

HORSE-RACING IN THE AGE OF CELEBRITY

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'With the help of stars, our chosen beacons for the murky atmosphere of modern life, we move onward' concluded Jib Fowles in his reflection on the cult of celebrity.¹ Horse-racing often seems rather less a beacon against, than a contributor to 'the murky atmosphere of modern life' and the racetrack an unlikely platform for the launch of sports celebrities. But then Gai Waterhouse, Tommy Smith, the Hayes family and the Freedman brothers are cyclically identified as stars.² So too Bart Cummings, Cups King and popular celebrity.³ The man who trained his first Melbourne Cup winner in 1965 and his most recent in 1999 has been chosen as a member of the Olympic Torch relay and will carry the Flame down the straight at Flemington racecourse. Where once the trainer was recognised by punters as merely one figure within a tight network of 'racing identities', now he or she is thrust forward, to ensure that racing does not fall to the back of the field in popular attention. Observing this celebration of the trainer perhaps helps us comprehend racing's transformation over the last two decades.

Celebrity was once defined as 'fixated on personalities. promulgated by the media, predicated on publicity, dedicated to the ephemeral and grounded on the principle that notoriety confers power'.⁴ The racehorse trainer has become a celebrity while defying all of these and other star-quality conventions. Success in racing remains ephemeral, but is at the same time dynastic. Racehorse trainers are more likely to be born to the sport than to rise from the status of obscure outsider. Gai Waterhouse's father, Tommy Smith, dominated Sydney racing for three decades. Bart Cummings and the Freedman brothers came from racing families, as have many other leading trainers.⁵ Ignoring the standard celebrity requirement of youth, trainers work on into old age. Where other celebrities mouth what is expected and speak with pedantic optimism, the cultural tenor of racing is a tight-lipped stoicism. Even the great trainers lose more races than they win and a dialogic convention of back-of-the-hand whispers is peculiarly resistant to talk-show verbosity. In Les Carlyon's collection of national icons, *Heroes in Our Eyes*, Bart Cummings appeared along with Diana, Princess of Wales, Don Bradman, Patrick White and Bob Santamaria. Bart, as Carlyon reminds us:

refuses to talk sports babble. He never says he's giving it his best shot. He gives the impression he's only turned up because he has nothing better to do. He never throws tantrums or takes himself too seriously.⁶

One of the marks of the celebrity age is the high seriousness with which the banal is adulated. Trainers don't often display banality nor compose themselves for the benefit of the paparazzi. They get up too early to attract the gossip columnist. By breaking the essential rules of celebrity, from age through to parole, the thoroughbred trainer has revived the style of the racetrack for a new audience and undoubtedly contributed to the renewed appeal of the great racing carnivals.

Trainers of course have always been popular figures in racing, their distance from celebrity probably determined by their position in an elaborate hierarchy of breeding, ownership, training, racing and betting. The emergence of the celebrated trainer has drawn the public gaze away from this extended network. Etienne De Mestre, the best-known trainer of the nineteenth and early twentieth century [whose feat in training five Melbourne cup winners was only surpassed by Bart Cummings] drew much of his success and popularity from a close association with successful breeders and owners, the Fisher brothers of Maribyrnong in particular.⁷ De Mestre was equally well-known in the betting ring. He staked everything on what at the time, 1882, was the biggest bet ever laid on an Australian horse-race, backing two of his horses in the Victoria Derby- Melbourne Cup double. His colt, Navigator, duly won the Derby but his Cup fancy came in third. De Mestre was ruined and his training days ended.⁸

The leading trainers of the inter-war years, amongst them Michael [Jack] Holt similarly straddled the cultural distance between pastoralist owners and betting ring.⁹ While Holt was on friendly terms with wealthy owners, like Sir Ernest Lee Steere, the West Australian pastoralist, and Charles Kellow, one-time pole vault champion and pioneering motor-car trader, he is perhaps best known for his celebrated partnerships with female owners, Lady Stradbroke and Mrs L.R. Buxton, for whom he trained High Syce, the 1929 Caulfield Cup winner.¹⁰ Holt was equally familiar with bookmakers as wealthy owners and a far more successful punter than De Mestre. The fortune which he left to St Vincent's Hospital probably derived as much from astute backing as from training fees.

As the principal stables become conducted more thoroughly along commercial lines, their training managers rely less often on the punt. Those inter-war battles between stable commission agents and professional punters like Eric Connolly or between trainers and 'leviathan' bookmakers like Andy Kerr, are no more.¹¹ The most successful stable agents can bet by phone although anecdotes suggest that many still prefer the challenge of the betting ring.¹² Where once stable 'connections' were fundamental to successful betting, punters who rely on statistical probabilities can dispense with commission agents to disguise their bets, ignore stable whispers in assessing computerised form and even step back from the crush of the betting ring as they send wagers by modem.

Horse-racing was once centred on the horse and to a slightly lesser extent, on the jockey. A curious aspects of the rise of the trainer as celebrity is an apparent decline in the stardom of riders. It is hard to think of a leading

jockey of recent years who can inspire the same public loyalty as Bobby Lewis for example or the great jumps jockey Tom Corrigan. Perhaps jockeys were too speedily groomed to fit standard images of the celebrity sports star? For what makes racehorse trainers such emblematic figures is their defiance of the routine accoutrements of celebrity. Once observed through the gaze of the camera, the celebrity acquires a status elevated above that of the fan. But not in racing, where trainers walk amongst ordinary mortals and punters crowd around the boxes of multi-million dollar horses. The track, and especially its trainers, retain a fluidity and intimacy lost in all other major spectator sports.

And then there is the horse; around whom thoroughbred racing revolves. But perhaps no longer so in the public eye. In the pantheon of great horses, few recent champions measure up, in popular recognition if not racing ability, to inter-war heroes like Nightmarch, Eurythmic, Phar Lap or Peter Pan, or even to stars of the 1950s amongst them, Tulloch or Rising Fast. There is an obvious reason for the change. The household names of the first six decades of this century were trained for the great handicaps, most often the Melbourne Cup. The distance handicap, unlike the weight-for-age sprint, allowed the outsider to upset the favourites. It gave the battler his or her day.

Much has changed since 1959 and the first running of what is now touted as the world's richest two-year old race, the Golden Slipper Stakes. The Sydney Turf Club massively boosted prize money for the race from 1979 onwards while cleverly courting the sports media. Since then 'The Slipper' has spawned a series of lead-up two year-old-races, all run over short distances at set weights and generally won by colts or fillies who typically fail to make much of an impact as adult runners.¹³ As the historian of the Sydney Turf Club pointed out 'the success of the Golden Skipper Stakes has exceeded early hopes and expectations'. At the same time he acknowledged that 'the early retirement of such great gallopers as Vain, Baguette, John's Hope and Luskin Star, all Slipper winners, may have robbed the racecourse of some glamour horses'.¹⁴

Contemporary breeding lines, with an emphasis on sprinting ability and 'precocious' development render the dour stayer an exception. As a result, the long build-up to the handicapped Cups in which fans followed their fancies to country tracks, no longer seems so significant. The Cups themselves are increasingly targeted by European horses, which, having descended at Melbourne International Airport, are sent off to quarantined training and are not seen again until Cup days. That meandering intimate relationship which racing fans had with horses has been all but severed. After all, can anyone really imagine a thoroughbred from the Queen's stables fronting up, as did the first fly-in Cup winner, Even Stevens in 1962, to a country cup meeting at Werribee?¹⁵

Despite regular intonements of the death of racing, the racetrack remains Australia's most popular sporting spectacle. Crowds certainly have fallen at minor meetings but major carnivals outdraw any other annual sporting event. Some country tracks have vanished but then many have

survived.¹⁶ Smaller clubs have closed, the betting ring has declined (and changed with bookmakers no longer displaying prices in odds-for fashion). It may revive if other states follow the lead of the Victorian Racing Minister, Rob Hulls, in reviewing betting regulations and permitting a wider market for phone betting with bookmakers. At least bookmakers seem now to be holding their own against the new gambling attractions of poker machines and legal casinos. Power is passing from traditional club structures to state boards. And in the industry, the celebrity trainer is less subordinate to club managers and owners than in the past. At the same time, the personal networks, the language, the routines and popular participation in professional aspects of the sport remain, and have indeed been flourishing. The success of the trainer, in straddling the worlds of celebrity and racing's dynasties indicates some of the complexities of the sports transformation.

Too often the writing of sports history seems shaped by a visceral struggle between commercialism and spectacle on the one hand and community identity and control on the other. The recent history of racing suggests a less elemental process at work. Racing has always been a business but one with strong communal characteristics. It was, and is, spectacle, hence the ease with which its trainers have emerged as celebrities. It remains simultaneously an attraction for the shady, the ordinary, the marginal and the exalted. It merited condemnation by the Protestant churches – whose ministers now rediscover racecourse communality – as they lambast 'pokie' venues.¹⁷ To interpreters of more 'improving' pursuits like cricket, racing is, well, murky. While cricket, no longer a moral beacon, grapples with its own gambling-inspired murkiness, racing, the sport once written off as hopelessly old-fashioned, has managed a remarkable transformation, while maintaining much of its old culture. When Bart Cummings takes the Olympic Flame through the last furlong at Flemington, he will bear witness to both the dynastic traditions and contemporary commercialism of racing. As football codes face the future with trepidation, and cricket fights ineptly with betting networks, racing's success must cause even the most tight-lipped trainer to smile. Wryly of course.

NOTES:

1. Jib Fowles, Starstruck, *Celebrity Performers and the American Public*, 1992, Smithsonian Washington, p. 263
2. See for example *Practical Punting Monthly*, June 1997.
3. Bart Cummings born in South Australia in 1927, became a strapper at 17 and trained his first classic winner in 1958, see Peter Pierce and Rhett Kirkwood, *From Go to Whoa: A Compendium of the Australian Turf*, Crossbow, East Melbourne 1994, p. 57.
4. Neal Gabler, Walter Winchell, *Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity*, 1995 (first published 1994), Picador, p. xiii
5. One of the most enduring training dynasties of course is that of the Hayes family of Lindsay Park.
6. Les Carlyon, *Heroes in Our Eyes*, Information Australia, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 46-51.
7. Jack Pollard, *Australian Horse Racing*, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde 1988, pp. 187-188.
8. See Maurice Cavanough, *The Melbourne Cup, 1861-1982*, Currey O'Neill, first published as Cup Day, 1960, 9th ed, Hong Kong 1983.

9. Maurice Cavanough, *The Wizard of Mordialloc: The Life of Jack Holt*, Cheshire, Melbourne 1962.
10. Cavanough, *The Wizard of Mordialloc*, pp. 36-49
11. On Connolly, and other inter-war professional gamblers see Chris McConville, "'and don't run upstairs"; the heroics and ruin of the leviathan punter' in Richard Nile and Michael Peterson, eds, *Becoming Australia: The Woodford Forum*, University of Queensland Press 1998, pp. 93-106.
12. On the new 'systematic' professional punting strategies the semi-autobiographical reflections of Don Scott, doyen of whisper-free betting in Don Scott, *Winning More*, Horwitz St Leonards 1985.
13. Richard Boulter, *Forty Years On: the Sydney Turf Club: A History of the First Forty Years* [1943-1983], Sydney Turf Club, Parramatta 1984:182-198.
14. Boulter, *Forty Years On*, p. 207.
15. Cavanough, *The Melbourne Cup 1861-1982*, pp. 321-4
16. On the closure and precarious survival of non-metropolitan tracks see Robert White, *Courses for Horses: the story of Victorian and Riverina racecourses*, 'Five Mile Press, Hawthorn 1985
17. On churches and racing see John Pacini, *A Century Galloped By: The First Hundred Years of the Victoria Racing Club*, Victoria Racing Club, Melbourne 1988:303-376