

# Trust is key to horse racing's crucial owner-trainer relationships



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It is the crux of the job description Todd Pletcher and his fellow trainers adhere to in their quest to triumph in a sport where losing is the norm.

It is also the formula Team Valor CEO Barry Irwin and other owners who invest in the Thoroughbred game use to get the best return on their leaps of faith.

Whether an owner or a trainer, success often depends on the ability to assess an individual and figure out how they best fit into your program.

In only part of the equation is that individual the horse.

The astute instincts needed to keep a barn full of Thoroughbreds happy is rivaled only by the delicate balance required between owners and trainers to keep their relationships in top form.



Just as there is no one way to bring a horse up to a big race, the most successful and enduring human pairings are often the product of myriad elements — not the least of which is trust.

Some owners want to be kept abreast of every breath their horses draw. Others put the full brunt of the day-to-day decision making in the hands of their trainers.

Thus, a good chunk of a trainer's job is figuring out how to manage the variety of personalities that help pay the bills.

"Every owner has a different need, a different outlook on what they're looking for in horse racing," said five-time Eclipse Award winner Pletcher, who counts such outfits as WinStar Farm, Mike Repole, and Starlight Racing among his clients. "Some of them are ultra-competitive and want to win all the time. Others put less emphasis on winning and are more focused on the enjoyment of it, and if (the horses) perform well that's great, and if they don't they still love them the same.

"Everyone has different personalities and different competitiveness. Each owner is an individual just like each horse is an individual."

The owners and trainers who enjoy and maintain success are the ones who figure out how to manage what is essentially a power struggle.

Since it is their money driving the bus, owners have the ultimate say in what they can and can't do with their horses. Since the trainers and their staffs are the ones with said horses each day, they often have the best handle on what will truly be in their charge's best interest.

Even if their personalities conflict, having respect for the other's opinion is paramount. Some of the greatest scores horsemen have enjoyed came when egos were put aside and ears were opened.



"My feeling is as much money is as invested in the horses, they (the owners) have a right to have a voice," said trainer Graham Motion, who conditions all of Team Valor's horses including 2011 Kentucky Derby winner Animal Kingdom. "Most of them that have been in the business for a while can make a good decision, and I'm not always going to make the right decision.

"Certainly there is a balance and from the owner's point of view and trainer's point of view you've got to be able to make your own decisions or know when to back off."

Few events put the owner-trainer relationship under the microscope like the Kentucky Derby.

While the quest for roses has resulted in emotional scenes such as trainer Carl Nafzger tearfully embracing his 92-year-old client, Frances Genter, after Unbridled's triumph in 1990, the strain can test even successful partnerships — i.e. the split that occurred between the owners of Seattle Slew and trainer Billy Turner after Slew became the first undefeated Triple Crown winner in 1977.

This year's Toyota Blue Grass Stakes at Keeneland became the host of a much-discussed conflict between Mike Maker, trainer of juvenile champion Hansen, and the colt's co-owner Dr. Kendall Hansen over the latter's desire to playfully dye his horse's tail blue for the race.

What ultimately led to the mini dust-up between the straight-laced Maker and his ebullient client was the potential nemesis of any owner-trainer pairing — lack of communication.

"Our whole relationship is constant communication, to me that is a huge piece," Repole said of his relationship with Pletcher. "I call it over-communication, Todd calls it micro-managing. But at the end of the day, we have good chemistry.

"He can be as straight with me as possible. If I have a \$300,000 yearling that I'm excited about that can't beat *him* in the morning, he doesn't have to sugarcoat it."

The relationship between Repole and Pletcher — who campaigned Uncle Mo and Stay Thirsty together last year — has morphed into a genuine friendship, something that can be beneficial or more taxing to the job.

Doug O'Neill has been training for owner J. Paul Reddam for the better part of 10 years, seeing the president of CashCall through some of his marquee moments. The fact O'Neill has the chance to give Reddam his first Kentucky Derby winner next Saturday when he saddles Santa Anita Derby winner I'll Have Another is adding to both the pressure and the elation of the moment.

"Paul's just so loyal it's unbelievable," O'Neill said. "He's got multiple trainers and he would never take one from one guy and give it to another. So it's added a lot of icing to this wonderful ride we're having with I'll Have Another, that's for sure."

However, considering the tough decisions involved in racing, some find it easier to remove emotion as much as possible.

"My relationship with trainers has always been the same, it's a totally professional relationship," Team Valor's Irwin said. "I'm not looking for a friend. I want to be friendly and like the guy, but my whole thing is, I want to win. If a guy can win and he's *playing by the rules*, that's what I look for in a trainer."

And if one can't handle either delivering or receiving bad news, it's probably a sign that partnership has run its course.

"You have to trust and empower the people who are working with you or for you," Repole said. "Sometimes in sports, the most talented players don't always win championships. But the teams that have the best chemistry and work together, they win."

