

Burt Reynolds of 'Gunsmoke'
swings from the heels

BY DAN JENKINS

Quint Asper, the half-breed blacksmith new to Gunsmoke this season, is described by Burt Reynolds, the actor who plays him, as "a guy who loves physical contact, has no prejudices, is completely independent, takes people at face value and would just as soon fight as eat." Aside from the fact that he's not part Indian, Reynolds might well be describing himself. continued

Reynolds, 27, is a husky ex-football player who eased into the TV scene in the fall of 1959 as the young pilot Ben Frazer, in *Riverboat*, the hour-long adventure series that starred Darren McGavin.

"I will say this about McGavin," Reynolds says. "He is going to be a very disappointed man on the first Easter after his death."

An actor does not usually say this sort of thing about another actor, especially for publication. But Reynolds elucidates: "I'd been in Hollywood only a few months when suddenly I got this series. Lew Wasserman [president of MCA, Inc.] had brought me out from New York and had told people I was going to be a big star. You know what that means at MCA—if Lew Wasserman says it's going to rain, everybody puts up an umbrella.

"I was a green kid so far as film was concerned. Instead of helping me, McGavin looked on me with contempt. He did everything but destroy me on camera. Like we'd run through a scene a couple of times and then, just before the camera rolled, he'd say to me under his breath, 'You're not going to play it *that* way, are you?' and what little confidence I had would go right down the drain.

Threatened to blow up riverboat

"I've worked with nice guys in this business-guys like Jim Arness and Milburn Stone and Ricardo Montalban, guys who go out of their way to help you all they can. I'd like to work with McGavin again, just once. I don't ask him to like me. I just want to make him respect me."

At the end of his first season with *Riverboat* Reynolds asked out of the series. "I wasn't doing anything and I wasn't learning anything. I had lines like, 'Are the Indians going to at-

tack us?' I was nothing but a dum-dum riverboat pilot. Revue must have a whole auditorium packed with my close-ups. None of them ever got on the air."

Revue tried to argue the bullheaded young man out of it, but they hadn't yet learned what they were dealing with. When he finally said he'd "blow the damned riverboat up" if they didn't let him go, they called Monique James, the MCA agent who handled him.

"If he says he'll blow the thing up," said Miss James, "let him go. Because that's exactly what he'll do."

"They gave me a lecture about ingratitude," Reynolds says, "and let me out of my contract. Somehow—I don't know how these things are done—they managed to get some kind of word around. Anyway I couldn't get a job at any major outfit. And, of course, I haven't worked at Revue since. But I will."

Brawls in Skid Row

For the next two years Reynolds worked in "every lousy syndicated show they were making, and that's where I finally learned to act."

Reynolds admits he has calmed down considerably since joining the *Gunsmoke* cast. When he first arrived in Hollywood, he says, he made a habit of taking his frustration out on the first man at any given bar who so much as looked at him sideways. "I'd drive down to the Skid Row section, walk into a bar, wait for the inevitable crack, belt the guy in the teeth and go home feeling much better."

Born in a fishing district outside of Palm Beach, Fla., Reynolds grew up feeling he had come from the wrong side of the tracks and had to prove himself. In grade school he did it by running faster than anyone else. In high school and college (Florida

State) he did it by becoming a star halfback and heading toward a career in professional football.

On Christmas Eve of his sophomore year, however, his life underwent an abrupt and devastating change. He had just been given a ticket for speeding ("My father was chief of police at the time and I used to get away with that sort of crazy thing") and had slowed down to a contrite and somewhat shaken 35. Suddenly a parked truck loomed into his headlights. Before he could stop, he had plowed into it.

One of the three men from the truck hurried over and asked if he could help. "Please call my father," Reynolds said, realizing he was seriously hurt. "He's chief of police."

This turned out to be the wrong thing to say because the three men had been engaged in loading the truck with stolen cement blocks. Electing to be smart rather than humanitarian, they took off. Twenty minutes later ("I've always been lucky," Reynolds comments) a police car happened along.

The accident, which cost Reynolds his spleen and broke one of his knees, also ended his football career. Inasmuch as football was his life, it was in the nature of a deep shock. Leaving school, he took off for New York with nothing more in mind than to get away.

Depressed and unhappy

"I was depressed, I was unhappy, I was drinking," says Reynolds. "In short, I was well on my way to becoming a bum. What saved me, I bumped into this guy at a bar and he asked me if I could read. I almost slugged him. What he meant, of course, was could I read lines. He was a writer."

The writer turned out to be Conrad Hopkins, former secretary to author

James T. Farrell and now an English professor. Hopkins got Reynolds hooked on reading books and plays, finally got him enrolled in the Hyde Park (N.Y.) Playhouse.

In February 1956 Reynolds returned to school, at Palm Beach Junior College, majored in drama -and wound up right back at Hyde Park, this time on a scholarship. A supporting role in "Mister Roberts" at the New York City Center (Charlton Heston was the star) caught MCA's eye, and he left the pleasant confines of Heston's supply snip for what turned out to be McGavin's riverboat.

Coming into his own

Still husky and energetic, Reynolds likes to double in brass as a stuntman, finds it difficult to sit still for any length of time without fidgeting and finally just getting up and leaving. Says Gunsmoke producer Norman Macdonnell: "I have the feeling that if he ever got the bit in his teeth, he'd run away with it. He's not afraid of man, beast or God. Yet he's really made an effort to fit in with us. It's not easy for a newcomer to break into a cast that's been working together like a family all these years.

"I think he's a good actor. Innately, he's a leading man, which creates something of a problem for us. We can't use him as such. But we get so many letters saying, 'Enjoyed the show last night with Matt, Kitty, Doc and the blacksmith.' That's damning him with faint praise, in a way, yet it means the character has been established. I think next season he'll begin to make a real impact."

Reynolds, who treats indifference as a mortal enemy and praise as a warm friend, best sums up both himself and his role: "I don't care how good or bad I am so long as I'm not dull."