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# Kid from Brooklyn grows into a power hitter

## The book on Phil Dusenberry is all major league

By Joseph M. Winski

It is a balmy winter's day in Tampa, and a BBDO crew is cruising along in a Dodge convertible to yet another shooting location. Arnie Blum, a pixyish BBDO producer, is talking about his boss' new country home in Connecticut.

"Yeah, it's a beautiful place, beautiful," Mr. Blum says. "Trouble is it's only 20 minutes from my home. I see a lot of weekend work coming up. Phil says, 'Uh, Arnie, why don't you come over and let's kick around a few ideas, until, oh, three or four in the morning?'"

"And I say, 'Uh, well Phil, it's Saturday you know, and I kind of thought I'd spend some time with the family. You know, family?'" And he says: "What? What!"

The subject of this discourse, Phil Dusenberry, BBDO executive creative director, looks at Mr. Blum and laughs. He's heard all this before. Once, the creative

the dominant admakers of his time.

He is, moreover, that rare advertising person who except in jest has seldom been heard to utter a bad word about the demands of his calling. The son of a Brooklyn cabdriver remains far more grateful for what advertising has given him than for what it has denied him; he remains in many respects the awe-struck kid who made it to the big leagues and became a star.

Mr. Dusenberry's accidental occupa-

says Eric Harkna, head of BBDO's Chicago office and a Dusenberry friend, "but Phil carries it to an extreme. He just never turns off."

Says John Bergin, who was Mr. Dusenberry's boss at BBDO and is now his counterpart as head of Coca-Cola advertising at McCann-Erickson: "If you were to examine Phil Dusenberry's fingernails, you wouldn't find that they are clean or dirty, but that they don't exist. They're bitten down to the second knuckle, and

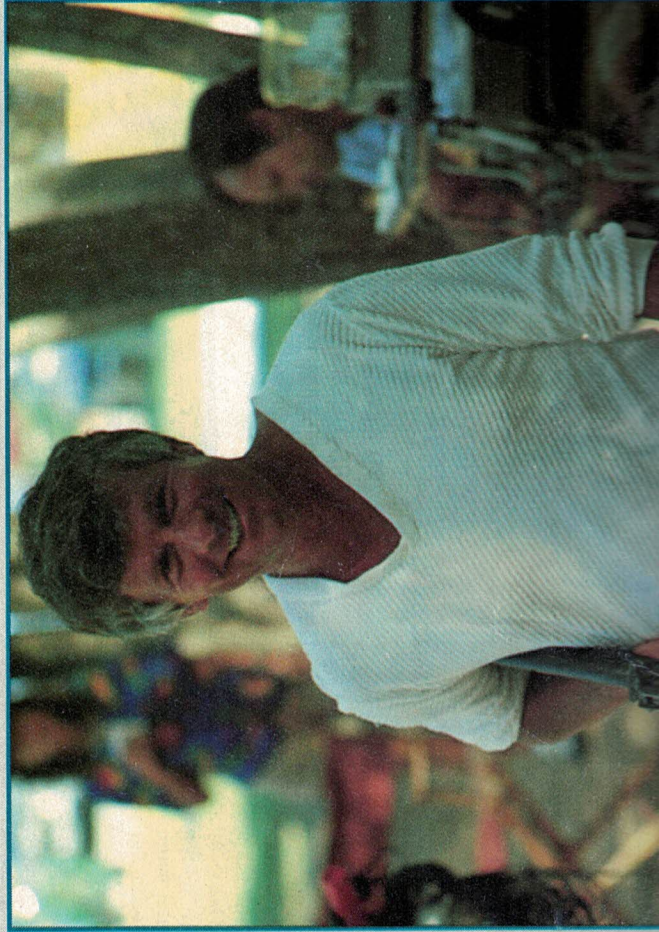
vertising that Pepsi-Cola pioneered with its "Pepsi Generation" campaign 20 years ago. Coca-Cola soon picked up on it and the two giant soft-drink makers have been hurling the stuff at each other with a vengeance ever since in the ceaseless battle for market share.

Mr. Dusenberry is the prime practitioner of this "user image" advertising. "Rather than sanctify the product, we exalt the people who use it," he says.

Over the years he has created some classics of the genre for Pepsi: "Skywriter," in which a young lady is proposed to via a plane spelling out "Marry Me Sue"; "Band," showing a winsome redhaired girl muffing her baton tosses before the big parade but snatching it flawlessly when the chips are down, and "Pony," a tear-jerker showing a boy getting his first pony.

These story-telling commercials have been increasingly supplemented by vignette pieces. These often are characterized by rapid cuts from scene to scene that leave a dazzling array of impressions on the viewer's mind. They are set to music that, when it is right—and the music picked by Mr. Dusenberry is right more often than not—virtually defies the listener not to start humming.

Unfortunately for Pepsi and Mr. Dusenberry, for the past year or so, the most visible and talked-about example of this advertising has been arch-rival Coca-Cola's "Coke Is It!" campaign. Pepsi's ex-



## The Admakers

Another in a series of profiles of individuals who are creating memorable advertising today.

group he headed composed a song about



Gettin' used to the pain 'cause it hurts so good.

Old lady done left me; my kids have flown the coop,

But you gotta pay your dues in the Dusenberry group . . .

On another occasion, when Mr. Dusenberry was planning a rare vacation, his employes got together a mock survival kit containing aspirin, Roloids, pencils, paper and the phone number of the Alcohol Workaholics Anonymous unit.

If he had had his druthers, Mr. Dusenberry would have been a baseball player. He was named Madison Avenue official, in fact, to an abiding love for the game. A framed copy of "Casey at the Bat," an authentic Louisville Slugger bat and a baseball glove are in his office. DUSENBERRY carved into the hitting glove; an old septa snapshot of Phil Dusenberry in the uniform of Brooklyn's Wood High School—Phil in front of a garage with the cracked windows, wearing just swung and obviously concentrating, his eyes following the flight of the primary ball as it soars away.

"I really wanted to be a baller," Mr. Dusenberry, now 46, says, "but a kid that's all I ever dreamed about." He was a good enough catcher in high school to catch the eye of some major league scouts. The book on him: Good rifle arm, fine speed, too small. (He is 5 ft. 7 ins. tall)

a tortuous and largely unplanned career. Mr. Dusenberry became instead an advertising man. Today, by virtue of his work for clients including Pepsi-Cola, he has a high visibility and often outstanding quality—and through sheer persistence of effort, he has become one of

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**The son of a cabdriver, Phil Dusenberry came through a circuitous route that has led him to become a dominant figure in the advertising industry.**

It has brought him considerable fortune. He has a penthouse on Manhattan's Upper East Side, a condominium in St. Thomas, the country place in Connecticut, a chocolate brown Mercedes convertible; he wears silk shirts and a year-round tan.

What advertising has denied Mr. Dusenberry is much of a life beyond his work. It has become, by his own admission, "almost an all-consuming thing."

"Many outside interests have to be subordinated, by all of us in this business,"

every time he bites them he's thinking about advertising."

What makes Phil Dusenberry run? "Fear," Mr. Dusenberry says, flashing his dazzling white smile.

Mr. Dusenberry is wearing a V-neck pullover that says Used People on the front, and he's got both hands stuffed into the pockets of his white tennis shorts and he's tapping his blue Nikes to "The Tide Is High," blaring from two giant speakers mounted on 5-ft. tripods, while all about him musical chaos seems to have unfurled: Hundreds of people of every possible description are dancing in a park.

The occasion is the filming of "Dancin'," a commercial for the new "Pepsi Now" campaign (which broke early this month). This is the latest installment of the lavish, damn-the-cost "life style" ad-

Mr. Bergin, who is at once Mr. Dusenberry's nemesis, friend and goad. "I've said it over and over again—Phil Dusenberry is better than that."

So there is the challenge facing Mr. Dusenberry as he stands there in the Florida sun chewing vigorously on his Wrigley gum: To keep a 20-year-old campaign fresh and alive, to upstage "Coke Is It!" and—although he will not say it quite this way—to show John Bergin ("a father figure and my mentor") and the whole damned world that Phil Dusenberry has not lost a step.

As if italicizing the urgency, a "Coke Is It!" outdoor ad hovers over the very field where BBDO is shooting. Mr. Dusenberry doesn't need this.

Despite all that is riding on this campaign, BBDO has given the client, Pepsi, only a three-page listing of the things to be shot. It is no more expansive than the 141 white index cards blanketing one wall of the production's war room back at the hotel, each indicating a scene to be shot, over seven days at 20 different pack-up-and-move locations and more than 100 settings at those locations: "Slow dance waist deep in ocean"; "Black street band"; "White family picnic"; "Row of feet tapping." There is nothing approximating a storyboard in evidence.

Pepsi seems to have a great deal of trust in Mr. Dusenberry, maybe even a vital dependence upon him. It has watched apprehensively as he has risen through the ranks at BBDO, fearing that each move will take him further from the actual making of their advertising, congratulating him, yes, but always with a caveat: Well, Phil, that's nice, but as far as we're concerned, you're still the assistant creative director on the Pepsi account.



"For us, he is the best," says Alan Potasch, Pepsi-Cola senior vp-creative services. "Absolutely the best."

Mr. Dusenberry is head of a 200-person creative department and responsible for all advertising turned out by BBDO, New York, and for much turned out by other BBDO offices; he has plenty to do back at the office.

He doesn't really have to be here, he says. But Pepsi expects him to be here, and he wants to be here. He is proud, in fact, of the time he spends on shoots. "You ask the creative directors in comparable positions at other agencies when was the last time they went on a shoot—I'll bet it's been quite a while." Mr. Dusenberry also says he has done "more writing in the last two or three years" than in several previous years, and as for John Bergin: "Well, he hasn't done a soft-drink commercial in 11 years."

**"The great thing about Phil is that he knows instinctively when something is right; he's got it here," says Mr. Blum, slapping a hand to his stomach.**

"The great thing about Phil is that he knows instinctively when something is right; he's got it here," says Mr. Blum, slapping a hand to his stomach. "After that, he's got nothing—no talent at all." Mr. Dusenberry laughs.

Mr. Dusenberry was the oldest of six children; five were boys, four of whom grew to be 6 ft. tall or more, much to the eldest's chagrin. After the scouts doused his dream of being a baseball leaguer, he cast about for a baseball scholarship to get him into college.

The only taker was tiny Emory & Henry College in Emory, Va. After one semester, the school scrapped its scholarship program, and Mr. Dusenberry returned to Brooklyn, where he embarked on a singing career. "I was gonna be the next Mel Tormé," he says. He auditioned for his first job at a place called the Club Monterey. It was being cleaned up for that night, so the owner, mumbling around a fat wet cigar, told the young man he would have to audition outside. The result was as fine a rendition of "Walkin' My Baby Back Home" as the crowded sidewalks of Flatbush have ever seen.

That night, "Phil Doran" was belting them out at the Club Monterey. When he hadn't been paid for some time after completing his act, he shyly sidled over to the man with the cigar and noted that he was sort of in this for the money. "The guy says, 'Are you kiddin', kid? You know how many talent scouts I get in here?'" He never played that joint again, but did manage a couple of years of appearances at various Greenwich Village clubs. The talent scouts didn't find him there, either.

He then decided to become a radio personality. After taking an announcing course at New York University, he got

low report the news in a way they most likely hadn't heard before. "Good morning," he said, "dis is da news."

It was at WBBI that Mr. Dusenberry, who was primarily a deejay, wrote his very first advertising copy, when he was drafted to take over for an absent copywriter. It was a 60-second spot for a drive-in theater that was showing "Tammy and the Bachelor." Mr. Dusenberry thought it was a snap. Moreover, he was told he was pretty good. He asked to do more.

Eventually, he was convinced: He wanted to be an advertising man. To get closer to Madison Avenue, he got a job as a copywriter-announcer at WGSM in Huntington, Long Island. The first day

(Continued on Page M-29)



The GE ads are noted by many for their taste, charm and humanity.



For Pepsi, Phil Dusenberry is the hand that puts the ad in motion.





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...new let-

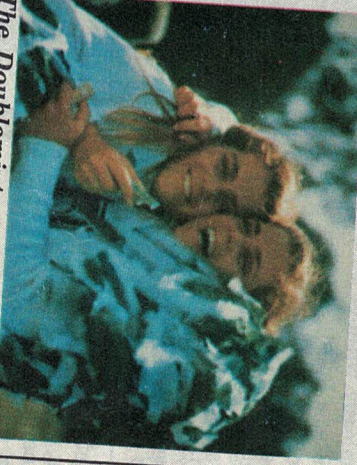
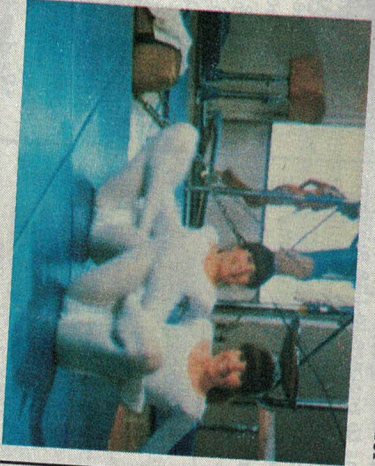
"We don't have creative review boards, strategy review boards or any of that kind of stuff," he says. "Today running an agency is a hands-on deal. You gotta be at the scene, walking the stuff—it's like minding the store—and making sure that what you want is happening...."

"I could never be just a pure delegator. You know, you do this, I'll see you later—when it's too late to do anything about it. No good. As a creative director, you've gotta have time to input into the stuff."

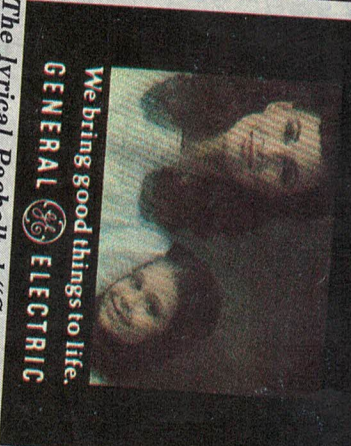
At the Pepsi shoot, Mr. Dusenberry is taking a lot of long looks through the camera to make sure he knows what the director is seeing. Though he doesn't say much that anyone more than a foot away can hear—he is very soft-spoken by nature—he is never more than inches from the ear of producer Mr. Blum or director Joe Hanwright. They apparently are hearing a great deal; they are nodding, and then changing the camera angle or ordering more "product" into the scenes or bringing a fetching little girl in a head-band up closer to the camera.



A Dusenberry spot without the customary Dusenberry "touch."



The Doublmint commercial helped stem a five-year decline in sales.



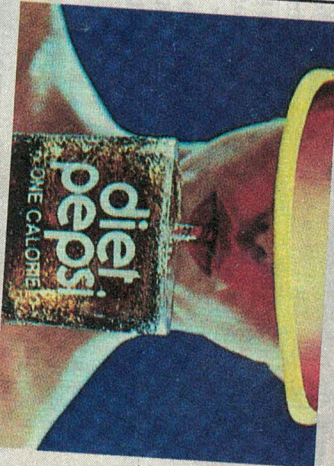
We bring good things to life. GENERAL ELECTRIC  
The lyrical Pachelbel "Canon" sets the mood for GE Soft White bulbs.



An off-handed comment provided the inspiration for this commercial.



Have a Pepsi way.  
A boy and his first pony: The tears and sentiment are a trademark.



The Diet Pepsi spots represent a departure from convention.



# A power hitter

(Continued from Page M-29)

gone with my instincts, I've ended up kicking myself, because they've almost always been proven right."

Those appear to be instincts abetted by sound mastery of the techniques of his trade. Those who have worked with Mr. Dusenberry over the years say they have seen him write, direct, art direct, produce, mix (blend the audio components of a sound track) and shoot, as well as instruct cameramen about the virtues of given lenses.

And having largely snucked his Brooklynese—except for an occasional lapse when he visits the old neighborhood, where his mother still lives—Mr. Dusenberry is doing the voiceover for the current Pepsi Challenge commercials.

He is secretly delighted at this. During a mild disagreement with Susan Proctor, a BBDO creative supervisor and close friend, he raises his hand for quiet and says: "Listen, this is the voice of Pepsi speaking."

It is the sharp-witted Ms. Proctor's wont to neutralize Mr. Dusenberry by calling him "nasty, brutish and short." For once, she allows herself to be awed into silence.

Mr. Dusenberry's current stint at BBDO is his second. He made rapid progress during his first—perhaps too rapid. "He naturally became my No. 1 star," says McCann-Erickson's Mr. Bergin, Mr. Dusenberry's boss back then. "He's the truest of the creative geniuses I've known, the purest of the form. If there is in this business a born 400 hitter, it's Dusenberry. I just watched him in amazement."

Among other things, Mr. Dusenberry created the famous medicine-cabinet

commercial for Gillette's Right Guard. One night as he and Mr. Bergin sat in a restaurant waiting to come up with a theme for a new Dodge campaign by the next morning, Mr. Dusenberry started scribbling on a napkin and eventually came up with "You could be Dodge material," the "Sheriff" campaign that gave Dodge awareness a big boost.

Word of his talent got around. Ted Bates offered to increase his salary to \$10,000, from the \$6,500 he was making, if he joined them. BBDO matched the Bates offer. Six months later, Foote, Cone & Belding offered \$20,000. BBDO matched that. (Mr. Dusenberry today probably makes \$300,000 to \$400,000 a year.)

He became one of the youngest vps in the agency's history and became creative supervisor on more top accounts. "I was getting kinda cocky," he says. When a group of venture capitalists offered to put up the money for him to start his own agency, he accepted. He was 32 at the time.

He rented 3,500 sq. ft. of "gorgeous space on Fifth Ave., fully furnished." He had no accounts and no employees, until he decided to hire a secretary. "I started cold calling companies—and got nowhere. Pretty soon I had called everybody there was to call."

It being the summer of 1969, the year of the New York Mets, Mr. Dusenberry began spending his afternoons at Shea Stadium in Flushing. "I had *nothing* to do. So I'd go to the ballgame. I'd say, 'Sally, if anyone calls—and believe me they won't—tell them I'm out pitching the Flushing National Bank.'"

Deliverance came in the form of a Catholic priest calling from California. "I figured he was calling to give me the Last Rites," Mr. Dusenberry says. It turned out that John Bergin had recommended Mr. Dusenberry to the priest, who headed

a California organization called the Family Prayer Crusade.

"He says, 'I want to do a television campaign to get people to pray.' I said, 'Father, that's a tough sale. I gotta tell ya, that's a *tough* sale.'"

The priest was a charmer with an Irish brogue. So Mr. Dusenberry took on the account, agreeing to try to do seven commercials, on a budget of \$25,000—enough for about one spot, Mr. Dusenberry figured. Mr. Dusenberry wrote the commercials, giving them the theme line, "The world hasn't got a prayer—without yours."

"This was, remember, the time of Vietnam, Kent State and all that. I presented them to him, and they made him cry," Mr. Dusenberry says. He put the arm on friends to volunteer their talents, and the commercials were produced—for \$25,000.

He then finally announced the opening of his agency and threw a press party to present its first piece of business: Father Patrick Peyton's Family Prayer Crusade.

Phil Dougherty, advertising columnist for the *New York Times*, was there. Mr. Dusenberry mentioned to him that "you could say we're the agency that opened on a prayer—literally." The next day a box in the *Times* was headed: Dusenberry Opens Agency on a Prayer. Business took off.

Meanwhile, Mr. Dusenberry also was co-authoring a prescient pre-Watergate movie called "Hail to the Chief," a spoof about a paranoid president who tries to take over the country. When it was released—during Watergate—the *Times* called it "a remarkable political satire." (In his movie, Mr. Dusenberry named the secretary of state John Bergin.)

Mr. Dusenberry's agency was acquired by another agency, Clyne-Maxon, in 1974. He sold his 40% share—for which he had paid nothing—and then, after working for a while at the merged agen-

cies, spent a year indulging his longtime wish to write a screenplay based on "The Natural," Bernard Malamud's novel about a baseball player. (The screenplay has not been produced, but soon may be.) In 1977, he returned to BBDO as associate creative director on the Pepsi account. "I decided I had been out of this business too long," he says.

After becoming executive creative director in 1980, Mr. Dusenberry went outside the agency—an unusual move at BBDO—for some top creative talent. He hired Michael Drazen, a highly regarded Scali, McCabe, Sloves copywriter, to succeed himself as creative director. He then hired Curvin O'Rielly, also a talented writer, to be another of the three creative directors BBDO had at the time.

"I was really trying to give the agency a more creative identity," Mr. Dusenberry says. "I felt also that those names would attract other good people from the outside."

It didn't work out. Messrs. Drazen and O'Rielly, as well as a number of others who were indeed attracted to BBDO by the new "names" there, are no longer with the agency. Their complaints have a common thread: Mr. Dusenberry is a relentless perfectionist willing to accept only his vision of perfection.

"Dusenberry is one of those guys who just does not want his people to fly," says Mr. O'Rielly, now creative head of Ogilvy & Mather's Chicago office. "Phil didn't really want what we could do. He wanted to do what he wanted to do—period."

"At no other big agency where I've worked did the top creative guy get down and listen to virtually every track and look at every tape. But Phil, he'll do everything. I was being told how to do *print* ads, and it just drove me crazy."

Mr. Drazen says he had those types of problems and others. He calls his time at



BBDO "the worst year of my career." He describes the agency as inbred, political and unaccepting of outsiders, a place of snakepit."

He holds Mr. Dusenberry responsible; he had hired some so-called creative hotshot from outside. And the thing I ultimately disrespect him for is he in no way prepared these people for my coming. He just backed off. In the end it was the absolute wrong decision for my coming. He Dusenberry agrees for both of us." Mr. mistake to hire Mr. Drazen, but strongly disagrees with his interpretation of what happened.

"It's Phil's show," says Charles Gowl, a short-term BBDO copywriter now at McCann-Erickson. "It was always my cut vs. Phil's cut—and I wasn't hired to do Phil's cut." Mr. Gowl says his personal relationship with Mr. Dusenberry never became bitter, however, and indeed, offers what could be considered high praise: "He sets a tone for the advertising and demands that it be followed: In that sense, he is a true creative director."

Mr. Dusenberry subsequently reorganized his creative department into six groups with six creative directors—all from inside BBDO.

Phil Dusenberry eats dinner at 9 or 10 o'clock every night. He is notorious for canceling dinner dates, letting theater tickets go unused, cutting short vacations.

He has been engaged three times and never married. Once he went as far as putting a deposit down to reserve the tavern on the Green in Manhattan for the reception. "This was an ultimatum and of case," he says. "I thought, 'If I don't get married, I'm losing my'

## MAGAZINE

the day before the wedding. Guests were already arriving in the would-be bride's hometown, Atlanta. They gave everyone their presents back and turned what would have been the reception into a party. "And everybody had a great time—especially me," Mr. Dusenberry says. Mr. Dusenberry's commitment is to advertising, and he willingly devotes nearly all his waking hours to trying to do

people down.

"There are the constant insecurities of this business in general and of just being a creative person. I mean after all, you're peddling something. It's like selling clouds for a living . . . You're selling ideas, and your ideas are constantly subject to the whims, opinions, comments of the world at large, consumers, clients, peers, subordinates, you name it, and

"Bergin told me once, a long long time ago, that when you choose to move from the sidelines, and walk that tightrope, only one of two things can happen—you're either gonna make it to the other side, which will be in view of everyone, or you will fall, and that too will be in view of everyone."

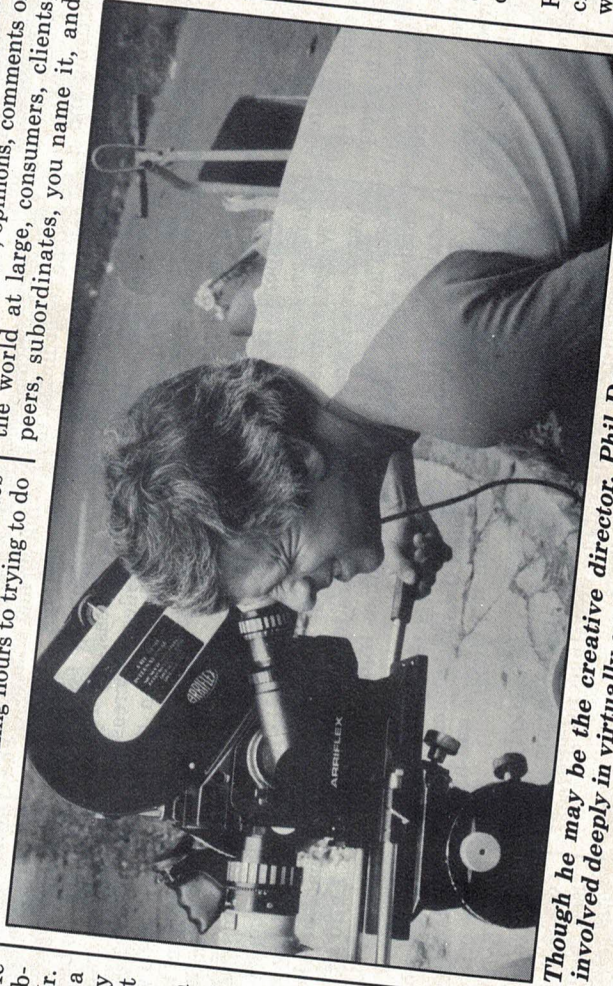
The novel, "The Natural," ends with the hero, Roy Hobbs, taking a bribe to throw the championship game. He strikes out with the tying run on base.

Mr. Dusenberry has changed that ending twice now. In one of his classic Pepsi commercials, "Homecoming," which he says he based on the character in the novel, he shows a young baseball player returning home to a hero's welcome.

In his screenplay, he changes the conclusion again, even more dramatically. He plays Roy Hobbs overhears a veteran player telling a young girl the preposterous story of his having knocked the lights out of a stadium with a home run.

In Mr. Dusenberry's version, Roy Hobbs agrees to take the bribe but then changes his mind in the ninth inning, when he realizes that he has been lied to by a girl who said she would marry him if he threw the game.

"This all comes crashing down in this one scene; he just realizes that he's been duped," Mr. Dusenberry says. "And he hits it out. And he not only hits it out, but he hits the lights. And the last scene is Roy, trotting the bases. And the last scene is he's . . ."



**Though he may be the creative director, Phil Dusenberry manages to get involved deeply in virtually every step of the commercial-making procedure.**

it better and better and better. "I've always felt that I really had to try doubly hard to prove myself," he says. "Holy cow, I'm surrounded by guys who went to Princeton, Yale and Harvard. And I didn't. I didn't even finish Emory & Henry."

"Some people are dis-

that can make somebody pretty insecure at times . . . It can strike fear in your heart.

"You say, 'Oh my God, I'm losing my sense of judgment.'"

"And you feel the forth-