

PERSONALITY PROFILE by Graeme Kelly

MARK PILKINGTON

If they gave awards for industry “all rounder” Mark Pilkington would certainly be a favourite to take the title. He has been involved in most aspects of the thoroughbred industry in the past 40 years, and has gained respect and accolades along the way. These days he’s helping owners and trainers via his innovative Horse Training Packages and enjoying racing a few horses with friends.

IF Facebook had existed in the 1970s it would have been easy to follow Mark Pilkington’s natural progression through the world of the thoroughbred. During the journey, which began as a child at the side of his father, Mark has made quite a name for himself in a variety of different roles.

These have taken him from being a youthful racegoer to a pedigree analyst, auctioneer, part-owner of a bloodstock company, manager for David Hayes, Aushorse director, yearling buyer, bloodstock agent, award winning owner and successful syndicator through to the present. In the recent past Mark has become an industry innovator with the launch of Horse Training Packages.

It is an enterprise that has been introduced with the aim of simplifying the financial arrangements between owners and trainers. “Horse training costs are expensive and can be unpredictable, and management of cash flow by trainers can be complex,” he said. “Through the Horse Training Packages owners can be aware upfront of the costs involved and can benefit from a discounted rate for paying in advance, while the packages ensure that trainers are better able to manage their cash flow.”

Among those “stress-tested” has been respected owner, breeder and Yalumba’s internationally acclaimed wine maker Robert Hill Smith, who says “it’s a product for the times”. Another was the late Andrew Ramsden, who died in October. “Andrew was an invaluable sounding board for me when I was formulating the horse packages concept. His wisdom will be a massive loss to the industry.”

The financial model which evolved is called Pilkthagoras and determines a training package for a nominated horse by averaging the total annual costs of similar profile horses with data from the trainer’s historical charge rate. To guarantee the training arrangement represents a fair and equitable package for both parties all costs associated with educating, training, veterinary, farrier and spelling horses are included.

“Potential extraordinary costs are listed on contracts and can only be incurred after consultation between the owner and the trainer,” Mark said. “I believe these packages align the interests of both the trainers and the owners like never before. Besides improving the cash flow of trainers, with the upfront payments, the packages avoid the grind of monthly administration and that also helps the trainers.

“On the other side the packages provide a significant discount for owners because of the upfront payments while preventing them from receiving billing surprises. The timing is right because many owners and trainers are looking for reasons why they should stay in the industry with the high costs involved.”

While admitting he needed a “spell” a few years ago Mark has never even considered moving away from the thoroughbred industry since being introduced to racing some 40 years ago.

It was not long after he was born in 1967, in the wheat belt town of York just on a 100km south-east of Perth, that he was being taken to the races by his father Mike, who was a livestock agent with Elders. Settled in 1831, just two years after the establishment of a colony on the



Swan River, York boasted a racecourse and a trotting track. That suited Mike, who Mark says was “a passionate racing and trotting man.”

“I think that’s where my interest came from,” Mark said. “Also my best mate in York since our childhood days is Shane Bransby whose father owned the local

TAB. Our first jobs were putting up the form sheets in the TAB. Shane and I were also the co-proprietors of the Melbourne Cup sweeps at primary school and through into high school.”

Then at 15, his father and mother Mary had previously split up, Mark went to school in Perth to complete the



I Got Chills

(General Nediym-Tidfish by Imperial Prince (IRE))

final years of his secondary education. After leaving school he went on to his stepfather Peter Meecham's farm at Brookton in the wheat belt, but it was in the middle of a drought. Mark decided "there wasn't much future in farming" so that only lasted six months although he continued to go shearing on the farm for quite a few years afterwards.

"Fortunately my father knew John Chalmers who was managing Goodwood Bloodstock at the time, and I got a job there as a trainee pedigree consultant. Inglis's Simon Vivian was my first boss and Damon Gabbedy was another trainee. Mike Becker, who founded The Independent Stallion Station, was there and later Murray Tillett, who is now managing Woodside Park, joined the firm."

Then Mark and his now wife Tracie decided to have what he describes as a "sabbatical". "We travelled around Australia and we ended going up north where I was working on a reverse circulation drilling rig in a gold mine. We both worked in the mine for about a year and then travelled overseas for nearly a year before returning to Perth." Shortly after his return he, Murray Tillett and Paul Smythe, a friend of Murray's, were involved in the buyout of Goodwood Bloodstock.

A major breakthrough came for Mark not long afterwards when he was asked by the Heytesbury Stud management, following the death of its principal Robert Holmes a'Court, to arrange the dispersal of the revered Trelawney Stud in New Zealand.

"We co-opted Joe Walls, who wasn't with New Zealand Bloodstock at the time, and did the dispersal in conjunction with him." In the lead up to the dispersal Mark sold the Breeders' Cup Juvenile-Gr.1-winning Hold Your Peace horse Success Express (USA) privately to Peter Moran, and he was sent to stand at Widden Stud. Among the sale's headliners was the speedy Bletchingly mare Boardwalk Angel, who had been prepared by George Hanlon to win nine races featuring the SAJC Goodwood Handicap-Gr.1.

"I had been auctioneering in Perth, although I didn't have the voice for it, and Murray decided it would be great experience for me to sell at such a prestigious sale. I was lucky to be holding the gavel when Boardwalk Angel came into the ring and she went for \$320,000 which well and truly topped the \$8000 of the previous highest lot I'd sold."

During this period Goodwood Bloodstock was developing export markets into Singapore, Malaysia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. "We took the view that our horses were good enough to be sold cost-effectively

to those countries," Mark said. "At one stage 24 horses we sold at the yearling sales went by boat to Zimbabwe."

While this was happening a friendship was developing between Mark and David Hayes who had taken over the Lindsay Park training empire on the retirement of his father Colin in July 1990. "We were managing horses for some Singapore owners, they had two obviously promising horses in Penghulu and Permai and we transferred them across to Peter Hayes not long after David had moved to Hong Kong. Penghulu went on to win the Toorak Handicap in 1997 and something like \$450,000 while Permai was a stakes winner of 10 races.

"That spurred on the relationship and I started doing more consultancy work out of Perth for Colin and David. Then in 1997 a filly by Rory's Jester from the Bellwater (FR) mare North Bell was passed in for \$45,000 at a Goodwood Bloodstock sale.

"I rang Colin and told him about the filly and that I thought she was worth buying," Mark said. "He was a bit taken back because he always bought his own horses but he said 'all right'. That was Northern Song, and under Peter's care she was a Gr.3 winner of five races and turned out to be a half-sister to the great dual Horse of the Year Northerly. That further cemented my relationship with the Hayes family."

However, early in 1999 Mark had a setback which however proved only temporary, when he suffered a heart attack after returning from the Zimbabwe National Yearling Sale. "Thankfully I have not had any subsequent issues," he said.

The heart attack came at a time when Goodwood Bloodstock was also encountering problems. A split among Western Australia's breeders resulted in Magic Millions conducting a sale in Perth in 1998 and 1999. It was obvious to everyone involved that the state did not have sufficient turnover to sustain two thoroughbred bloodstock companies.

"While this drama was going on I introduced myself to Gerry Harvey at a mixed sale at Inglis in Sydney," Mark said. "I told him I wanted to talk about the situation that had developed between the Magic Millions and Goodwood Bloodstock. He claimed he didn't know much about it but he listened to my views.

"I told him that despite Magic Millions having the bigger cheque book we would win the war because we had the support of the majority of the breeders. We both agreed that with Western Australia being such a small

market there was a danger of the industry being destroyed. Gerry was terrific and we were able to strike a deal which resulted in Magic Millions buying out Goodwood Bloodstock."

Then after the death of Colin Hayes on May 21, 1999 Mark received a phone call from David in Hong Kong. "He asked me to move to Melbourne with the family to manage his business affairs in Australia." Agreeing, Mark, Tracie and their baby daughter Emily who is now 16, set up in Melbourne where they later had a son Sam, 12, and a daughter Matilda who is seven.

"It was an interesting assignment because as well as his horse interests David was involved in quite a few properties. He still had an interest in Collingrove, at Nagambie, so I sat on the stud's board of directors with David Coles, Bob Atkins and Adam Sangster.

"Adam later bought out Collingrove, and Sam Hayes and Darren Thomas who many view as a young John Messara, bought Lindsay Park Stud. We started looking for a property which could be a future base for David, with the help of Paul Kerr. He is a long time Lindsay Park consultant and a person responsible for some of my most enduring friendships, like the one I have with the family of dual Carlton premiership player Kevin Hall and his wife Ann.

"After a search we found a property at Euroa for David. He had wanted a property of about 400 acres an hour out of Melbourne, and I remember ringing him up and saying we'd found a wonderful place but it was 1100 acres and about an hour and 40 minutes out of Melbourne. I took some video and sent that with some notes to him and his wife Prue, and they bought the property sight unseen."

It was a particularly memorable time in Mark's life because in 1999 he was co-opted to the board of Aushorse. "John Messara's view was that I should be a director because I could represent the many different spokes of the thoroughbred wheel," he said. "I was on the board for 10 years and I made friendships with people such as Johnny Kelly, Duncan Grimley, Ron Gilbert, Antony Thompson and Ken Barry, which I have valued and enjoyed."

It was less than two years afterwards, on March 12, 2001, that tragedy struck when Peter Hayes was killed when a light plane he was testing crashed. "Tony McEvoy and I had the task of telling the family members the dreadful news. It wasn't the sort of phone call you wanted to make or receive. It was all very unsettling."

When the dust cleared Tony became Lindsay Park's trainer. "Although Tony was always under pressure because a lot of Lindsay Park's best horses had gone to David in Hong Kong, we had some good times," Mark said. "Foremost among those was the 2003 Cox Plate win with Fields of Omagh, who went on to win again in 2006 with David as his trainer."

After spending 10 years in Hong Kong David had returned to Australia in the middle of 2005 and resumed the title of Lindsay Park's trainer. His return signalled the beginning of an extraordinarily successful run for the stable. With a relatively young team, Fields of Omagh was a notable exception, David captured the 2006 Blue Diamond Stakes with Sheikh Hamdan Bin Rashid al Maktoum's Nadeem, and the 2007 Golden Slipper Stakes with Miss Finland who was raced by a syndicate managed by John Messara's Arrowfield Stud. Also, by the end of the season David had an incredible 46 individual two year-old winners to his credit.

That was followed by an exceptional season in 2006-07 when David captured 11 Gr.1 events featuring the Cox Plate, the Caulfield Cup with Sheikh Hamdan's Tawqet and the VRC Oaks with Miss Finland. During those years Mark's duties included overseeing the selection and purchase of stock and selling the horses on to stable clients.

PERSONALITY PROFILE: Mark Pilkington



Spacecraft
(Galileo (IRE)-Demanding by Octagonal (NZ))

"In the 2006-07 season, as a result of the stock we had been securing, the stable won a record \$19.4m, which is still the record today," he said. "Over the years in my role as a recruiter, of both horses and owners, as well as buying horses to sell them on we had Gr.1 winners in Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, South Africa, Singapore and Malaysia.

"The Gr.1-winning Perth sale graduates Chartreux and Barely a Moment with Darley Victoria boss Andy Makiv provide special memories. Added to that we had a wonderful sales team with David, Tony, Jenny McAlpine and veterinarians Cam Baker and Dave McKellar."

On reflection Mark says "probably the most talented horse he has ever bought" is I Got Chills, by General Nediym from the Imperial Prince (IRE) mare Tidfis and who was knocked down to Mark Pilkington Bloodstock for \$45,000 at the Melbourne Premier Yearling Sale in 2005.

"We could easily have missed her because she failed the scope at the sale. She went back to her breeders Peter Lord and Rob Dunnnett for a month. She was found

to have pharyngitis that I hoped would clear up with treatment, and fortunately it did."

At her debut I Got Chills landed a 16/1 to 3/1 plunge in the Maribyrnong Trial Stakes-LR. Subsequently a controlling interest was sold to Sheikh Mohammed Bin Khalifa al Maktoum prior to her producing a brilliant performance in the MVRC St. Albans Handicap-LR at Moonee Valley.

"She ran a faster 1000m than Australia's best sprinter of the time Virage de Fortune did on Cox Plate Day in winning by five lengths untouched. Unfortunately she injured a knee at the Valley and that was virtually the end of her."

There was some compensation though, when I Got Chills was sold for \$540,000 to John Singleton's Strawberry Hill Stud at the Magic Millions National Broodmare sale in 2007. After their years of success together the association between Mark and David came to an end in March 2012.

"David had a change of his model and I was drained after 13 years of travelling around the world chasing

owners and horses so we agreed it was appropriate to finish up our partnership," Mark said.

"Although I must admit I miss being part of such a great team and being in the company of knowledgeable blokes like Angus Gold, Hubie de Burgh and Adrian Nicol, which was a great pleasure and a privilege.

"However a connection remains with former Lindsay Park board member Mark Balnaves and I am still racing horses together with Dave." Those interests, in the likes of Spacecraft, The Blues, Marmaa and Aashiq, in his Blue Collar team enabled Mark to win the Thoroughbred Club's Champion Owner Award in the 20012-13 season.

"To have my name alongside racing luminaries such as David Hains, Dennis Marks, Bill Lanyon, Peter Devitt, Les Gordon, Gerry Ryan, Gary Lechte and company while slightly embarrassing is a real thrill. When you take into account that 90 per cent of the progeny of the world's elite stallions can't win a black type race, it puts every race day success into perspective . . . and, perhaps, sums up why the game is so intoxicating to those of us who love it." ■

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