

“Anyone Seen Sam?”



The Man Behind the Curtain

By Art Sanda
Photos by Beth Terranova

He's part Houdini, part Barnum and Bailey, part Wizard of Oz, but most of all he's Mr. Personality, the man whose magic has helped keep the Coal Prep Conference and Exhibition one of the most perennially successful shows in the coal industry.

For more than 20 of its 25-year history, Sam Posa literally has been the man behind the curtain on the exhibition side of the annual event held all but for two years in Lexington Kentucky. Through two decades of virtually steady growth, and a series of ownership changes, exchanges and re-changes, Posa has been one of the constants upon which Coal Prep has been built.

"Over its quarter century, Coal Prep has had its share of both constants and changes," Posa offered, "Among the constants have been most of the 40 to 50 companies that exhibited at the first Coal Prep in 1983 who, in some form, are here today and those people recognized as being among the tops in their profession who have served over the years on the Coal Prep Executive Committee, which is responsible for the technical programs, workshops and keynote sessions that are as much a part of Coal Prep as are the exhibits.

"On the change side," he continued, "that core group of companies—and I hate to name a few who were there from the start for the risk of offending any I might overlook. From that beginning, the number of exhibitors continued to grow virtually every year to the current level of 220 providers to the industry displaying their products.

"Along with this, total exhibit space has exploded, from being contained—or

constrained—in the original hall adjacent to Rupp Arena to more than 34,750 square feet. That's nearly eight acres of exhibitors. In part," Posa said, "Coal Prep can be credited with the Lexington facility having the capacity to accommodate such an event. Back in the 1980s, we were growing and Lexington was dragging its feet in fulfilling commitments to expand the exhibition hall. In part to demonstrate there were alternatives, for two years

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Sam and long-time exhibitor Bruce Daskivich from McLanahan Corporation.



Sam visits with friend Don Halulko of CBP Engineering during the Silver Anniversary Reception.



Sam and Steve Cattani from Roberts & Schaefer, already discussing options for next year's show.

we held Coal Prep in Cincinnati, in conjunction with the American Mining Congress (AMC), since merged into the National Mining Association (NMA).

"The events themselves were quite successful," Posa recalled. "We had larger shows and greater attendance but, perhaps because of the AMC connection, the delegates tended to be more senior in position. However, at the same time, we recognized that we had lost a portion of our core group, those involved directly in coal preparation, the group that is of most importance to our exhibitors. Still, we proved our point and we have been in Lexington ever since. Today, they call the second half of the expanded Lexington facilities 'the room that Coal Prep built'."

Posa said the success and the growth of the show over the years "have been incredible, all due to the efforts of a lot of incredible people." Something else slightly incredible has been the constancy of Posa's position with the show while the positioning of the show itself had undergone a series of changes.

"In the beginning," Posa said, "Coal Prep was conceived more as a conference than an exhibition. While those on the technical side saw Coal Prep as filling a need for an information exchange forum, others, like Bob Lick who was in advertising with McLean Hunter Publishing (Coal Mining and Processing Magazine) saw an opportunity, a venue for displaying products of importance to the coal processing industry. It was a marriage made in heaven, or at least it has proven to be for me."

At that time, Lick contracted with Peter Johnson, founder and president of Industrial Presentations, to promote, sell, coordinate and generally manage the exhibition side of Coal Prep. Though initially brought onboard in 1986 to manage Longwall USA, before long Posa also was involved with Coal Prep, then being sponsored by COAL magazine, then Coal Age, and now Coal Age, Coal People and a number of other "sponsoring" coal industry publications. And therein lies the tail of the "changes, exchanges and re-changes".

"Along the way," Posa recounted, "Johnson sold one of his companies, Industrial Presentations West, to and joined McLean Hunter, giving them the total package. Around toward the end of the 1980s, McLean Hunter bought properties from McGraw Publishing, including Engineering & Mining Journal (E&MJ) and Coal Age. While E&MJ continued publishing, Coal Age was rolled into Coal Mining and Processing and the name changed to COAL. That lasted until 1996 when the Coal Age name was resurrected and reintroduced to the industry at MINExpo."

MINExpo, NMA's international mine exhibition and conference, is held every four years in Las Vegas. Back in 1992 while still under the auspices of the then independent AMC, Posa and company reaped benefit from their involvement with AMC in Cincinnati and won the bid to manage that year's MINExpo.

"We sold the space and managed the exhibition," Posa related, "and the magazine, COAL, published the show guide. It was a great experience to do a show that large—30,000-plus attendees, 400 and more exhibitors—and we almost got it again in 1996.

"It was around this time McLean Hunter's Canadian owner, Rogers Communications, sold its U.S. publishing side to Intertec Publishing," Posa continued, "and Johnson, who had left Intertec to run his remaining company, Lobo's in New Orleans, bought back his company, and me. By that time, we also were handling the exhibition and mechanics associated with Longwall USA, now held every other year in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

"Before a decade was out, Intertec was purchased by Primedia and, shortly after, Johnson sold them the company that still managed the two coal shows—Coal Prep and Longwall USA—which now came under Primedia Presentations, as did I.

"The turn of the century proved to be the beginning of some difficult times for the publishing industry and Primedia discontinued publishing both Coal Age and E&MJ, something I always thought was a mistake. Though Primedia Presentations had continued managing Coal Prep, it already had transferred Longwall USA to the magazine.

"Anyway," Posa continued, "upon learning of the suspension of publication, Johnson reappeared and made a successful offer to purchase both magazines, which now publish under Johnson's Mining Media. That was in 2005, 2006. But prior to that, Primedia had turned into Prism Publishing and had been purchased by Penton Media. Though of about equal size, with the Penton name being more recognized in publishing, it was retained. Coal Prep then became part of Penton Media Exhibitions and I continued with them as sales manager of Coal Prep.

"Ownership of Coal Prep is somewhat presumptive," Posa explained. "In truth, the folks at Coal Prep—those attending as well as those exhibiting—don't know a Penton from a Primedia, a Primedia from a Prism.

What they do know is that Coal Prep is their show," Posa said. "If anything is 'owned' it's the company that puts together the package—the exhibition, the pre-registration and registration aspects, arranging for the facilities, handling the coordination, tending to all those details.

"In going over the history, much has changed, certainly, but then again, much hasn't, at least for Coal Prep," Posa said. "Through all the machinations of ownerships and name changes, Coal Prep continued unabated, setting attendance and sales records almost year after year. For me, I guess the most noticeable change has not been in my role in Coal Prep but in what that role entails."

At one time, in putting together Coal Prep, as well as Longwall USA, Posa was chief cook and bottle washer; negotiating contracts with hotels, caterers and exhibit halls, laying out and selling exhibit space, arranging for electricians, florists, designers, carpenters, electricians, maintenance, even forklift operators, and then overseeing pre-registration as well as registration at the show itself; not to mention managing the annual golf outing that at one time would have had two foursomes at each hole at the start of play. The most oft-heard cry leading up to Coal Prep's opening day was "Where's Sam? Anyone seen Sam?"

"It was crazy, no doubt," Posa recalls. "Though it certainly had its moments, it was fun. You got to work with a whole range of people; from the soup to the nuts, from the waiters to the dishwashers, you handled it all.

"Today it's different. The shows are bigger; the numbers of attendees and exhibitors are bigger. Everything is a lot more involved, a lot more complicated. Or so it seems. At Penton, things are all compartmentalized. There are specialists involved with contract negotiations, site selections, and site preparation, there's even an in-house housing bureau that handles that chore for all their shows.

"While I miss some of the personal contact with the vendors to the shows, on the plus side I have more time to concentrate on my customers, the exhibitors, to spend more



Bond Jacobs, with the Lexington Convention & Visitors Bureau. The bureau sponsored the 25th Anniversary Reception. Sam has been working with Bond for at least a decade. Bond is a great ambassador for the city and always makes the group feel welcome.

time with them and to grow the shows.

"Oh," Posa interjected, "did I mention that along the way Primedia also had acquired Cardinal Publishing and Exhibitions, including their Club Industry magazine that covers the commercial fitness industry? Perhaps as a consolation from the show gods for no longer having Longwall USA, Cardinal's shows filtered down the acquisition sluice to us. In addition to Coal Prep, I now have similar responsibilities for the regional and national health and fitness club exhibitions, a slightly different clientele, a whole lot different clientele. I call it the Jekyll and Hyde of the trade show industry.

"When you compare the two, Coal Prep is 90 percent shall we say mature males and the other certainly isn't. But I still have the softer spot in my heart for Coal Prep," Posa admitted. "I've spent half of my life involved with Coal Prep and the folks from the coal industry, they've both long been a part of me. In fact, I'm almost one of them, my grandfather and great grandfather both having been coal miners in Rock Springs, Wyoming.

"Still, Club Med is a tough competitor," Posa offered. "When folks ask me: 'Which is your favorite show?' what I tell them is, well what I tell them depends on who is asking."

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