it's over. Well, if a non-elimination horse wins the second heat, we come back 45 minutes later. So that was something unique that ESPN had to work around. We were on TV live at 4 o'clock and if necessary, they would show the race-off on Sports Center. So, fortunately, we didn't have to cut into Sports Center but, honestly, I look back on the ESPN years and think it hurt the Little Brown Jug and the reason is people in Cleveland didn't have to drive to Delaware to watch the race. They could watch at home on ESPN.

The 50th anniversary should have been one of the greatest events we had, but it was, in my opinion, one of the most disappointing. Today, the last race of the day is the Little Brown Jug final. But back in 1995, it was Race 12. We still had seven races after the Jug so...once the Kentucky Derby's over the people leave; once the Super Bowl is over, the people leave. They don't stay for the band concert after the game. So as soon as the final heat of the Jug went, the crowd really went away. So, we didn't have much of a crowd for the 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th race. So, in my opinion, ESPN, while it was great to get the publicity, at the end it really hurt attendance and the atmosphere that year.

Q: Was 1995, to the best of your knowledge, the only year ESPN covered the race?

A: I think they covered 3 years. It was a 3-year deal. Obviously the 50th anniversary was the crescendo. I think the official here at Delaware realized that they made a statement after a couple of years that we're not going to let TV dictate what we do. Unfortunately, with television, they say, "Your race has to go off at 4:46 'cause it has to be over by 5; we have to do the interviews in the winner's circle." We have been fortunate. We've had worked a little bit with CBS Sports Network in, in as of 3 years ago. They were much easier to work with. Now obviously ESPN has greater viewership than CBS Sports Network. They covered the show for about 3 years.

I remember we're sitting in the winner's circle saying, "Where's the horse? We need the horse in the winner's circle" and here he was in the first turn being interviewed by the TV crew for Sports Net. So, you know, TV dictates.

File #4 (6:27)

Q: In your opinion, of course, do you believe that there was a peak decade for the Jug?

A: I think the 1990s was the high mark for the Jug. I mean, we had great races, we had Triple Crown winners, we had, you know, exposure. We had more fans, more betting. So I'd say the 1990s were definitely the high point for the Jug.

Q: Umm.. You mentioned earlier social media seems to be a problem, maybe people wanting to sit home and watch a simulcast. Have you, I mean, has there been much talk of an actual decline in attendance at the race? Is it something you can notice by looking out at the stands? Thoughts?

A: I mean, every year that's the big question: What's attendance gonna be? I always ask the people, "What's the weather gonna be?" The kids used to get out of school, not all the school districts are doing that now. We have new people moving in the community. We have new people into the county that's never heard of the Jug. So one of the challenges we have is make ourselves relevant. We still have a large number of people come from Canada, Australia, even over in Europe. So, you know, we're still a destination. It's always something we talk about. We always talk about "cheeks in seats." That's something the pre-planning meetings we always talk about. We want people, when they come, to get an experience they wouldn't get through their simulcast or through their I-pad or watching it online. So, we're always trying to do things that are fun for the fans.

Q: What do you think keeps the die-hard fans, like yourself, coming back to the race year after year?

A: Where can you have this much fun? I mean, honestly, you could bring your own alcohol in, it's \$15, you can sit with your friends year after year. We're not charging \$9 a beer, we're not charging you \$110 a seat. It's a big family reunion, if you will. We only race 5 days a year. Now if we raced 50 days a year, would it be as special? Absolutely not. So we only race 5 days a year. The Jug is one day a year. It's the third Thursday in September. People mark it on their calendar, and it's been a destination.

Q: The 75th anniversary of the event in September

A: of 2020

Q: Obviously this going to be a big year. What are the current plans for the upcoming Jug?

A: The 2019 Jug or the 2020 Jug?

Q: 2019

A: 2019 will be the 74th Jug

Q: Oh. It's the 2020. Okay. I'm confused because we can't shoot it. Excuse me. Yes, the 2020 Jug.

A: Yes. The 2020 Jug will be the 75th anniversary. Obviously, it's something we've been preparing for the last 24 years, since the 50th. So we have T. Thomson, who is the sponsorship director. I know he is working on some things. We'll get together after the 74th Jug. Literally, probably the week after and decide what we'd like to do. You know, we're gonna, we're gonna go back and look at the 74 Jugs previous and highlight the best. We're conducting interviews with some of the old timers, if you will. It's unfortunately the old timers are now the 70s and 80s instead of the 50s and 60s. We're excited to do an oral history project with the Delaware County Historical Society, Ohio State University, and Ohio Wesleyan. So, you know, we've got a lot of small plans coming together. There's some talk about possibly putting a book out. Obviously, if we're doing that, we'd better start working on it now.

Q: How do you believe or what do you think will keep the Jug alive in the coming decades, coming years?

A: To survive, the Jug is gonna have to make changes. You cannot run the Jug in 2019 and 2020 the same way we did in 1946. The horses are different, the drivers are different, the fans' expectations are different, the wagering opportunities are different. So we're always, we're always changing. I'm a member of the Little Brown Jug Society and recently, as of 2 years ago, voted out the race-off that I described earlier. We want the horses to race two heats but we don't need to make them race three or four heats. The horses are built different. We're here for entertainment. We're not here to punish the horses by any means. Our number one concern is the health and safety of the participants and fans. So we're gonna make changes. You know, they say if you're not changing, you're dying. So we're gonna keep changing. Now will the changes be dramatic? Absolutely not. We still have our tradition to maintain but I think it's important that we continue to change.

Q: Anything else you'd like to add for us?

A: No. It's just been a lot of fun. My dad had horses growing up. He was an attorney and he'd get home from work, we'd have dinner, and he'd say, "How'd you like to ride to Celina tonight?" So, I'd say, "What's in Celina?" He'd say, "Well, the fair's goin' on and So-and-So has a horse so let's watch him." So, I grew up with the racetrack, you know, he passed away in 1988. So it's fun to sorta live out his legacy, if you will. Now I'm in the Jug Society. It's a lot of fun. You know, hopefully, God willing and the creek don't rise, as Roger Huston always says, we'll be here for the 100th. I don't think I'll make it to the 12th, but hopefully I'll be here for the 100th.

Q: Thank you so much, Jay. That's it.