

By Neil Milbert

When the Tribune shut down Chicago Today in September, 1974 Mike Paradise was one of a select group from the sports department invited to join the staff of the parent newspaper.

Instead of staying on as a Tribune sports copyreader Paradise accepted an unsolicited offer to become director of publicity and public relations for the Sportsman's Park harness and thoroughbred meetings.

Harness racing was his first love and during the next half-century his name became synonymous with the sulky sport in Chicagoland.

"Mike was an ambassador for the sport," said Marty Engel, who served for several years as president of the Illinois Harness Horsemen's Association (IHHA). "He had a passion for harness racing and he was a promoter who helped grow the sport through the years as a PR man, as a newspaper handicapper (freelancing for the Tribune from the late 1970s through 2009) and on the cable TV show with Eleanor Flavin that had so many followers (from 1987 through the mid-1990s).

"He never bet on the horses. He just loved the people in the sport and the horses competing in it. Even after he became sick he continued to do stories and handicap on the IHHA web-site."

"As long as I have my health I'll continue," Paradise said last year. "I'm not looking for the finish-line."

At age 83 Paradise crossed the figurative finish-line on Aug. 1 when he died of cancer at his home in Rolling Meadows. After being taken to Northwest Community Hospital on July 10 he returned home on July 29 to spend his final days in hospice.

Paradise grew up on the West Side of Chicago and graduated from Austin High School.

After fulfilling the military obligation that was a requirement at the time with service in the Navy, he returned to Chicago and began his career in 1961 as a part-time copy boy at the American (the predecessor to Chicago Today) where his father was employed as a mailer.

"I volunteered for everything, trying to learn as much as I could about a lot of things," Paradise recalled in an interview prior to his 2009 induction into the IHHA Hall of Fame.

He wrote his first harness racing story for the American in 1972 and shortly thereafter persuaded the sports editor to publish his picks at the local tracks and give him a weekly column called Track Topics.

After accepting the 1974 job offer from Sportsman's president of harness racing, Billy Johnston, he made his PR debut at the Balmoral Park winter meeting that Johnston was overseeing at the time. Then, he began his long stint at Sportsman's that continued until the track discontinued

harness racing in the fall of 1997. From there he went to Maywood Park to run the public relations department until 2009 when he moved to the IHHA web-site.

John Brokopp was the first person Paradise hired to assist him at Sportsman's and they worked as a team through the 1997 harness meeting.

"The thing about Mike was that he wasn't a journalist or PR guy who got a job in racing," Brokopp reminisced. "He was a harness racing fan who happened to be there when Sportsman's needed a publicity man. He was a great publicity man and a wonderful writer and he always was embracing new technology."

To augment the product on the racetrack and broaden its audience, Paradise was instrumental in bringing recording stars such as Ike and Tina Turner, The Captain and Tennille, Blood Sweat and Tears, Chuck Berry and Chubby Checker to Sportsman's for concerts on race nights.

In 1987, when cable TV was in its infancy, Flavin, who was working as Maywood's director of group sales, welcomed Paradise's invitation to join him in inaugurating what became a nightly Chicago harness racing show on Sports Vision (which later became Sports Channel and then Comcast).

"We were on the cutting edge of cable competing with the networks and Mike was the driving force by constantly innovating," remembered Flavin, whose father, Pat Flavin, was a co-owner of Maywood at the time. "Mike made everything work."

The show ended when FOX Sports bought the channel and put its own programming in the nightly time slot. Paradise and Flavin were offered a 4 a.m. slot but turned it down.

Flavin cherishes her memories of working with Paradise and becoming a lifelong friend. The same is true of many of those who worked on his staff at Sportsman's.

"He's as good a friend as I've ever had," Brokopp said. "He was the best man at my wedding and he's the godfather of my son Jonathan."

"Mike was the greatest boss I ever had," said Marty Mia, who worked in the Sportsman's Press Box from 1982-85. "He was a humble man who'd never do anything to remind you that he was the boss."

"I was living in Palatine and my car broke down. Mike would come from Rolling Meadows, pick me up and take me to the track and back every single day and that went on for a week or two until my car was repaired."

Retired driver-trainer Carl Porcelli said: "Mike was probably the kindest, nicest man I met in the horse business. I'll never forget what he did when I won the training title at Sportsman's in 1991. I was only one ahead (going into the final program) so I didn't tell my family. "

When Porcelli's lead became insurmountable that night Paradise called the trainer's wife so she could there for the winner's circle presentation honoring him as the leading trainer.

"That's something I never would have thought to do," he said. "I was in shock to see that my family was all there in the winner's circle."

While he is best known for his harness racing endeavors, Paradise also was a thoroughbred publicist par excellence during his years at Sportsman's.

"Maxwell G was foaled in 1961 by Indians in Washington and in 1977 he was 16-years-old and at the time thoroughbreds couldn't race after they were 16," Brokopp reminisced. "He was at Sportsman's and Mike said 'We've got to have a party for him.'"

"This was Mike at his banging those drums PR best. We had a day for Maxell G with a bushel-full of apples in the winner's circle and Mike made up a song for him:

"Bred in the state of Washington;

'Trained by Richard Hazelton;

'He is the horse for you and me;

'16-year-old Maxwell G.'"

The birthday/retirement party drew local media attention and then took off nationally. The Wall Street Journal sent a reporter to cover the event.

Looking back on his long career in 2024 Paradise said one of the things he was most proud of was "hiring Kim Rinker and Tony Somone and seeing them become important people in harness racing."

Rinker went to work for Paradise as a writer at Sportsman's in 1984 and moved with him to Maywood, staying there until 2015. She went on to oversee the Ohio Sire Stakes program for eight years and make a name for herself nationally as a writer for trade publications.

Somone was hired in 1986 to send Sportsman's race results and also went with Paradise to Maywood before leaving the PR field for an outside job. However, he stayed active as a harness owner and in 2007 took his current job as the IHHA's executive director.

Paradise is survived by his wife of 42 years, Shelly; his daughter, Laura Housman, and her husband, Jesse; his son, Michael, and wife, Diane; his widowed sister Angel; and five grandchildren.

Shelly plans to hold a celebration of his life is later this month.