

# Thoroughbred

a PBS Documentary

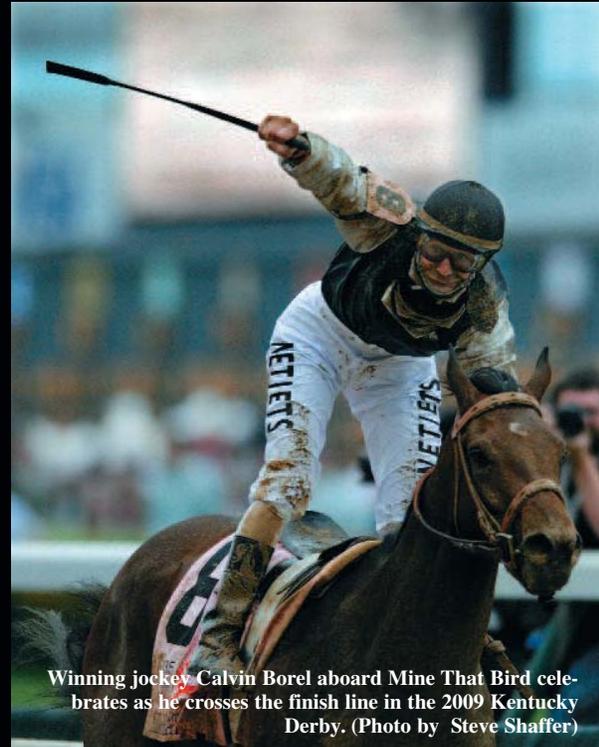
An Interview with Producer Paul Wagner by Elizabeth H. Sutton

Paul Wagner is an Academy Award-winning independent filmmaker who has produced and directed more than 30 documentary and dramatic films during his 30-year career. His most recent work is exploring the world of the Thoroughbred. Growing up in Kentucky, Wagner saw races at Churchill Downs but that was the extent of his horse knowledge. "My father used to tell me about going to the back side and sneaking into the races by way of a hole in the fence--the thrill of the whole thing is what he loved. But that was as close as he ever got to a horse. I have always been interested in the world of racing, and for 30 years I wanted to make a film about it."

In the summer of 2007 Wagner got the chance he had been waiting for. Kentucky Educational Television (KET) contacted him to discuss making a film about the Thoroughbred. "They wanted a marquee film of national quality that would serve the purpose of showcasing the Thoroughbred industry in the state

of Kentucky, but that would also have appeal to a national audience who knew nothing more about racing than having heard of the Kentucky Derby."

After three years, much research, hours of filming and countless interviews, and an odyssey that would take Wagner and his crew from the bluegrass of Kentucky all the way to the deserts of Dubai, we experience the world of the Thoroughbred through 90 minutes of exquisite film. Appropriately, the film made its national debut on PBS May 5, 2011, just days before the Kentucky Derby.



Winning jockey Calvin Borel aboard Mine That Bird celebrates as he crosses the finish line in the 2009 Kentucky Derby. (Photo by Steve Shaffer)

EHS: So how was it done— how did you capture an industry, a sport and a passion on film and make the viewer experience the journey with you?

PW: It helps that I come into this knowing nothing. So I can ask lots of questions out of genuine ignorance and get honest answers. I am a virgin with no preconceived ideas on the subject—a blank slate.

EHS: How did you find the right people to interview and the locations to shoot?

PW: I nosed around Lexington to find out whom to go to. We had an in-house producer at KET named Paul Grimm, and I knew of a woman in Lexington named Hallie Gay Walden Bagley, who had some writing and editing experience with the *Paris Review*. She proved to be an indispensable partner in providing an entrée to many of the horse

people we interviewed. Her family and brothers were in the business – her brother W.Elliott Walden is a trainer and vice president of WinStarFarm, and her brother Ben Walden is a prominent horse owner and businessman. She had the social connections to arrange interviews and help us do research.

EHS: Arthur B. Hancock III figures prominently in the film. How did you choose him?

PW: I had heard of Arthur through the music business – he used to perform in Nashville, and he did some writing at one time. Arthur actually did some research on me when he heard we wanted to talk to him, and he found out I had some experience as a country-western singer back in the late '70s so we had that interest in common. Somehow we just had the right chemistry and so I really think that common bond



Arthur Hancock (L) and Paul Wagner (R) at the special screening of *Thoroughbred* at the Paramount Theater in Charlottesville, April 14, 2011 (Photo by Meredith McKee)



Skyscrapers behind Godolphin Training Center in Dubai (Photo courtesy Paul Wagner)

with music had a lot to do with it.

EHS: What made Arthur your first choice?

PW: The film has three themes; breeding, sales and racing. We wanted a breeder representative of the industry that would establish the power of racing history and tradition. The Hancock family has the reputation that represents the old families in the horse industry. We wanted to cover the breeding aspect of the Thoroughbred, and he was the ideal person to tell that part of the story. He was not only knowledgeable, but a good storyteller and great on camera. That is not always easy to find. He also had an ideal setting on his farm in Kentucky to track the life of a foal from birth to the sales process, then on to racing.

EHS: How did you find such great archival still shots?

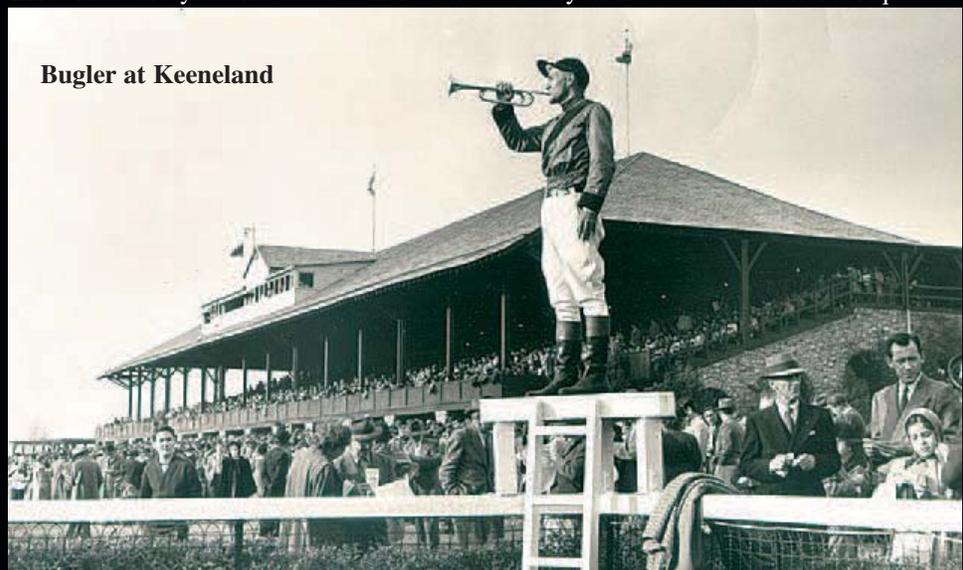
PW: We did research in the Keeneland

library and stumbled onto a treasure trove of superb photographs from the early racing days. That was an important discovery – the images drive the story and they perfectly illustrate the part of the film that tells the history of early nineteenth- and twentieth-century families in racing.

EHS: How did you choose the other own-

ers, the new West Coast people? They were a striking contrast.

PW: We had permission to film owners David and Desirae Lanzman and trainer Jeff Mullins in the weeks leading up to the Derby, and their horse was the favorite. After cheering their colt I Want Revenge to victory in the Wood Memorial at Aqueduct,



Bugler at Keeneland



Cerise's newborn foal sired by Point Given at Stone Farm (Photo by Steve Shaffer)

they face the heartbreak of scratching him from the Derby the very morning of the race. They were perfect, and the contrast between the new money and the old is one of the things that makes the story interesting.

EHS: The racing scenes really show the roller-coaster emotions involved in racing. Was that hard to document?

PW: We had to do a lot of preparation before the Derby shoot. NBC has virtually exclusive control over the shooting that day, so we had to negotiate how, when and where we could do our filming at Churchill Downs. We were in Louisville in February for several days, and then we went to Dubai in March 2009.

EHS: Was it difficult to gain access to the

racing and the owners in Dubai?

PW: The media representative at Godolphin set up arrangements for us. One day in the morning we filmed at the Godolphin training center (the Maktoum family's private horseracing stable named in honor of the Godolphin Arabian, who came from the desert to become one of the three founding stallions of the modern Thoroughbred). There I met and interviewed Saïd bin Suroor, the trainer of Desert Party and the top trainer for Godolphin. That night, we were filming at Nad al Sheba, the racetrack in Dubai, in the paddock. I spoke with bin Suroor, and also with John Ferguson (His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum's sales representative whom I had interviewed previously back in Kentucky). They asked if I would like to talk to Sheikh Mohammed. I said I would and they asked him to. I saw them talking to him and saw him look my way. They told me I could have a couple of minutes with him after the next race. So it worked out to be a very brief, but very helpful interview in the film.

EHS: What was your favorite part about making *Thoroughbred*?

PW: It was all a good experience, and it helped having the money available from the KET sponsors to be able to do the work. I learned a ton. I learned to appreciate the animal and the way of life. Even though it

seems the racing business cannot economically support itself, it is about the horse and maybe it is time for the people in the industry to refocus their own priorities. The subject matter was very interesting, the people and the experience were all fun. I felt like I became a part of the Thoroughbred world.

### Paul Wagner

In addition to *Thoroughbred*, Paul Wagner's award-winning documentaries include *The Stone Carvers* (Emmy Award and Academy Award, PBS broadcast 1985), *Out of Ireland, the Story of Irish Emigration to America* (Sundance Film Festival, PBS 1995), *Signature: George C. Wolfe* (National Educational Telecommunications Association Public Television Program of the Year, PBS 1996), and *A Paralyzing Fear, the Story of Polio in America* (Emmy Award, Eric Barnouw Award for Best Historical Film of 1998, PBS 1998). Wagner was born in Louisville, Kentucky, the youngest of three children. He attended Catholic elementary and high schools in Louisville and earned a BA in English and an MA in Communications at the University of Kentucky. He currently resides in Charlottesville, Virginia with his wife Ellen Casey and their four children.

For more about *Thoroughbred*, visit [www.paulwagnerfilms.com](http://www.paulwagnerfilms.com)

Elizabeth H. Sutton is a freelance writer and recreational rider and foxhunter who lives in Albemarle County. She is author of *A Pony for Keeps* and other children's books. Her articles have appeared in the *Thoroughbred Times*, *64 Magazine*, *Albemarle Magazine* and *Virginia Living*. She is currently web administrator for the Farmington Hunt Club. For more information on Farmington, please visit [www.farmingtonhunt.org](http://www.farmingtonhunt.org).



Crew shoot in Calumet barn with trainer John Veitch (Photo by Steve Shaffer)