

START ME UP

Many avenues bring new owners into racing



Emerald Downs' racing club has found a way to put new owners in the winner's circle

BY AMANDA DUCKWORTH

AMONG HORSE RACING'S PROBLEMS THE lack of new owners resides near the top of most lists. Without owners the game doesn't work, but while it is hard to attract people to racing for a myriad of reasons, many are still trying.

One of the biggest moves toward welcoming new people into the sport was also one of the simplest. In 2012 The Jockey Club and Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association launched OwnerView to help new, prospective, and current Thoroughbred owners.

"Many owners said when they came into the business it was very difficult to get information," said Gary Falter, OwnerView's vice president of operations. "The message I got was that learning about ownership was like a board game with no instructions. Own-



OwnerView's
Gary Falter

COURTESY OF GARY FALTER

erview.com is an aggregator of a lot of information, and it is all free."

Racing syndicates are often suggested as a way to break into the industry, but prior to OwnerView, tracking down and researching various partnerships were strenuous tasks.

"When we first started OwnerView, there was nowhere you could go, including us, to find information about the racing syndicates out there," said Falter. "There are dozens of racing syndicates of all sizes, and now there is a place for any owner to go to look up information on syndicates they

may want to consider joining."

Phase two of OwnerView began three years ago with the Thoroughbred Owner Conference. Last year the now-annual event synched with the Breeders' Cup World Championships and was held the same week at Santa Anita Park. Organizers will do the same this year at Del Mar.

"What we are finding is that people who want to get into ownership now have the resources available to them, whether it is the website or the annual conference," said Falter. "One of the great things about the conference is all of the networking. Prospective and new owners can meet longtime owners, trainers, agents, and industry executives. I have been told by our attendees that is as important to them as the panels we put on."

PARTNERING UP

The reason syndicates are so popular, especially among new owners, is that they help limit risk. In 1969 Cot

Campbell introduced Dogwood Stable, his formulated idea for partnerships in the United States, and acceptance of the concept has continued to grow since.

However, even those running partnership groups acknowledge that things need to be done a certain way not only to attract new owners but keep them. Additionally, it is something racing as a whole must be invested in.

“We’ve finally come to the realization that there are no magic bullets in the owner recruitment business,” said Terry Finley, founder of West Point Thoroughbreds. “It takes hard work every single day. Every single one of us in the business has a huge responsibility to showcase our industry in front of prospective new owners.”

Finley started West Point Thoroughbreds in 1991, and the syndicate had a website by the mid-1990s, making it one of the first in the industry to embrace technology as a tool. Today West Point Thoroughbreds has more than 500 partners and a stable of more than 70 horses as well as an active presence online.

It should come as no surprise then that Finley is a big advo-



West Point Thoroughbreds' Terry Finley

cate for using modern resources to recruit.

“There are plenty of really good horsemen; they just have to learn how to market themselves,” he said. “It is absolutely vital for every horsemen’s group around the country to have part of their mantra be to help educate, attract, and retain owners.

“What business in America in 2017 doesn’t have a website? Yet, I can name 10 trainers like that who came to me, and I said, ‘I am not going to look at you until you get a website, get a business card, get on social media, video the horses in the morning, and prove you are a good communicator.’ Some of them have taken the ball and run with it, but a lot of them

haven’t. I wouldn’t do business with someone who doesn’t have a website today. You are not special enough to ignore the stuff that is part of modern day business.”

LIFESTYLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Once prospective owners have taken the plunge and become new owners, retaining them is not a given. However, there is a general consensus about how to increase the likelihood they stay in the game, and it starts with transparency.

“It doesn’t do the individual partnership company or the industry as a whole any good if we have lots of flash-in-the-pan owners who come in in a big way and are churned and burned,” said Aron Wellman, president of Eclipse Thoroughbred Partners. “We want our partners educated, we want them informed, and we want them to have a proper mind set so they are prepared for both the highs and lows of the game.

“If you adequately prepare them with totally transparent communication and the truth every step of the way, you are going to get a much better opportunity to sustain these people for the long haul.”

In 2008 Wellman joined



Eclipse Thoroughbred Partners' Aron Wellman, left, being interviewed by Donna Barton Brothers

KEVIN THOMPSON

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Team Valor International as the company's vice president before starting Eclipse Thoroughbred Partners in 2011. One of the shifts in perspective he has seen in recent years relates to selling the experience as a whole instead of the idea of financial gain.

"The lifestyle and relationship experience is special for the people involved in these partnerships," said Wellman. "I think where our country has been different compared to Europe or Australia is that we allowed people who have gotten into the sport to believe that it's about money and the financial upside of owning horses. However, more and more, we are trying instead to send the message that while, yes, we want to succeed on the racetrack and we take a lot of pride in delivering high-level results, we will never represent to anyone that owning horses is about making money.

"It is about sport, prestige, competition, camaraderie, lifestyle, and the overall experience and joy you can get from owning a horse. Winning is absolutely paramount to sustaining yourself in the game, but you must also provide amenities and a behind-the-scenes experience for these people to be able to get more value for their money."

BABY STEPS

While the popularity of partnerships is undoubtedly on the rise, part of attracting new owners goes back to simply attracting new fans. Nine years ago Canterbury Park in Minnesota came up with a way to do both at the same time via its Canterbury Racing Club, and the success of that initiative has spread across the country.

"It has been fun to see all the other racing clubs starting up," said Jeff Maday, Canterbury's media relations' manager. "It's interesting to watch, and different tracks have taken different methods, but the end result is the same: We get new people involved and hopefully we get



REED PALMER/EMERALD DOWNS

Vince Bruun, inset, and Country Life Farm's Josh Pons



LYDIA A. WILLIAMS

people to start their own partnerships or buy their own horses."

Although the ins and outs of clubs vary at different tracks, many follow the concept that an owner puts up \$500 to be in the club for a year, and the club is usually capped at 200 people. That small of an investment is attractive to people who want to learn about the game without risking thousands of dollars.

"It is tough to get into the sport," said Maday. "If someone comes up to you at the racetrack and says, 'I would like to own a horse; what do I do?', where do you send them? We tried lots of different methods, and one day I thought,

‘why don’t we put a group together,’ and it ended up working.”

One of the first tracks to follow Canterbury’s lead was Emerald Downs in Washington, and that track has also found having a racing club to be a worthwhile effort.

“It is heartening to see how into it people really are,” said Vince Bruun, Emerald’s director of media relations. “You can’t make it basic enough for a lot of these people. A lot of them truly are real novices, but they love it. The stuff we in the industry take for granted, these people don’t. One of the things we really want to do is explain how racing works and how the billing works.

“We have already had some success with people not only getting in but getting in in a big way. Aithon Stable was in the original club, and they actually won a grade 3 at Santa Anita with Belle Hill.”

In 2016 Churchill Downs Inc. announced that it was going to start a racing club initiative. Churchill Downs and Fair Grounds Race Course & Slots currently have two racing clubs going while Arlington International is actively looking for appropriate horses for this type of venture.

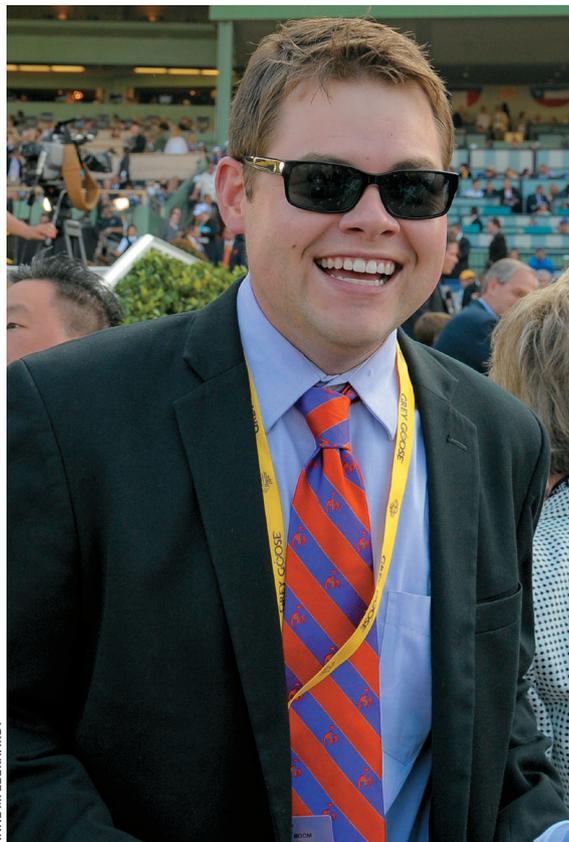
The first CDI racing club horse, Warrior’s Club, has already exceeded expectations. Last October he became a stakes winner by taking the Spendthrift Stallion Stakes, and he followed up that performance by finishing third to McCracken, currently a favorite for the Kentucky Derby Presented by Yum! Brands (G1), in the Kentucky Jockey Club Stakes (G2).

“Is Warrior’s Club going to make it to the Derby? Who knows, but he ran third to McCracken in the Jockey Club, so it’s pretty exciting,” said Mike Ziegler, CDI’s executive director of racing. “We have had a ton of fun with it—internally rooting for the house horses—and it really is a fun thing for everybody involved. It brings us back to the reason we are all here.”

OTHER AVENUES

Of course, the Thoroughbred industry isn’t just about racing. Breeding is a huge component of the game, and several people have seen a window to create partnerships in that arena as well.

One of the people marketing broodmare partnerships is Josh Pons of Country Life Farm in Maryland. Because of the breeding incentives in his state, Pons



Climax Stallions’ Sean Feld

sees value in offering people this avenue into the sport. Additionally, the partnerships are only for two years, which limits expense.

“It’s been a fun adventure so far,” said Pons, who started Raise You LLC in 2015. “The Maryland program right now makes it rewarding to breed a good horse. You are in line to collect breeders’ awards, and that is kind of the lottery ticket we are all buying. These broodmare partnerships are popular, and they sell out within hours after I announce what I am doing.”

Pons named the partnerships after

his family’s Raise You, who was bred by Country Life in 1946 and went on to be the dam of champion racehorse and major sire Raise a Native.

“To me, she is a wonderful example of perseverance by a savvy breeder, which my grandfather was,” Pons said. “With these partnerships you tap into the nostalgia of an earlier era in the horse business, but you are completely modernized in your approach to the business.”

For those interested in the stallion market, Bob and Sean Feld have launched Climax Stallions, which is syndicating its stallions in the same manner as racehorse syndicates. Climax is currently made up of three stallions: Bullet Train, Curlin to Mischief, and Haynesfield.

“It’s a totally different concept because we are going after non-horse people,” said Sean Feld. “The stallion thing is cool because if you have a piece of a horse, you only have one horse, but if you own a piece of a stallion, you kind of own all of the progeny in your own little way. It’s an overwhelming business overall, so any way you can help get new people in is good, and that’s what we are trying to do.”

The Felds are not new to the idea of partnerships. They manage a racing syndicate called The Club, which has about 12 horses at the moment, including multiple

grade 1 winner Miss Temple City, who was an Eclipse Award finalist in 2016.

“Partnerships are a great way to learn,” said Feld. “If you lose 85 of 100 races, you are still kicking ass. A lot of people can’t wrap their heads around losing 85 times, but it’s just the way the business is. You can learn just as much owning 5% of a horse as 100%, and at least you get to spread your risk. It’s better to dip your toe in the water than go all in when you are first starting out.” **BH**

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