



The Big Interview: Barry Irwin of Team Valor

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Barry Irwin has made a huge success of Team Valor, his ownership vehicle that has captured major races all over the world. So what are the secrets behind his global operation?

By Frances J Karon

Where did you come up with the idea for a partnership, first with Clover Racing in 1987 and with Team Valor International from 1992?

I was approached by some men who, well, the best way to put it would be to say that they were boiler room-type salesmen who wound up in Southern California. They syndicated a couple of horses but were rip-off artists. They'd buy a horse with a great pedigree for \$100,000 and syndicate it for \$900,000 or a million. These guys came to my office one day and said, 'Why don't we form a partnership? We'll raise the money, you pick the horses and manage them.'

Our first was [multiple Grade 1 winner] Political Ambition, who I bought from Brereton Jones. After he'd won, I realised he was a real horse and I said to my then business partner Jeff [Siegel], 'Look, these guys are going to get us in trouble.' We bought them out and allowed them to be salespeople for a short period of time before we phased them out.

You had immediate success with Clover...

The first couple of years were unreal. We bought Martial Law as a cull from Sheikh Mohammed, for \$60,000, and he won the Grade 1 Santa Anita Handicap on his third start for us. We bought half of Prized from Barbara LaCroix and he won the Breeders' Cup Turf. We were off and rolling. We won the Del Mar Oaks in our first year with Lizzy Hare, a filly I bought in England from Luca Cumani. We were just off to a good start.

How have things changed in your 24 years of being involved with racing syndicates?

The main difference is that when I started it was me, Cot Campbell, Centennial Farm, and that was about it. Now there are hundreds of people who do what I do. Some of them are the antithesis of what I try to do. In my company, it's the horse that comes first. The people come second. But I've got guys from Political Ambition and from Lizzy Hare in the 1980s that are still with us today.



Is it getting harder to recruit new partners?

We've had the same number of partners for about 20 years: 250 people. I don't know why that is. Some come, some go. I purposely don't advertise. I would like to find a way to promote my business but the kind of people you meet when you advertise aren't the kind of people you want and when I do take ads out I never put my phone number, I put my website. If somebody takes the initiative to try to find me, there's a greater likelihood that the person will be the kind of partner I'm looking for. I don't want impulse buyers; they're not the kind of people that are in it for the long run.

You have nice homebreds, like Grade 3 winner Animal Kingdom, bought from another Team Valor partnership as a yearling. How does that work?



With everything I do, there's no real game plan. I try to be flexible and try to give myself options as nobody knows where a good horse is going to come from. This year we've got five three-year-olds that can run and I bred four of them. I might not be able to do that again for ten years. Who knows why? So when I breed a horse I am breeding it in a way that hopefully I will like the horse enough to keep it. If I sell it that means I don't want it. It's difficult when you have as few mares as we do to breed a good horse. As an example – and this is a strange set-up, fraught with conflict of interest although fortunately my partners trust me enough to support me – Animal Kingdom and Ebony Flyer are the same kind of situation. With Animal Kingdom, we put him in a sale, I bought him myself for \$100,000, and after I went back to the people

who owned him with me and I said if anybody wants in, you can have in, here's the price, just what I paid for it. Then I offered him to the rest of the partnership. I bought Ebony Flyer as a suckling and put her in a yearling sale. I bought her and formed a new partnership. Ebony Flyer is the best filly I've ever had – she's better than Ipi Tombe.

How did you develop an interest in such an international portfolio?

I attribute that to my curiosity and restlessness. I get bored easily and am always looking for new challenges. My first love is track and field. I was an athlete (high jump and hurdling) and track and field's international, so I treated the horses the same way, always looking to other countries to see what was happening. When I was a writer I probably wrote for well over 20 international publications at one time or another.

Does athletics help you recognise the mechanics of a good racehorse?

Definitely. I never had a mentor – nobody in my family is a horse person. As I became an athlete I saw a direct comparison between human runners and horses. I spend a lot of time in the paddock looking at horses. When I was a writer I had the luxury of asking anybody I wanted as many questions as I could come up with. I drove guys like Charlie Whittingham crazy! What I try to look for in a horse is a certain rhythm and cadence, and the horses that have that do well. If you watch two in a stretch battle and one of them, his front legs are moving straight and he's reaching out, and the other one's going all over the place, legs going in each direction, and if they're of equal talent, the horse that moves best is going to get to the wire first.

So you saw those mechanics in Gitano Hernando when you bought him?

He had a great way of going and could keep it up. I thought he was a robust horse and I loved him. I am not a fan of synthetic tracks – I think they're great to train on but I don't think they're that great to race on. When I bought him he was the only horse I'd seen, that I could remember, that moved like a dirt horse on a synthetic track. That's what got me interested in him.

After you bought him, he won twice and ran second in the Dee Stakes before he won the Grade 1 Goodwood Stakes in California...

The trainer, Marco Botti, is a brilliant young guy but we always had a difference of opinion on whether he was a grass or synthetic horse. Even when we got ready to bring him over to run in California, he wanted to run him in another race the same weekend on turf. I don't like to get heavy-handed with trainers – I like to turn a horse over to a trainer and say, 'Here's my goal, this is what I think, go get 'em.' If I see something I think I can contribute, I will. Marco kept insisting and finally I blew a little bit and said: 'We're running in this as he's a synthetic horse, just give me a break!' After we won the race I never heard much about that from him.

Why did you sell Gitano Hernando to Ramzan Kadyrov?

We had a very good run with the horse. Everybody enjoyed him, everybody made money. We sold him to a guy who should do well with him, he's got plenty of racing left. To me it was a perfect type of scenario where we didn't squeeze him dry. We had our fun, this next guy's going to have his fun, and I think that's good. It's not easy to sell a good horse.

How many racehorses do you have?

In the US we have 15 four-year-olds and up, ten three-year-olds and seven two-year-olds. In South Africa we've 20 and in Europe four. Andre Fabre has a homebred called Brigantin (shown at right); he's a Group 3 winner and we're pointing him at the Ascot Gold Cup, which should be fun. And then I've got a couple of two-year-olds, one with Peter Schiergen in Germany out of a mare I own that's a Group 1 producer and then we also have a two-year-old Mr Greeley colt that I bought as a weanling who's a half-brother to Becrux that we won the Woodbine Mile with.

Has low prize-money deterred you from having more horses in Europe?

We've never been overly concerned with prize-money. Our focus is on developing horses. If the horses are good enough, they'll race for the right money. We consider purses and incentives for owners and breeders in France to be attractive, so we have always kept half a dozen mares at Haras des Capucines in Normandy. But we race in Germany, where the prize-money sucks, because they have excellent racing and terrific trainers capable of developing world-class horses. This is what we are after.



Will you expand your European racing programme?

We hope to keep about half a dozen horses in Europe with Marco, Peter Schiergen and John Hammond. We don't plan to have anything more extensive. We want to run a boutique operation centred at Fair Hill in Maryland and use European horses to supplement the stable.

You have a possible Kentucky Derby contender in Animal Kingdom, who is by Leroidesanimaux out of the Group-winning Acatenango mare Dalicia...

Animal Kingdom's a fabulous looking horse. I am perplexed to find a horse like him that might be able to run on the dirt, because you can't find anything in his pedigree to suggest it. I certainly didn't breed him to be a Kentucky Derby horse, so I just think I got lucky. I find it just amazing.

Another Derby candidate is Crimson China, a son of Giant's Causeway you purchased privately out of Brian Meehan's yard after winning at Wolverhampton. What was his appeal?

Brian is a guy that takes his time – his horses don't fire first time. But this one almost won first time out and the horse he almost beat had just lost a photo finish to Abjer, who went out and won a Group 3, so the form was good, the horse moved well and I do love Giant's Causeway – I've bred to him several times and I've bought offspring of his, he was such a neat horse.



Your newest purchase, Kentucky Oaks hopeful Summer Soiree, won the Grade 3 Bourbonette Oaks by over ten lengths at Turfway Park. How long after did you know you wanted her?

I didn't think about it at the time but the next day I zeroed in on her. We were lucky as she was owned by Brereton Jones and he is a seller. Every year he sells a good horse. A lot of people won't sell a horse as they think they'll never get another like it, but he's got enough confidence to know he can crank them out every year.

This year you've consolidated your US horses, with broodmares and young stock at Denali in Paris, Kentucky, and the racehorses with British-born trainer Graham Motion at Fair Hill. What led to that?

It'll be a lot easier to work with. When I used to spread the racehorses around I did it because one guy can't train every type of horse. Guys that can train sprinters can't train long distance horses. And also I like the adventurism of being able to have horses in various locales. I went to Graham Motion for a few reasons. Number one, I don't want to have a trainer that's going to get me in trouble with drugs and with this guy I don't have to worry about that. That's not the main reason but it's one that gives me comfort. I don't want to be embarrassed. I've been embarrassed and it's no fun. Number two, he trains the kind of horses that I aspire to own, horses that run long and can run on turf or dirt. I've always wanted to have my horses trained off the track. Graham trains at a place that is incredible. You can train a horse there and go anywhere you want and run in a race and do well, and that appeals to me. I think the trade-off with him is I'm probably not going to have as many early two-year-old winners, but I'm willing to take that trade-off because I think I'll get what I want out of my horses and they'll last longer.

How would you like to see horseracing improved on a global scale?

I'm really worried about Betfair, to tell you the truth. They scare the hell out of me. I think they can ruin our sport. The only thing that keeps our sport going is that there's a partnership between people who want to bet horses and the people who want to conduct the sport, and right now, worldwide, the punters are up in arms, and I think it's a good thing. I used to be a horseplayer myself so I can identify with these people. I think that they need better treatment and they do need to have a voice because they are legitimate stakeholders and people in racing, especially the owners and trainers, have to take that into consideration. I just wish that worldwide we could come up with something that would include the elimination of all bookmakers and especially of Betfair. They don't recognise that they need to give anything back to racing. I find that disturbing.

And your ultimate goal in racing, what would that be?

I don't really have an ultimate goal. What I would like to do is just have a small, well-run operation that produces horses that run in good races every year and gives the people that I have as customers as much pleasure as possible. The greatest joy and – it sounds corny – yes, it's exciting to win a big race. There's no doubt about it. That's why we all do it. But it is so much more fun to watch the people's reaction when they win a big race. I know that I'm giving this joy to these people.

WORLD IN MOTION

Maryland-based trainer Graham Motion's international outlook makes him a perfect fit with Team Valor. It's an outlook forged by his background in racing, with Motion – like many budding trainers – inclined to seek different experiences as a youngster to prepare him for the vagaries of the job.

The British-born Motion says: "I left England for the US at 16 so I never really worked in racing there, but my parents had a farm so I was always involved with horses.

"My first introduction to training was at Haras du Mesnil in France after high school. When I came back to the States I went to work for Jonathan Sheppard for five years, and then I was with Jonathan Pease in France for a season."

Asked whether the fact Barry Irwin is one of racing's most international American-based owners affected his decision to start training for Team Valor last November, Motion replies: "Definitely. After the Breeders' Cup, Barry was very keen to send Pluck to Europe and that's something I've always wanted to do.

"What I love about racing, as much as anything, is the international aspect of it, like the Breeders' Cup. I would love to take a horse to Europe to be competitive in a well-known race. My roots are European so it's something that's always appealed to me.

"Probably one of the neatest things I've done before my own career was taking [Sheppard's] Flatterer to Europe, where he was second in the 1986 French Champion Hurdle and the 1987 Champion Hurdle." Thoughts of taking Pluck to Europe this year have been dashed by his injury but Motion adds: "Part of the excitement to me is that Team Valor look to do something like that and hopefully we'll get another chance. There's a much better shot of doing it with someone like Barry than with most people."

