

Obituary



Wayne McLaren – Marlboro Man

Three million people die each year from smoking worldwide, victims of their own addiction to nicotine and an industry's addiction to greed. Wayne McLaren, a former Hollywood actor, stuntman, and occasional Marlboro Model, was one such victim. He died on 23 July 1992 at the age of 51 in a Newport Beach hospital from lung cancer after a long history of smoking and a brief crusade against the industry whose product took his life.¹

Wayne was born in Louisiana and loved horses and rodeos. Like his father and friends he took up smoking when he was young, at the age of 15, and puffed heavily throughout his shortened life. When he learnt of his lung cancer at the age of 49, he treated the bad news with a deep inhalation of tobacco smoke. His addiction was conquered at gunpoint – a gun pointed by his fiancée, Ellen Brubaker, to her own head. She threatened to take her life unless he stopped smoking. He did.¹

I first heard of Wayne in a news story about his lawsuit against the surgeon who failed to diagnose his cancer,² and I silently wished he had sued Philip Morris, the manufacturer of Marlboro. I learnt that his rodeo career led him to Hollywood film studios, where he appeared in westerns including *Junior Bonner* and *Paint Your Wagon*. To earn "beer money" he occasionally modelled in cigarette advertisements and joined the exclusive club of Marlboro Men.³

In the 1950s a Chicago advertiser, Leo

Burnett, used these rugged cowboys to transform the dainty image of Marlboro, a woman's brand with a red gloss lipstick tip, into pure machismo. An advertising miracle followed and by 1991, 350 billion Marlboro cigarettes were smoked annually worldwide, making it the world's most popular packaged consumer product.⁴ Today the brand accounts for 25 % of cigarettes sold in the United States and an astounding 69 % of cigarettes smoked by teenagers. A quarter of a billion dollars was spent advertising Marlboro in 1991,⁵ more than enough money to fund food programmes for poor children, a cause that Philip Morris champions. The brand poured \$9.4 billion into the coffers of Philip Morris in 1989,⁵ and without Marlboro Philip Morris would be a second rate company.

Maybe that is why Philip Morris claimed no record of Wayne's employment with the company when he and I attended their 1992 annual meeting in Richmond, Virginia.⁶ Wayne came to Richmond via Massachusetts, where he was filmed in a British documentary on smoking in March. While in town, I invited him to speak to a group of Boston schoolchildren and to testify before a Massachusetts legislative committee. This was his first public appearance, and he spoke eloquently. A month later we were off to Philip Morris' annual meeting in Virginia, where I filed a shareholder's resolution to urge the company to adhere to its voluntary advertising code not to market cigarettes to children. Wayne was my sidekick and gave an impassioned plea before the "bronchitic"⁶ shareholders. He ended his speech with a simple statement:



JOHN SLADE

Although Philip Morris originally claimed that it could find no record of Wayne McLaren having appeared in any of its advertisements, an article in the 13 September 1992 issue of the New York Times indicated that "A Philip Morris spokeswoman, Karen Daragan, now concedes that Mr McLaren appeared in retail promotional displays for Marlboro Texan Poker Cards, pictured sitting in a group of four cowboys playing cards"⁷ – ED

I have perhaps a better handle on smoking and the advertising industry than anyone in this room. Two years ago, I was diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer. I smoked for 30 years. I do believe I know what I'm talking about.⁷

An airy silence hung over the room which a few minutes earlier had been illuminated with wide screen images of rugged, riding Marlboro cowboys. The chief executive officer of Philip Morris, Michael Miles, hid behind a glass shield mounted on his lectern and condescendingly responded:

We're certainly sorry to hear about your medical problem. Without knowing your medical history, I don't think I can comment any further.⁷

Even if Miles read the doctor's notes, he would not be impressed. After all, Philip Morris' policy is that smoking does not cause cancer or any other disease. But, personally, Miles knew just what Wayne was talking about. Mr Miles once told a reporter that he could not remember why he stopped smoking and that he lost his taste for it.⁸

The former boss of Philip Morris, Hamish Maxwell, stopped smoking shortly before the surgical staples closed his chest incision made for coronary artery bypass surgery. Maxwell's close friend and political shield for the nicotine cartel, Senator Jesse Helms, developed a similar aversion to the golden leaf after quadruple bypass surgery this past June.

According to Joe Cherner of SmokeFree Educational Services, not one member of the board of directors of the Loews Corporation, which pedals Newport, True, and Old Gold, puffs on the company's brands. According to Cherner all of the non-smoking members of the board hung their heads when David Bresnick, who had had a laryngectomy, spoke through his voice box at Loews's 1992 annual meeting about Newport's claim that the brand makes you "alive with pleasure."

Louis Gerstner, the new chief executive officer of RJR Nabisco (RJR), also does not smoke. Gerstner, the Benedict Arnold of oncology, served on the National Cancer Advisory Board and the board of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Institute before moving to RJR and betraying America in its war against cancer. Why? Seven million dollars in blood money was his salary from RJR in 1991.⁹

Former Winston model David Goerlitz sums up the real tobacco men's position on smoking the best. After asking RJ Reynolds executives why they did not smoke, Goerlitz reported their answer: "We don't smoke the shit, we just sell it. We reserve the right to smoke for the poor, the blacks, and the stupid."³

Janet Sackman is another cigarette model turned activist. She was a beautiful Lucky Strike model who was urged to smoke the brand after being hired by the tobacco company. She tragically lost her larynx to cancer and suffers as a living Joan of Arc with the burning pain of a cancer survivor. "If only the tobacco company executives could live in my body for five minutes," she says, "they'd know."³

These "educated," "moral" tobacco men give new meaning to the word hypocrisy. They mainline profits like junkies shoot heroin. They live in a stupor of greed, oblivious to science or morality. They hate smoking but love smokers.

After the meeting Wayne and I spoke of future trips and even a lecture tour of Europe. But the weakness in his voice led me to believe that this would be our last meeting. I sent him copies of materials on smoking and health, and Wayne pushed for more. The quiet gentle cowboy I met in March was angry and wanted to get back at our common foe.

Unlike Earvin "Magic" Johnson's public fight against AIDS, Wayne's fight was more personal. In the short time between Wayne's cancer diagnosis and death, he transformed himself from a smoker to a non-smoker, from a cowboy image to a tough health fighter. He said, shortly before he died, "If I was responsible for making one person smoke, maybe I can be responsible for making two of them quit."

Wayne's crusade did not end in July. His fiancée, Ellen Brubaker, and Janet Sackman took up the smoke-free cudgel and did a lecture tour through Europe in October advocating for passage of a cigarette advertising ban in the European Community. Ellen carried a video of Wayne which included him in his hospital bed a few days before his death. Their tour was a smashing success. Yet, while Ellen and Janet spoke about the pack of tobacco industry lies in America, young US celebrities promote the deadly practice in Asia, with Rock stars Paula Abdul and Madonna appearing in live or taped Salem concerts sponsored by RJ Reynolds in Hong Kong and Malaysia.

Perhaps Philip Morris is taking note of all this. Recently, it was reported that it is changing the Marlboro image.¹⁰ The cowboy is being replaced with pictures of Western paraphernalia: belt buckles, boots, and stetsons. In a new Marlboro advertisement a long, thick packet of Marlboro cigarettes hangs between the legs of a cowboy. Perhaps this is their answer to the phallic nose of RJR's Joe Camel which has appealed to so many size-conscious 13-year-olds. Moreover, the new Marlboro images are safer. The Marlboro Man is aging and old smoking cowboys don't fade away, they publicly die of lung cancer. Belt buckles don't smoke, get sick, or speak back.

It was painful to hear of Wayne's death and it is still painful to listen to Janet speak. But for those of us who labour to control tobacco against overwhelming odds, it is good therapy. Before Wayne died he said, "I'm dying proof that smoking will kill you." His memory is living evidence that tobacco control is an important cause, one worth giving your life for.

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A "Doonesbury" cartoon which mentions Wayne McLaren is reproduced on p 298. – ED