



On The Earie
By Tom Powell, OABA News Ambassador

When I spoke to brothers-in-laws Michael Skelly and Tom O'Connor of **Skelly's Amusements** on Jan. 24, they were headed to the Pennsylvania fair convention in Hershey, where the weather is usually cold and snowy at this time of year, not much worse than it was for Skelly's Amusements last spring.

“Last season was wet. It was rough for a lot of shows in the Northeast,” said Skelly, whose carnival is based in Williamstown, N. J. Since Williamstown is only 24 miles from Philadelphia, we began our conversation by agreeing it was great that the late Roy Halliday, who pitched magnificently for the **Philadelphia Phillies** and **Toronto Blue Jays**, had been elected to **Major League Baseball's Hall of Fame**.

Skelly's was founded in 1956 by Michael's dad, Joe, who traveled through the streets of Darby, Pa., with a Carousel, charging 10 cents a ride. The carnival now moves with 22 rides, 12 show-owned games and a popper. “Since we play a lot of Catholic churches, they have their own food, but over the course of a season, we do book other games and food operators,” said Skelly.

The route consists of spots in Pennsylvania, New York and Delaware, and is very tight. “We go home to our own beds to sleep every night. We have never used foreign labor through the H-2B visa program or any other program. We have people who return from year-to-year and we have vans to transport them. New Jersey is in the process of passing a \$15 an hour minimum wage law so we are anticipating the possibilities of working out any issues that could relate to that.”

The season begins the second week of April for The City of Philadelphia. “The dates depend every year on when **Easter** falls. It's April 21 this year. The last date of the year is the **41st annual Deerfield Harvest Festival** in Vineland, N. J. “over Columbus Day weekend”, Oct. 3-6 this year.

Skelly said **Expo Wheels** have been added to the ride arsenal, each of the last two years, along with a new water game. Skelly and O'Connor planned to purchase an **SBF** airplane ride from Len Soled of **Rides-4-U**, that was to be on display at the Feb. 5-8 trade show of the **International Independent Showmen's Association** in Gibsonton, Fla. “We always make it a point to go to Gibtown. If you're in this business, it's an absolute must,” said Skelly.

Tom's wife, Deb, handles the cotton candy, and Skelly's wife, Christine works games and food. Both also have office duties. Other key people include Frank Schwartz, who works with rides, and Eric Marchione. “Frank is almost like a step son,” said Skelly. Marchione, who goes by Rick, has been with the show for 20 years. I say he ran away with the carnival because I first met him when he welcomed me as manager of the **Greene-Dreher Sterling Fair** in Newfoundland, Pa., right in the heart of The Poconos. When that fair ended, he joined the show as project manager and concession manager.

I remember that my wife, Christine and I were having fun in the old neighborhood of my home town of

Scranton, Pa., when I asked if there were any carnivals in the area. Believe it or not, when I was growing up, The Poconos seemed far away, and I don't recall any of our friends ever going up there. Low and behold, I checked it out and the distance was approximately 20 miles.

Where I live in Nashville now, that would simply be another part of the town. It was a great trip to see what they advertise as an old-fashioned county fair. It always takes place over **Labor Day** weekend, with dates this year Aug. 23-Sept. 1. Even though Scranton has no county fair, people don't seem to realize what's virtually in their own back yard.

Most of Skelly's spots have been played for three decades or more. "Our route doesn't change much. We have about three volunteer firemen fairs, including Manasquan, N. J., along with the Middlesex County Fair in Brunswick, N. J., and a Catholic Church in Belmar, N. J., we've played for 45 years." Looking ahead, Skelly said, "I think this will be a good season as long as we get the weather." Asked, almost facetiously, what he and O'Connor do between seasons, Skelly laughed and said, "It's almost like a part time job, at least that's what a lot of people think. But we stay busy, working in the shop.

Our latest projects are refurbishing our **Cliff Hanger, Gravitron, Zipper** and **Fury**. There is always something going on and in what sometimes seems like the blink of an eye, we're back on the road again." Skelly's has done business with **National Ticket Co.**, and **Allied Specialty Insurance** for more than 35 years.

In fact, Skelly said Bob Anderson, who worked for National for more than 30 years, now plays music on weekends in a local restaurant where O'Connor runs into him occasionally.

The show never splits into two units and doesn't usually book with others but has done business in the past with Al Belmont's **Wizards Festival of Fun and Magic**, and Rill Reiss's **Blue Sky** Amusements.

I look forward to watching the **Super Bowl** from home after attending 25 or more in person during my time as editor of **Amusement Business**. The last time it was held in Atlanta, my son, Kevin, co-worker **Ray Pilszak**, who is now deceased, and I stayed at the home of an old friend, **Don Sandefur**, in Conyers, Ga. The **Tennessee Titans** lost that game to the **St. Louis Cardinals** 23-16 in 2000. An ice storm hit the city that year and we couldn't even get out of the house until the day of the game. Because of Sandefur, who ran the **Harlem Globetrotters** for several years, I got to coach one of their games.

He still keeps up with the current coach, **Sweet Lou Dunbar**, who succeeded such playing legends over the years as **Reece (Goose) Tatum, Nat (Sweetwater) Clifton, Bill (Pop) Gates, Marques (World's Greatest Dribbler) Haynes**, and others. I even remember **Abe Saperstein**, who founded this dynasty.

When people ask me if carnivals and fairs will be around in the future, I usually use the **Globe Trotters** as an example. I may have seen them 100 times or more and become blasé about their antics. But there is always a new generation of children who will want to ride the rides, play the games, eat the popcorn, sausage sandwiches, elephant ears, and corndogs, and go out and see the latest version of the Trotters.

That's what happened to my son Kevin, and his son, Sam, last Saturday, at **Bridgestone Arena** in Nashville. You should have seen the look of awe on Sam's face, especially after his dad bought him a basketball and he stood in line and got it autographed by Dunbar and most of the members of the team. Yes, Virginia, there is...And yes, it is true that I did coach them and was the first person ever given one of their official team jackets, with the lettering **COACH** on it.

I must have looked official as I crossed my legs on the bench every time they did because when the team went into the locker room to play cards at halftime, I remained on the bench. Slowly, a kid approached and asked for my autograph. As I tried to explain why he didn't really want it, he started to cry, and his dad said, "Please." By the time I finished signing, the line was almost a mile long. About the 10th guy in line was from **Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus** and he asked if I did this every night. He then said that if I could coach the Trotters, I could blow the whistle to start the circus when it came to town. I did, and I still proudly have the whistle. I think I gave the jacket to Kevin.

Have all great days, and God Bless!

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