

Transcription of the interview with Brian Brown

Date: November 11, 2019

Interviewer: Richard Leavy

Location: Meeker House at the Delaware County Historical Society

Leavy: Thank you very much being willing to participate in our project.

Brown: I appreciate you asking me. This is pretty cool.

Leavy: I guess I am going to start at the beginning. Do you know how old you were when you first saw the Little Brown Jug?

Brown: I'd say 13. It was 1977; Governor Skipper and I haven't missed one since.

Leavy: I was going to ask that and it's always been interesting in these interviews that people can date things by the winner of the race.

Brown: [Laughing] I'm not quite that good. I'm not very good at dates and all that.

Leavy: So you have attended all of them since that year.

Brown: Yes, I believe so. I am trying to think back, maybe I did miss Hot Hitter. I know I missed Hot Hitter, because I would have remembered watching Herve (Filion) stand up in the bike. I got that wrong. I was not there for that one.

Leavy: OK. Well that's still plenty of races to see. When you were young you went with your dad?

Brown: No, my grandmother brought me. I had to beg. My dad and uncle had a stable, so they were busy working. I talked my grandma into bringing me; skipped school and I got her talked into it.

Leavy: What were your first impressions?

Brown: Back then it was smaller. We actually came early in the morning. My grandmother parked right up by the fence at the head of the stretch. It was that open that she could actually pull a car right up there. She stayed at the car and watched the whole time. I actually snuck in the grandstand. The first several races I watched from the east end of the grandstand and they kind of ran us off. I wound up in a box seat with some nice, elderly people that were nice enough to let me sit there and spend the day with them.

Leavy: Not a bad start.

Brown: It was actually a great place to be.

Leavy: So did you continue going with grandma?

Brown: No, after that my dad might have taken me a couple of times and by then I was old enough to drive, so I would come sometimes by myself. My dad after a while they got to where they didn't miss a Jug either. When I was younger they were busy training, trying to make a living and racing horses and trying to make a life of their own.

Leavy: Well you've seen lots of races. Are there certain ones that you remember as just being remarkable?

Brown: Probably the first one that I remember was my first one because Governor Skipper won so easy. But being a kid and being (my) first time at that we came from the county fairs mainly and it was like a whole different world coming to the Delaware fair, to the Jug. But the one that stands out the most probably the two was Life Sign's win, but I was lucky enough to be in the one with Wiggle It Jiggleit. I had Lost For Words that got beat by a nose. It was an amazing race. Life Sign was an incredible race, but for my horse, Lost For Words and Wiggle It Jiggleit to battle from just past the quarter pole all the way to the wire. It looked like I had him beat at the head of the stretch and he was tough enough. He came back to beat me a nose right at the wire.

Leavy: We have asked a number of people, including Roger Huston and others who have long histories and they mention those two races.

Brown: Life Sign was incredible because he had to race against a three horse entry and they made him, they parked him to the quarter, he got in and came right back out. He was on the outside for a long time and to me he looked like he was beat coming down the stretch. Half way up the stretch he found another gear and went forward. Almost the same thing with Wiggle It Jiggleit. It was such a battle. I mean Roger (Huston) called it right when it was battle that turned into a war. They were just head and head for so long. The first think David Miller said to me when he got off the bike was 'that was fun.'

Leavy: I'm glad that was the first thing he said. You have known lots of drivers, you have known lots of professionals in the business over the course of time. Are there people who you put in a certain category?

Brown: Well, I missed the years that Billy Haughton was the main guy, just too young to really know all that. I know a lot people that worked for Billy and just loved him. I talk to Bob Boni all the time about Billy and his experiences. But for me it's David Miller is the top. You know he's won the most. He's won the most races at Delaware, the most in one day. He was the guy that almost won the Jug for me. You know, hopefully one day we get it and we can do it together. Tim Tetrick has done great for me. It doesn't matter who wins it for me , but I probably be extra special if David did. We were related at one time, he was married into the family. It doesn't matter, we're still family.

Leavy: You have seen a lot of racing at a lot of places. What do you think makes the Jug special?

Brown: Because it is at a county fair and it draws so many people. We get so many more people on Jug Day than any other race. The Hambletonian the Jug are the two major races in harness racing. I'm sure we still draw more people than the Hambletonian. It's at a county fairgrounds where all the fans just walk off the street come to a race once a year. Can come right up to the horses, the drivers, the trainers. They can go everywhere on the fairgrounds, except the paddock area. So they get to come right up to the horses. There is a time where they can come right into the Jug barn and see everybody. Just the Jug horses. When the race goes there's so many people around the outside fence, in the grandstand, it is like they are right on top of you. The track sits lower than the outside, where all the people are, so there is a great view down to the track. It is so exciting to be in a race where there is people there watching. Our business has gotten so consolidated that there's not that many people at the race tracks anymore and it's really nice to race in front of people.

Leavy: 40 or 50 thousand?

Brown: Yeah, that's the number they always say it is.

Leavy: And you are wondering whether that's a little inflated? [Laughing]

Brown: Well, whatever we get is more than any other race gets.

Leavy: Are there traditions involved with the Jug that you think should be retained?

Brown: Especially the two heats. A lot of people don't like it. I like it. I don't think it is as hard on the horses as we all think it is. I think horses are tougher than we think they are, that we give them credit for. It has changed a lot, the breed has over the past 10, 20 years. They are not as tough and hardy as they used to be. Lost For Words raced his two greatest races here, probably two of the greatest. His third best race was two weeks later. He went to Lexington, Kentucky, started from the 10 hole, was parked in the turn, got in, came first over before the half. He got beat a head in 47 and 4. It was the greatest race of his life. You know the Jug race was great, but it really wasn't as tough as that race. He went his best race after two heats that day and he was not a big horse. Not a big strong horse, so you'd have thought the two races would have been tough on him. It wasn't. The horse raced great that day. I would never want to see it go to one heat, because as a fan...there used to be three divisions of the Jug. So you got to see all those horses in one day. Where if we would go to an elimination, say on Sunday, and the final on Thursday like some people want to. Most fans aren't coming both days. We draw a lot of Canadian people. Those people aren't coming on Sunday and staying all week to be here on Thursday. Anymore the people, most people come on Wednesday and are here Wednesday and Thursday. It's not as popular as it used to be. Everybody came on Monday and was here for the whole week. It was such a party all week. It's changed a lot that way. As a fan, I like the two heats because you get to see all the horses in one day. You get to see eight or nine of them twice in one day.

Leavy: How did you feel when they changed it from a possible three.

Brown: I was OK with that. When you race that third heat that can be tougher on them, but position means so much at Delaware to start with. When you go to that third heat, if there are two or three horses, if the rail horse has any gate speed. He's the one going to be on the front controlling the race. So it's generally not that great of a race anyway. The year Happy Escort won, it turned into a great, exciting race because they raced. Billy Popfinger pulled going to the quarter and got to the front and raced, but when he got to the front he slowed down and went slow. The other horse, he (Happy Escort) was the long-shot, the other two couldn't catch him. It makes it kind of a very dull race when they go that slow and just sprint home.

Leavy: In order for the Jug to continue into the future, to even prosper in the future, are there any changes, that you think, could be made or should be made?

Brown: I don't know if there so much we can change in the race itself, now I am on the Jug Society and we've talked about supplemental entries to make sure, this year we didn't get Bettor's Wish and another horse I forget, there was a really good horse that possibly would have come, he could have supplemented. Sure there are four races that if you win you get to supplement in. Bettor's Wish was second in all of them. We are going to open it up, I believe, to anyone can supplement. You don't have to win a certain race, you can just supplement. You have to make that payment high enough that it's fair to the people that make that payment all along. So someone that supplement's in they can...it makes it worth everybody's while. Of course the (purse) money is what would draw all the top horses. Being a half-mile track, again post-position means so much, a lot of people will not come just for that fact. Some people won't come because of the two heats, I don't think it's as big a deal as a lot of people make it out to be. I would worry more about the post position than the heats, myself. So, I don't see a lot we can change. We need to keep working to keep the money up to draw the best horses.

Leavy: Now you are aware that there is the Bed Tax and some money is going to be flowing in to the structures. How do you see that in the future? Are there facility changes you would want to see?

Brown: I would like to someday see some way to make the grandstand better. I am not an architect and I don't know all that side of this thing, but just for the viewing pleasure. The backstretch is still a great place to watch the races. The only drawback is the tote board is in the middle of the track. I wish there was a way that could be smaller so you can see. You lose sight of them down the home stretch both times around because the tote board is too tall and it does hinder the view. We still get a lot of people on the backstretch. People come to party and have a good time and that's why they are back there. It's just a few smaller things. Which making a different grandstand would be a big thing. There is talk about new building down the home stretch. More of a bigger sponsorship thing, where people would rent the whole building and bring bigger parties. That would be really nice.

Leavy: How would you rate the facilities for your horses?

Brown: The track at Delaware, I mean this is why we are here. Everyplace you go, you don't go to a training center, a racetrack, a fairgrounds because the barns are nice. That's wonderful. But you go because of the racetrack and for a half-mile track you can't beat Delaware. It's got the best banking, the best turns. It makes it a little tougher on the racing because the turns protect the inside horse so much. Just the training on a wider turn is easier on the horse. The footing is usually good, we have good guys that take care of the track. The track at Delaware, when it is really good, it is the fastest track in the country.

Leavy: And that is because of its design?

Brown: The design and the footing. The surface of the track.

Leavy: This is a hard question to ask. Suppose there were no more Jugs, at least in Delaware, how would that affect you personally, how do you think it would affect the business?

Brown: I am not sure how much it would affect the business. I think it would hurt us as a business because if you move it to one of the racetracks, again, when you go to a racetrack as a fan you stay in the grandstand and you watch from there. You don't get access to the drivers, the trainers. Most horsemen like to talk. So, if a fan comes up, we give them the time to talk and everything. You move that to a racetrack it commercializes it so much that it would take away from the draw of it. I don't think the Jug would be near the race that it is, so in that aspect, it would really hurt the business, the sport. Personally, I am on the Jug Society now, this was my first year. When you first talk, I told them...there has been talk of moving the race to a bigger track, to Scioto Downs even the Meadowlands, and I told them 'when you move this race from Delaware, I'm done, I'll give up my spot on the Jug Society, I want nothing more to do with it.' This is Delaware's race. When the Jug leave's Delaware, it becomes another race. It won't be the same.

Leavy: I think it would have an effect on the community.

Brown: For sure the community because I am sure you won't get the draw of the people. The town still shuts down quite a bit on Jug Day. We get a great response from the community to come to the races.

Leavy: You are the son of a driver, a nephew. Was there any other occupation you ever considered?

Brown: Nah, no. Other than the horse business, it is the only job I ever had. I worked two weeks on a broodmare farm. I hated it. It was too slow....I was raised in Upper Sandusky, forty miles north of here. Anybody from the fairgrounds, it didn't have to be a my own, my dad's or uncle's horses, I got in the back of the truck and rode to the races with those people, just to get to go to the races. It was just a way of life, we grew up in it, it was all we knew. I tried it for two weeks and couldn't do it because I couldn't go to the races, I had to stay on the farm. I just hated it, I couldn't do it. I hate to quit and go back to the racehorses.

Leavy: So you do what you love?

Brown: Yes, yes.

Leavy: I want to ask you about that. Standardbreds are extraordinary athletes. They may be speedier than they were, but remarkable athletes. I was wondering about your philosophy about the care of these animals.

Brown: There are several ways to do this as far as training and everything. You have to be able to work with the horse without force. You have to be able to get the horse to do what you want it to do without forcing them, try to make them do what you want them to do. You try to work with them to teach them not to be afraid, to trust you. You trust them...it becomes so much easier. There are so many ways to do this. There is no right way or wrong way.

Leavy: But in your view, you want that animal to come to you.

Brown: You will get along a lot easier, yes. If you can get that horse to trust you...horses are like children, they have to be disciplined too. You can't be overly hard on a horse, especially a mare, and expect it to do what you want it to do.

Leavy: Color's A Virgin won the Jugette and you mentioned Lost For Words came that close. What are your thoughts, your feelings about those two?

Brown: Those two days were about as good as any day I had in horse racing. Losing the Jug was very disappointing. It probably took me three days to recover from that. I still to this day watch the replay of that race and turn it off as soon as the race is over. I don't want to hear all the commentary afterwards and all that. Color's A Virgin was probably my first major win in harness racing, not just in the Jug, but in harness racing in general. It was something that you really can't explain the feeling because it's your hometown. A lot of my family was there. Just the local people, the people who know you for years, who root for you. It's just something different to win the Jug or Jugette. Like I said, losing the Jug was tough but once I got over that fact and then realizing people were coming up to you telling you that was, might have been the greatest race they ever saw, yet alone Jug. Then you realize you were a part of something that special, and then it was easier to take. But it was very disappointing.

Leavy: I would guess. In the fact that you are from the area, that you are training in the area, you are using the Delaware track all the time. Do you feel that it is an advantage or actually more pressure, or it doesn't make any difference, when you are racing on that track?

Brown: I don't think it makes a difference, again, like I said, this track is so good that horses get around these turns and that is where you lose speed. If you have a horse that is great on a half, that can gain ground because they get around these turns so well. This track is so much better than the normal half-

mile track. Most horses adapt right to it and do not lose a step. If a horse doesn't get around the turns, whether it is a five-eighths (mile track) or bigger, they are going to have trouble here. Most horses do not.

Leavy: Are there any other topics, things that you think we ought to include in this oral history project to get a full picture of the Little Brown Jug?

Brown: I think that if you could talk to those drivers, more trainers and even owners, grooms. The whole experience of all of this, getting everyone who has been involved in this, if you can get them to come talk, even down to the grooms. My niece took care of Lost For Words and she took it as hard as I did. David was thrilled. It was a fun race for him and everything. For a while it was tough to get over. We haven't won one yet and I can't image what that would feel like. I'm sure it would mean as much to my groom, my owners. Lost For Words had four different owners, one is not with us anymore, they were like 85 at the time and had been in harness racing for a long, long time. Jim Koehler, the Country Club Stable, I would have loved to win that race for him. He's been in it several times with other trainers and I think that is the closest he probably he had ever come. The main goal that week was to...I had him that was trying to win that race. Two years ago I had Downbytheseaside and Fear The Dragon. I had the two favorites. I won the elimination...I didn't get it done the second heat. That was very, very disappointing, that was more disappointing than the other one. We had the two best horses and it just didn't work that day. I hate to use the word 'luck.' I don't like the work 'luck' at all, this business is tough to try to be lucky to win a race. When Brian Sears told me, I had a horse that was second in the elimination, Beach Memories. He interfered with a horse and got placed back to sixth, I didn't even get to go back (for the second heat) the year Vegas Vacation won. I don't know if I could have beat Vegas Vacation. He was a great horse and I never beat him after that. My horse was really go that day and Brian Sears told me that 'not only do you have to be good that day, you have to be lucky' and I hate that word. I think that nothing else, you can't be unlucky that day. This business is just too hard to depend on luck. If you wanted to say you can't be unlucky, I would agree to that.

Leavy: Fair enough. Anything else you would like to comment on?

Brown: I just hope the people of Delaware realize that Delaware County what something special that they really have here. It is unlike anything, anywhere else in the country.

Leavy: That is one of the goals of this whole project is by next September that we'll have some interviews, some stories, forever achieved and that people will begin to appreciate what has been around them. I think the thing that is most interesting, or distressing, one of those, is that Delaware County has increased in population enormously and a lot of those people come in and they don't know (the Jug) at all.

Brown: The same thing happened in Wyandot County. We would have fair horse races at the county fair and half the county didn't know the races were there. So, yes it is trying to get that out there so people know what is going on. I would think that Delaware County probably does the best job anywhere with all the advertisements, the Jug flags and everything. You have a nice university here. It would nice to get

those college kids to come more so we can build that fan base, get the younger people back involved. I think our numbers would go back way up if we could get that younger crowd back.

Leavy: Well I thank you very much for being willing to be a part of this and your remarks are right on target and very, very helpful.

Brown: I appreciate you having me, again, thank you.