

From *Pennsylvania Equestrian* comes the following:

TEAM VALOR FOUNDER BARRY IRWIN IS RACING'S SYNDICATE KING

by Terry Conway

Born into another era, he might have been a swashbuckling pirate captaining a stealth sailing ship.

"I just sit back and wait for something to happen, and then I pounce," said Barry Irwin with a sly grin.

Known for his keen eye for prospecting thoroughbred talent, Irwin tends to listen to his gut and doesn't shy away from risks. The founder and CEO of racing's most successful racing partnership, Team Valor International, Irwin's bold thinking played out spectacularly when Animal Kingdom roared down the stretch in 2011 to capture the sport's most coveted prize, the Kentucky Derby.



Team Valor International's Chief Executive Officer Barry Irwin leads home-bred colt Animal Kingdom into winners' circle last season after the 137th Kentucky Derby.

Irwin, trainer Graham Motion and jockey Johnny Velazquez teamed up again in the 138th running of the Derby looking to become the first back-to-back connections to take the Derby since 1972-'73. Went the Day Well encountered a rough trip early in the race, having to check sharply twice in the first three furlongs. The colt was sixteenth headed into the first turn, but rallied boldly to finish fourth.

"Went the Day Well ran a huge race," Motion said. "I think with another jump he's second and with a good trip he has a shot to win the race. It's frustrating but we had a beautiful trip last year (with Animal Kingdom), we had the trip (the winner) I'll Have Another had this year. That's what it's all about in this race. You've got to have a good trip.

"The start cost him. Johnny wanted to be about 8-10 lengths further ahead at the start than he was. That didn't work out. Then he got checked in the first turn. That's where all the bad things start to happen."

A son of the 2002 Derby runner-up, Proud Citizen, Went the Day Well was born in New York but ran twice in England before Irwin traveled there and bought a 75 percent stake in him. (Mark Ford retains a 25 percent interest.) Team Valor syndicated the colt to ten partners for \$850,000. Irwin thought his pedigree suggested dirt and targeted the Triple Crown races over last winter. Went the Day Well put Team Valor's colors in the winner's circle and punched his ticket for the Derby by taking the \$500,000 Spiral Stakes (same as Animal Kingdom did in 2011) by 3 1/2 lengths at Turfway Park in late March.



“I had a lot of confidence in this horse,” Irwin added. “In the last yards of the Spiral he showed a different gear and ran faster than Animal Kingdom (in 2011). He’s a big, tough son-of-a-gun, and I knew he could handle the Derby’s mile and a quarter”.

“It’s a credit to Barry to find a New York-bred running in England on synthetic surface and point him to the Triple Crown races,” Motion said. “Not many folks could do that.”

International Bonanza

Irwin has tracked down plenty of truly talented horses from overseas. Take Animal Kingdom. He is a son of the Brazilian-bred Leroidesanimaux who won a pair of Grade-1 turf races in California, while his mother, German-bred mare Dalacia, raced five years in Germany, France and North America.

Barry and Kathleen Irwin celebrate Animal Kingdom’s Spiral Stakes at Turfway.

“In Kentucky I’m kind of a renegade,” related Irwin, who worked as a turf writer for the Daily Racing Form and Blood-Horse before moving into racing partnerships in the late 1970s.

“I’m not with the establishment. I’ve got my own ideas about stallions and I’ve taken a lot of grief. For me to be in Kentucky, to have bought the sire, imported the mare, and bred the foal, a Kentucky Derby winner, that’s a lot of satisfaction.”

Irwin dresses and talks as if he is straight out of one of Damon Runyon’s racetrack stories. He is brash and outspoken, and makes no apologies.

“I’m the kind of guy that gets bored easily, I need to do different things,” explained Irwin, who purchased a home near the Fair Hill Training Center in 2011. “Following international racing is a lot of fun. I think that we (America) have not done enough importing of horses and blood lines from other places where horses don’t run on drugs and horses’ legs are not manipulated. Horses basically are bigger, tougher, stronger and sounder.”

Irwin founded his first racing stable with longtime friend Jeff Siegel in 1987. He has scored 55 stakes wins while racing such top-flight horses as Golden Ballet, Unbridled Belle, Star of Cozzene and Captain Bodgit. In 2011 Team Valor horses earned a touch under \$4 million. Team Valor has owned 16 Grade-1 winners and 11 million dollar race winners.

His racing success in South Africa has no real precedent in America. Currently, Irwin says his most talented horse is Ebony Flyer, a filly who has won seven of ten races in South Africa.

“I’ve had some very good horses there like Ipi Tombe and Iridescence and I think she’s better than them,” Irwin related. “She’s a big, black, physical monster like Zenyatta. My biggest charge is finding a diamond in the rough, horses from faraway places, purchasing them and bringing them to America and watching them do well. Sometimes I’m a lucky son of a gun.”

In November 2010 Irwin turned over all thirty of the syndicate’s horses to Graham Motion and later purchased a barn at Fair Hill Training Center. The primary reason for making the move from various racetracks to one training center is the opportunity to have one set of eyes on all of his horses on a daily basis. Also appealing was Motion’s European-style training and his reputation for holding back horses less than perfectly fit out of races, even lucrative ones.

“Graham has rejuvenated our operation,” Irwin said. “He is very open, extremely courteous and very creative, he’s always thinking. Every time I get off the phone with the guy, I think, ‘What a pleasure.’”



The switch to Motion worked out better than Irwin ever imagined. After scoring a Kentucky Derby victory within six months of the switch, in 2012 Team Valor had four colts on the Derby Trail—Went the Day Well, State of Play, Howe Great, and Lucky Chappy. Went the Day Well will target graded stakes dirt races, while the other three will be pointed to turf races in May and throughout the year. Other top horses are the fillies Summer Soiree and Allaboutcaroline, plus Meistersinger and Brujo de Olleros, a colt from Uruguay who ran the fastest dirt mile in the track’s 75 years. He is slated to make his American debut at Saratoga.

The Early Days

Growing up in Long Beach, Calif., horseracing was a non-starter in the Irwin household.

“From the time I was a little kid, I liked any kind of racing,” Irwin recalled. “My dad, my brother and I competed in track and field. But, my family hated horses, hated gambling. Fortunately, I had an aunt who loved to go to the track. She took me to Hollywood Park and Santa Anita when I was seven. I would get my grandparents to drive me out to these farms and I would go out in the fields and whinny trying to talk to the horses.”

In 1969 Irwin packed his bags and moved to Kentucky, working as a staff writer for The Blood-Horse, before returning home to write for and later edit Thoroughbred of California and contribute the Southern California column to the Daily Racing Form.

“I drove a lot of famous people nuts, asking them questions,” Irwin recalled. “But there were things I wanted to know and I was in a perfect place to pester racing’s greats for answers.”

Still, he wanted to be a player, not a writer.

When simulcast wagering was introduced in the winter of 1978, Irwin and Jeff Siegel put aside their notepads, launching Clover Racing Stables. The first horse to wear their black silks with green clovers was Political Ambition who became a Grade 1 winner in the Hollywood Derby; later that year English import Lizzy Hare won the Grade 2 Del Mar Oaks.

A new business concept, Clover Racing syndications brought more people into the sport by selling shares of a horse, as little as 2.5, 5 or 10 percent.

“A lot of people made fun of us,” Irwin remembered. “They said stuff like, what you can’t buy your own horse? Do you own the tail? But gradually we got some prominent guys who buy five or ten percent of a horse, and they get as big a charge out of it as someone who has the whole horse. That means a lot to me.”

Barry Irwin and Jeff Siegel in the paddock at Santa Anita Park in Arcadia, California





They soon gained a reputation as the “upset kings.” Fifty-to-one Martial Law triumphed in the \$1 million Santa Anita Handicap. Prized shocked the racing world by upsetting Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes winner Sunday Silence in the 1990 Swaps Stakes (left). For an encore their colt captured the \$2 million Breeders’ Cup Turf in his first start on grass.

Irwin and Siegel broke away from their partners and formed Team Valor in 1992. Irwin bought out Siegel in 2007 and took sole control of ownership.

“We had limited funds in the beginning,” said Irwin, “and we wanted to get the most horse for the dollars spent. So we put talent first. We also relegated pedigree even farther down the list.

“Second to talent, we placed athleticism. Next we looked at soundness, followed by temperament. Pedigree became our last consideration. We wanted to get the most bang for our buck and pedigree costs money, lots of money, money that most times is never returned to the investor.”

Irwin rolled the dice in 1997 when he purchased Captain Bodgit after he ran third at Gulfstream in his three-year old debut and was syndicated for \$500,000 by Team Valor. Irwin looked beyond the colt’s bowed tendon, focusing on his talent and athleticism.

After winning the Florida Derby and the Wood Memorial, “The Captain” was the favorite in the Kentucky Derby, where he roared down the stretch and just missed winning by a head in a hard-fought battle with Silver Charm. Captain Bodgit finished a neck back in the Preakness. The colt injured a tendon, most likely when over-extending himself in the stretch run, and was immediately retired. A half-interest in him was sold for \$1.25 million when he entered stud in February, 1998. He currently stands in Canada.

Lightning Rod

Passion and conviction are two traits Irwin brings in spades. His penchant for spouting unpopular opinions has made him a polarizing figure in the racing industry. After Animal Kingdom won the 2011 Derby Irwin was interviewed by NBC Sports on his way to the Derby winner’s circle. Asked why he gave all 30 of his syndicate’s horses to the trainer Graham Motion, Irwin pulled no punches.

“I got tired of other trainers lying to me, and I wanted a guy to tell me the truth,” he responded.

Translation: trainers had misled him as he sought to make decisions in the best interests of his horses. A firestorm erupted among the dozens of trainers he had employed over 25 years. In the ensuing days, Irwin backed off his comments somewhat, stating which trainers he was not taking a swipe at.

“Do I feel like what I said is correct? I do.” Irwin maintained. “I wish I would have not said it in the wake of our sport’s greatest event.”

A retired IBM executive, Tom Furey is one of the 20 part-owners of Animal Kingdom.





“Barry is as nice a guy as you want to meet, but he takes his responsibilities to the partners and to the sport seriously” Furey said. “He’s a quirky guy, though, and what goes on in his head always gets said.”

In late March an explosive article in the New York Times was highly critical of both the alleged widespread use of drugs in racing and what it characterized as lax state regulation of the sport.

Whether it's drugging horses, snookering gullible owners at the sales or trainers not being up front with owners, Irwin says the sport as a whole has looked the other way far too long. He has screamed the loudest concerning the sport’s “culture of drugs” -- medication administered to keep horses running, to allow them to run faster, to push them run through pain or infirmity.

The United States and Canada are the only major racing jurisdictions in the world that currently permit the race-day use of Lasix (furosemide), a medication that is used to keep horses from pulmonary hemorrhaging during a race.

A resolute member of the hay, oats and water crowd, Irwin was not happy when the Kentucky Racing Commission in April voted not to enforce a ban on race day medication in graded stakes races for two-year olds. Trainers vehemently opposed the ban and regulators have remained inactive. Practicing what he preaches, Irwin revealed that Team Valor two year olds won't be running on Lasix in 2012.

“It was very disappointing,” Irwin said. “The Jockey Club and TOBA (Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association) can't step up to the plate. It's not in their make-up. It is going to take a grassroots rebellion among large number of owners, a steady drumbeat.

“It is perceived by the public as juicing horses in order to render them healthy and sound enough to race. If we say to the public that there will be less a chance of a horse bleeding by administering Lasix, then what we're really saying is that too many horses bleed on a regular basis and that PETA is correct that we are being cruel to our horses. Either way, proponents of race day meds have a position that is indefensible.”

At a time when the federal government is threatening to take drastic measures to clean up the racing game, Irwin offers trainers this trade-off: keep treating their horses with meds on race day and drive the racing game into an abyss, or change their position and help revitalize the game. Said Irwin:



“Horsemen should realize that a game without drugs is preferable to no game at all.”