



The "PROTECTO" Man

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Photo - Al Terwilliger displays his invention "The Protecto Vest" at 1967 U.S.T.A. annual meeting in Columbus Ohio

Just recently I came across a write up covering the U.S.T.A. 's 1967 annual meeting held in Columbus Ohio . The meetings which covered a variety of topics lasted 3 days, beginning November 17th . The purposes of the annual get togethers were many and varied, and one presenter addressed the gathering on what most might consider a rather boring topic, that being "Safety" . Probably a time to slip outside for a smoke or maybe sleep in a little on the morning it was on the agenda . Suffice is to say that the subject of safety while very important has never been considered too exciting .

One person who didn't take it lightly was the host of the session, a young fellow of just 28 by the name of Al Terwilliger . He as the saying goes "had some fish to fry " ,he was pitching a couple of pretty important products,at least they were to him . One was wheel discs for sulkies and the other was a vest that carried the name " Protecto Vest " . He was a staunch believer in both items and I'm sure those in the audience that day detected his sincerity .

I guess one might conclude that people who go around "stumping " and trying to sell "far fetched" ideas don't stay around long and sooner or later get a real job that brings in some money . Well in the case of Mr. Terwilliger ,guess again . After some 45 years in the business he is still going strong and above all he is still coming up with new ideas . At an age when most people are content to take it easy and rely on past glories,he is still looking forward to his next invention .

Al was born in Detroit in 1939 and about the time WW II ended, his horse loving family moved to a place called Farwell Michigan, a farming community located in Clare County in sort of the central part of the State .While Al's father and grandfather and an older brother were involved in harness racing ,he had other ambitions and aspirations .By the age of 12 young Mr. T was appearing on stage and drawing rave reviews for his singing of Al Jolson tunes . His interest in artistic endeavors eventually led to attendance and graduation from The Detroit Conservatory of Music . From there his travels took him to Julliard College in far away New York City where he studied acting .Soon a well paying job as a back up actor came his way but he never got on stage.

So far it doesn't sound too much like the start of a career in the sport of harness racing .Perhaps it was what happened in his spare time that paved the way for the future . Ideas began to come to him about how to design and build things that the horse industry so desperately needed .He soon reached the point where he kept a pad of paper next to his bed at night and when a new idea came to him, he jotted it down . What followed was an American dream ;if ever there was a person who thought "outside of the box" it was Al . He invented the now famous Protecto Vest ,mud fenders,wheel discs,special clips for head numbers,better boots and hobbles,etc.,etc. . You name it and he has probably invented it . His products are shipped to many International destinations such as Japan,Russia,Italy and France .He has invented more products and today owns more patents on harness racing products than any other horseman in the world . Among his current "newer" items are Tropples,Anti Choke,Multiple hand holds and even "Butt Plug " . Please don't ask me for an explanation of the latter .

Al's big break in business came about not through an invention or a huge sale of his goods, but when he met Myra now his wife of over 40 years . She was a teacher attending a convention while he was at the aforementioned U.S.T.A. meeting in Columbus .(I don't know if it was the same year I quoted?) . They met ,courted and eventually married and have two daughters . Wherever you see Al, you see Myra . In an interview a few years ago he said "I'm not very smart but I'm creative .The smartest thing I ever did was to marry Myra .She's the one that makes the business work .She's my other half,the best half" .

Al's lifetime of inventing and building and his long years of devotion to the sport he loves has led to a number of prestigious awards and recognitions . In 1992 he was made a Kentucky Colonel for his contributions to horse racing . He joined such notable stars as Bob Hope and Bing Crosby as fellow "Colonels" . In 2006 he was installed in the Michigan Sports Hall of Fame . Perhaps even more important is his link to most of the top horsemen in the business ,many of whom use his products .His list of "endorsers" read like a "Who's Who " of the sport .

Today if anyone has attended a sale recently or bumped into "Big Al" at a racetrack ,they have just found a new friend . He talks with and treats everyone he meets with the utmost sincerity and genuine interest ,kind of "best friend" treatment . After all they might be "planting the seed" for his next invention . It is refreshing to see someone who is so consumed by what they are doing and literally loves every minute of it ...still .The intensity in his sales pitch would make you believe that this next sale might just meet this month's rent and allow him to stay in business . He undoubtedly personifies the old Confucius adage that states" Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life " .
