



Which way did those varmints go? Dick Martin (left) and Dan Rowan seem perplexed in "Once Upon a Horse."

Two Comics with a Problem— Themselves

by Peer J. Oppenheimer

Rowan and Martin are Hollywood's top laugh team; now they must avoid the personal pitfalls that destroyed other famous twosomes.

"THE COMEDY TEAM is dead . . . long live the comedy team!" That has been Hollywood's chant through the days of Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, Martin and Lewis. Today it applies to a new pair of comedy kings, Dan Rowan and Dick Martin.

The team you'll soon see in Universal-International's "Once Upon a Horse" differs from their predecessors, though. College-trained, they create much of their own material and go about their careers with the calculated coolness of business tycoons or, perhaps more properly, business machines.

Rowan and Martin hope something else about them is different, too: their ability to work together as smoothly at the top as they did at the bottom. Successful comedy teams frequently are their own worst enemy, the classic example being Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis.

"That's not for us," say the newcomers, and they recite a long list of solutions to the problems that split Dean's and Jerry's popular combination. Maybe Rowan and Martin have the answers. They undoubtedly are smart boys—but comedy pairs have a way of outsmarting themselves.

Still, the youngsters have some natural advantages. Unlike Martin and Lewis, they have no

desire to work as singles. They tried it and ended up eating salami sandwiches.

In addition, their ages may be in their favor. Both are in their early 30s. Dean Martin, who is ten years older than Jerry Lewis, complained he often had to act as a father. Ironically, Jerry also felt he had to "father" the irrepressible Dean.

The new stars approach their personal problems with the objectivity of military tacticians. For example, they determined long ago to keep their wives away from each other. Comics fight and make up—their wives just fight.

This was no problem until Dick recently abandoned bachelorhood and married Peggy Connolly. Dan already is a seasoned husband with three children, and no doubt his wife, Phyllis, would get along famously with Peggy—but their husbands won't gamble on it.

For a show-business team, however, the sorest problem is publicity. Did X get more press notices than Y? Which had the funniest lines in their last movie? Petty jealousies have deflated million-dollar partnerships before, so Rowan and Martin grant no individual interviews and virtually use a slide rule in figuring how much time each gets before the cameras.

Sounds like a lot of trouble, doesn't it? But Rowan and Martin have worked too hard to get to the top to push each other off. Dan, whose parents produced melodramas for a carnival, went to Paramount studios as a junior writer after graduating from the University of Missouri. During World War II he was a fighter pilot in New Guinea; in the postwar years, he was a hungry actor.

Dick Martin became a top radio writer after graduating from Michigan State, but the vagaries of Hollywood soon relegated him to bartending and picking up small-change acting roles.

The two got together in 1952 through comic Tommy Noonan, who knew each wrote fine comedy material which neither could sell. The answer was obvious: perform it themselves. They did, at no pay, and met with instant failure.

Over the years, persistence and improvement paid off in fat contracts with U-I, the National Broadcasting Company, and the night-club circuit.

The pair has a special affection for night clubs, the "alma mater" of their show-business education, and the gradual disappearance of these smoky cubicles makes them sad.

"Where will young comedy teams get their training?" ask Rowan and Martin. "We used night clubs, but those days are gone. Maybe we're the last of the comedy teams!"

Which, of course, is the same lament old comedy teams wept when they saw the English music hall, burlesque, vaudeville, and radio "die." Yet ambitious performers like Rowan and Martin always find a proving ground for their talents, and the public is always ready to crown new kings.

Rowan's and Martin's main worry today is not how new teams will get started—but how a top team stays on top.