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finding the right FIT

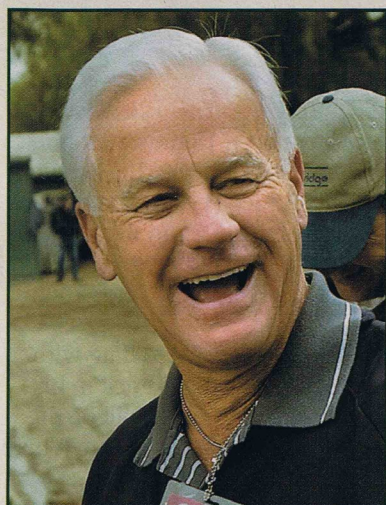
Owners discuss the value
of racing partnerships

A growing number of Thoroughbred racing partnerships and syndications are providing opportunities for those passionate about the sport to pursue their dreams of ownership. Many of today's top owners who now run their own stables got their start in partnerships. The following owners share their experiences with finding the right partnership, what questions to ask, and what they learned along the way.



Multiple grade I winner Turbulent Descent raced for a partnership that included Blinkers On Racing, Dave Aurelio, Robert Butler, and Joleen Coons. The daughter of Congrats sold for \$160,000 out of the 2010 Ocala Breeders' Sales April 2-year-olds in training sale and went on to win five stakes and has earned more than \$858,000.

COURTESY STEVE ZERDA



WALLY SKALJ

John Amerman

John Amerman, former chairman and CEO of Mattel, has been involved in Thoroughbred racing since 1987 and has campaigned 28 stakes winners since 1994.

One of the sport's greatest success stories has been the stable of John Amerman and his wife, Jerry, whose Amerman Racing Stables always seems to have a graded stakes winner running each season. The couple first got involved with Thoroughbreds when they lived in New Jersey on the shore and took weekend visits to Monmouth Park.

"Driving back home, Jerry and I would look at each other and say, 'Wouldn't it be nice to own a racehorse?' remembered John Amerman.

After moving to California in 1980, John ascended to the head of the Mattel toy company. After a long day at work, he received a postcard in the mail advertising a Thoroughbred partnership deal. He flipped the card into the garbage can, but Jerry reminded him of their musings back in New Jersey, so the Amermans checked out Clover Racing, the forerunner to Team Valor run by Barry Irwin and Jeff Seigel.

"We bought 10% of two horses," John said. "One of them couldn't run and the other one shouldn't have run, but we were hooked. We went on and became the largest partner in the organization, and it was lots of fun."

It helped that one of the horses they bought into was Star of Cozzene, who made millions for the partnership on the

racetrack and then was sold to Japanese interests for \$3 million.

"We looked at the books and figured this is an easy game," said Amerman. "So we thought instead of dealing with partners and having others make the decisions, why not do it on our own?"

In 1995 they did just that, after about a decade with Clover/Team Valor.

Alone or with partners, the Amermans have since campaigned grade I winners Mash One, Happyannuit, Lido Palace, Siphonic, Spoken Fur, Adoration, Balance, and other graded winners Demarcation, Blue Steller, Drama Critic, Heads Will Roll, No Slip, Printemps, Chattahoochee War, Fencelineneighbor, and Green Swallow.

"The partnerships with Barry were invaluable," Amerman noted. "You talk to Barry and ask why he selected a certain horse and it was an excellent learning experience. It is absolutely the right way for people to get into the sport. You learn how horses work, what surface they should run on, conformation. We have high praise for partnerships, and we still dabble in a couple of horses in Bob Feld's Bongo Racing partnership. But our philosophy is own them yourself, do your own thing, make your decisions, and don't have people looking over your shoulders."

Steve Zerda, Z Thoroughbred Racing

Steve Zerda, a resident of Washington state, joined the Northern California-based Blinkers On Racing Stable to learn the game before going off on his own with success.

Steve Zerda is one of the partners who own multiple graded stakes winner Turbulent Descent who remains in training with Mike Puype in Southern California. He has used the time in Blinkers On Racing to drink in a wealth of knowledge and today has a 3-year-old runner with some partners of his own.

"I learned how to manage the horses from an owner's perspective," said Zerda. "I learned things like condition books, the sequence of conditions, purse structures at various racetracks, the costs, the trainers. It's all good information to have before you jump in with both feet."

Zerda is straddling both worlds; he has a horse that he manages, and he is still involved with Blinkers On.

"(Blinkers On head) Scott (Sherwood) is a great communicator and very straightforward, and he and Greg (Gilchrist) pick out good runners, so I'm still going with that," Zerda said. "They're good horsemen and good people. It took a year or two with them to figure out everything that was going on, and I had a lot of fun at the same time."

Zerda went to his first Thoroughbred auction and simply watched the action unfold. The second time he attended one, he bought a yearling, who today is the 3-year-old that Zerda owns. He is with trainer Frank Lucarelli, Emerald Downs' leading trainer, and races on the Washington and Northern California circuits.

"Dealing with the trainer directly is a big difference in being out on your own," Zerda noted. "That, and the bills multiply a lot more quickly. You have to deal with the setbacks and understand the veterinary stuff when you're the lead owner. I've looked at a lot of radiographs and learned what does and doesn't hamper a runner in terms of bone structure."

"Plus the time commitment is more, especially if you go to auctions and do the prep work and then the travel. I've been to Barretts and the Fasig-Tipton Texas sale and the Pegasus sale in Washington.

"I've learned a lot with Scott, and I'm still learning. It was a good plan, going with Blinkers On first to learn."



REED PALMER

