

A New Chapter

By Peter Gross



After 14 years as this country's most important harness race announcer, 50 year-old Frank Salive has, in his typically amiable fashion, left the Woodbine Entertainment Group to be closer to his children and his home in London, Ontario. Salive believes that by pacing himself, he can keep his career on gait by trotting up to the mike for perhaps another 15 years. He has already started announcing at Western Fair Raceway and couldn't find himself in a more beneficial circumstance. "The bottom line is I still want to work over 250 programs a year," says Salive. "I just don't want to drive 90,000 kilometres a year. Western Fair is ideal. It's a great racing organization and has a prominent place in Ontario racing and I believe in the Southern Ontario horse people."

Salive has been dubbed 'The Velvet Fog' and the nickname is apt. His race call has the feel of a ride in a Cadillac - smooth, reliable, seemingly effortless, but with all the amenities. In the style of the late Toronto Blue Jays announcer Tom Cheek, Salive is never about himself, but always about the sport. He can list a wide range of broadcasters who have shaped his delivery. "The late NHL play-by-play announcer Dan Kelly was a personal favourite," says Salive. "As I grew in the job, I'd hoped to have a voice that was a cross of Walter Cronkite and Peter Jennings with a command of telling the race story like Tom Durkin and Dan Loiselle, and even after 58,000 races I'm still a work in progress."

As a younger man, Salive worked in radio news in Windsor and identifies one extraordinary event as a moulding experience. "I was assigned to cover a tragic plane crash at the Metro Airport in Detroit," he recalls. "Two-hundred and fifty-five passengers died. In those situations you have to pull yourself together for the twice hourly reports, so to step up and do the million dollar races, I had a prior experience, not allowing myself the luxury of my own emotions." For Salive, nailing all 10 horses in a race is as natural as brushing his hair. This is a man who honed his skills on summer nights in the 80s at the now defunct Checker Flag Motor Speedway just outside Windsor. "I would call the stock car races," says Salive, clearly enjoying the memory. "And I would do the 24 car late-model feature by memory."

Salive is famous for never missing a day of work, a deadline or assignment of any kind. This explains why he never turns down requests from Clinton, Hanover, Woodstock, Flamboro, Georgian Downs or Windsor. Any racetrack General Managers needing a last minute announcer should keep Salive's number handy. He is as reliable as they come. "As long as I can get there, I will never leave any racetrack in the lurch," insists Salive, adding he has told Woodbine they can count on him any night they might need a substitute.

Salive draws on an unforgettable hockey experience to explain his incredible focus.

"I played goalie for the Peterborough Petes from 1972-1975. In my last year under the great coach Roger Neilson, we were playing in Hamilton and a Dale McCourt slap-shot broke my jaw. For the next eight games, playing with my jaw wired shut, I went undefeated with six wins and two ties. So Neilson calls me in and says, 'During those eight days you couldn't shout at the referees or instruct your defencemen. You go undefeated when you stay focused.' It's a lesson I never forgot."

As race-caller for the biggest races in Canada, Salive selects two vivid memories. "When Lifetime Dream won the 1993 Breeders' Crown, it was a David and Goliath story line as a rural Ontario-bred stepped up and beat the world. And the 2003 North America Cup was won by Yankee Cruiser. His trainer Brian Pinske had recently died and through the stretch I called 'Yankee Cruiser and Dean Magee winning for the memory of Brian Pinske.' Pinske's parents were there and it was quiet an emotional moment." On his final night at Mohawk, Salive gave his concluding race a classy twist when, just after the horses hit the three-quarters mark, he announced warmly, "Thank-you so very much to Mohawk, Greenwood and Woodbine for the memories to last a lifetime!" A little while later, the Cadillac of race-callers left Mohawk, and, for the last time as an employee of Woodbine Entertainment, made the 123-kilometre trip to London. In his 1994 Saturn.

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