

# JOHN THOMPSON

## *Definition of (the) abyss:*

*A deep or seemingly bottomless chasm;  
A wide or profound difference between  
people;*

*The regions of hell conceived of as a  
bottomless pit;*

*A catastrophic situation seen as likely to  
occur.*

**H**e took on a training empire in its infancy to achieving the Leading Australian Two-Year-Old Trainer within two years, to then being the one left facing the angry mob as it crumbled around him, was personally stranded with enormous debt, accepted the mammoth job of setting up a race meeting from scratch over 9,000 km away in China, a job so well-done it was rewarded by a wealthy owner with having the pick of any one of his 30 yearlings to train and choosing First Seal, backing himself with the support of his family and climbing out of a dark hole of desperation and debt through the sale of one horse.

It is not Hollywood fiction but the true-life story of John Thompson.

During the course of our recent interview at his Randwick stables John politely excuses himself twice to attend to clients who have come to inspect their horses.

Not just any clients but two of the biggest in the industry.

China Horse Club's Racing Manager Karl Henry and Emirates Park Stud owner His Excellency Nasser Lootah.

But things were not always this good.

After the demise of Patinack Farm John had just four horses left in his 50 Randwick boxes - and by his own admission - was curled up at home in the foetal position not knowing how he was going to pay his bills and considering walking away from the



*Trainer John Thompson with one  
of his stable stars, First Seal*

*Photo by Lisa Grimm*

industry he had known all his life.

John Thompson, 42 - has been to hell and back - and this is his story.

## **THE BEGINNING**

John - a fourth generation trainer - had the perfect grounding for his chosen profession. His father Vic Thompson Jnr, won the Sydney Trainer's Premiership in 1991-92, was runner-up the previous season, leading trainer for many years and well known as private trainer to the 'Chicken Kings' and owners of the famous cerise colours, Jack and Bob

Ingham. Vic also designed and oversaw the construction of the state of the art training complex Crown Lodge at Warwick Farm - now 'the nursery of champions' owned and operated by Godolphin. It was an excellent schooling for any budding trainer.

"We lived at the stables - obviously they were in the backyard - at Rosehill," recalls John. "Dad had the corner stable block there which was eventually bought out by Bob Lapointe who developed it."

# BACK FROM THE ABYSS

“Good early days - pretty much Dad’s whole career he was private trainer to Don Storey and Jack and Bob Ingham. Obviously they wanted to go bigger then we moved to Warwick Farm where over the next two or three years the stables were purchased, knocked down and then Crown Lodge was built on two blocks.

“While that was being designed and built and set-up, that was all a good learning curve for a young guy wanting to come into the industry and very interesting times to see it grow from nothing to the empire it is today.

“When I left school and was doing the early part of my foremanship with Dad, Peter Snowden had just come down from the bush, doing his early education.”

It is quite remarkable how John’s career has in many ways mirrored that of his father. From the pressures of running a major stable for one owner to having no horses when you depart - John had seen first-hand what his father went through and the lifelong lessons the experience brought. In actual fact, it was probably the best grounding he could have had, for the serious challenges that lay ahead in his career.

“After Dad left Inghams, my brother and I ran a small stable at Warwick Farm for a couple of years in his name while we got ourselves sorted out. We had a bit of luck, won a Metropolitan with Zamination (1993) but then it was time to come out and get some experience and that is when I came to Randwick and have been here ever since.”

“I did four years with Billy Mitchell, a couple of months with Graeme Rogerson, before the job with Bart came up as his foreman and stayed there for eight years. Then while I was there (John pauses

for a moment as if to catch his breath) Nathan Tinkler had horses with Anthony Cummings and used to come to trackwork a bit and I met him and through Anthony’s recommendation got the job as his private trainer.”

## **BART’S FOREMAN**

Your time with Bart - what has stayed with you?

(John’s voice changes - like gears shifting, he moves from his head to his heart).

“It was sort of an interesting time because when I started there he didn’t have many horses in work.”

“When I first went down there to meet him in his stables it was probably two-thirds empty and when I sat down with him we probably hit it off straight away because I said to him, ‘You look like you’re about to retire?’ (John laughs).

“I was straight up with him. I was just being direct. I got to worry about my future. A young family. Mortgage.

“And he laughed, he thought it was funny and he said, ‘No, all we’ve got to do is get winners and the stable will grow again.’ That was our mission and to his credit we got winners straight away and good winners like we nearly won the Derby with Strasbourg and it sort of grew in momentum.

“He said, ‘I will be proactive at the sales again.’ We went to the sales and bought a truck load of horses and again from that lot of horses we got Group One winners Swick and Sirmione. A lot of good success and it just snowballed and before you knew it, two years later we’re back up on the premiership and winning races left, right and centre and a force in the carnivals again.

“It was great. My perception of Bart going in was of a very famous person that loved the limelight and

all that sort of thing but when you actually met him and got to know him he was quite the opposite. You know he was very shy, and a bit of a recluse, loved his horses but didn’t like big crowds and didn’t like to look for publicity. He just wanted to spend time with his horses and work and get winners basically.

“It was great, very good times, a lot of fun and really made you enjoy racing because everyone loved Bart and it was just a fantastic experience to go through.”

What would you say in hindsight now, were some of the greatest things you learnt from him?

“Definitely feeding. His attention to detail in that department is second to none. Better than anyone. And you see that, I think, coming through in my horses. You can walk from the front of my stable to the back and every horse in the place is healthy and looks well and does well because I feed pretty much identical to what Bart fed and you’d be silly if you didn’t try and mimic his training ways. Just year after year he developed top-line good horses and fingers crossed I’d like to think that I have been able to do that. Each year we have produced nice horses and the plan going forward is to continue to do that.”

If you speak to anyone who spent a lot of time with Bart they all agree he was not only a genius with equines but also a master of human psychology.

“He was, he was good at playing people off each other but he’d always use that to get the best out of people,” John recalls. “He just made you feel like you were eight foot tall and bullet proof when you worked for him. Because he’s Bart Cummings and he’s got your back, he’d back you and your judgment and when I left there, I wasn’t afraid

to do anything with horses.

“It was just amazing - we had so much success - we won Magic Millions with Mimi Lebrock, Melbourne Cups with Viewed and Derbies. Like I said, it was sort of the learning curve of knowing how to feed a horse properly, knowing how to work them properly and if you do x and y you get z. I think if you look at my short training record each year, he taught me how to develop and make good horses. And you see that each year. We are developing stakes horses every year. It’s not my aim to just get winners - it’s my aim to get stakes winners. Doing my time with him, taught me how to do that.”

When Bart passed away on 30 August 2015, John gave the following tribute to *The Daily and Sunday Telegraph’s* Racing Editor Ray Thomas.

“Very sad day in racing, we have lost a legend. I have lost a master and a friend. I wouldn’t be the trainer or the man I am today without his influence. Every runner I have has a piece of Bart in it.”

“For sure, I think there is no doubting that (quote) whatsoever. The feed is nearly identical and I think you see that in my horses when they parade at the races. They look well, they wouldn’t look out of place in his yard. They just look very similar, bright in the eye, bit of a tribute to him having the rolled leather bridles. Bart was very much against plastic and I have followed that trend, just being with him and knowing the attention to detail in every way - not just the horse but your gear. I am a bit of a fanatic with the gear as well. (John laughs). So that was passed on.”

#### **PATINACK FARM**

So you then went from Leilani Lodge to be head trainer at Nathan Tinkler’s?

“He (Tinkler) poached me.”

Was that a hard decision?

“Very, very hard (decision). I always thought, Bart and I had joked together, he used to invite me up to



*John Thompson’s stables nestled on High Street hill overlook Royal Randwick*

his farm of a weekend and have a barbecue on a Sunday. And we’d always joke, I’d be his last ever foreman. It was very sad to go.”

Was it hard telling him?

“Very hard. It was sad - we both shed a tear. He was a good mentor. Like he knew I was giving him a 110% and everyone makes mistakes in this game, he’d always forgive me for making a mistake because he knew I was trying to do my best. It was good (my time with him).”

“But when I told him, he did say to me, ‘You’ve always said that you were going to be my last foreman.’ I said, ‘Look Boss, the money was too good to knock back. Tinkler flew me to his farm and said, ‘Give me your pay slip - I’m going to triple it.’

That doesn’t come along every day.

“No, when I had a young family, a mortgage, it was a good opportunity. Very scary. Very scary to go into something like that when my father had been through it with the Inghams and probably one thing he learnt there was not to put all your eggs in one basket. And it was scary going into that again. And obviously a lot of pressure, they’d spent a lot of money on horses and were expecting results. It was a hard job to go into because the horses came from 20 different trainers all over the country. A lot of people had horses you never knew even trained for him - Gai Waterhouse, Mark Kavanagh, Peter Moody, Mick Price - they all had at

least half a dozen horses and they came from everywhere into the one stable with us at Warwick Farm.”

“It probably took a minimum 12 months to get it all going. I did have to change my ways a bit, in the fact that Bart never pushed early two-year-olds whereas Nathan was a breeder. He had Casino Prince and Husson as stallions and he wanted them to be competitive as two-year-olds. So I had to change my ways with educating and training early two-year-olds, to get those horses to run well early.

“And off the back of that Casino Prince was leading two-year-old stallion and Husson was number two and I was leading Australasian Two-Year-Old Trainer for that season but we probably only ran at full strength for 18 months.”

When did you realise things might be starting to get a bit shaky?

“Pretty quickly. We had money troubles and it was a downhill spiral from there. We couldn’t pay bills, couldn’t pay feed bills, people were always chasing us for money.”

It must have been a terrible way to live?

“Not good fun. The last two years at Patinack - I wouldn’t say it was pure hell but it was close to it. Not so much the people I worked with who were all lovely, nice people but when you are trying to run a big stable with no money, it was terrible. You couldn’t pay people and they needed to get paid obviously and it was just very

hard times. For me it was still a good learning curve because I learnt to run a big stable on no budget and still got winners and still managed to get by on a shoestring budget.”

It was reported, at times you didn't know where you were going to be able to find the money to pay for your feed or buy feed?

“Yes, well most of the time we had to pay for it ourselves and then get it back off Patinack when they could afford to pay us back because the horses needed to be fed. Credit to our feed suppliers because they were never too harsh on us, they would always do their best to keep the feed coming for the horses but it was pretty crook there at times.”

“We were getting yelled at and we would just have to grin and bear it and push on and do our best in a tight, tough situation and credit to the staff I had at the time, they were very loyal and just put their head down and got the job done.

“Yes, it was a tough time.”

It's a credit to you because never, ever in the whole time did I hear you publicly say anything disparaging about Nathan Tinkler.

“Yes well, I wasn't going to gain anything from that - not that I was after a gain, probably it's not in my make-up. What a lot of people don't know is when his horses left here and the private stable shut and I took over the stable for myself I had to pay off his debt.”

“He never paid off the last few months training of the rent, so because the rent was totally in my name I had to fork up the money. It was a big amount and I couldn't afford it straight up so I had to pay it off.

“The race club were a bit tough - they made me pay off his debt but they gave me the time to pay it off so I guess I can't be too angry.”

Were you reimbursed later for all you were owed?

“No. He (Tinkler) still owes me personally over \$100,000 today.”

(John laughs as if he has just heard a good joke). “Which I can probably kiss goodbye.” (John laughs again).

There was always this public perception that you got paid back whatever was owed?

“Still chasing it up today. Owes me like \$120,000 and I had to pay the Club like \$60,000 and \$70,000 in rent - unpaid rent of his.”

Can you still ring him on a phone - can you get him directly?

“I can get him directly but he won't pay us.”

Is the fact you think because he hasn't got it or he doesn't want to pay it?

“He's moved on I think. He's just said, ‘That's it I'm done with that.’”

“It disappoints me that myself and the staff were still owed - on top of that \$120,000 - that is just what he owned me personally - but on top of that is Super(annuation) - owes me like three years of Super so you can add another whatever on top of that money which I will probably never get either - so it's a lot of big dollars - so all up its probably \$200,000 he owes me.”

Another misconception which John shared in our interview was it was reported at the time what he was owed personally would be paid out of the proceeds of the Patinack horses being sold at sale. John, although promised this would occur, again didn't see a cent.

“So, we live and learn from these mistakes that we make in life,” John says with good humour in his voice.

You don't seem to hold any grudges?

“You've got to move on, you can't hold grudges. You don't worry about it, you move on, keep your head down and bum up.”

And such is this remarkable attitude of Thompson - although at the toughest time of his career when left with just four horses in a fifty horse stable and a mountain of debt - he still sees the positives he can take away from the situation.

“To this day out of the 1500 horses they sold, I think there have been five Group winners out of the sale and I have trained four of them,” shared John.

John recalled something once said to him by Sky Racing tv and radio personality Richard Freedman right at the start of the Patinack Farm experience which he says, “Was the best advice I was given and helped me through those difficult times.”

“Richard said to me: ‘John, you may last a month, you may last a year. Ride the wave, go with the flow. There will be ups and there will be downs. You'll train winners and you'll train losers.’”

There are a few further positives John takes away from his ‘roller-coaster’ ride at Patinack Farm.

“I was still training horses right up until the finish.”

“Only person not to get sacked!” John says with a grin.

But there were still the dark days and it was the support from those who knew John best - his wife Nicole and children Jake and Elise - which stopped him from leaving the industry.

“Incredible, my wife's my backbone. She's lucky enough, her father was a trainer, Rod Craig, trained Intergaze.”

“I think if she didn't have my back in knowing the ups and downs of racing, I would have walked away or been forced to walk away. 18 months ago when I had four horses here in a fifty horse stable and I was dead-set home in the foetal position, she was always the one that said, ‘Don't worry, you know what you're doing, you're good at what you do, you'll get back on your feet, all you need is horses.’”

It must have been especially hard for you during those times.

“You've got no idea and the money side of it too because we were getting jammed by Patinack and running a stable is very expensive and when you are going from being owed

a lot of money to having to take on the stable yourself, and not having the horses here to pay the rent and have got to not only pay the rent going forward but pay his (Tinkler's) debt - it was a tough 12 months.....tough 12 months."

But John, thanks to his supportive family, an unwavering self-belief, the excellent grounding he received from his father and Bart Cummings, and one compliment in particular from the Legend himself, never gave up.

"There was a bunch of trainers one morning in the Randwick hut and they were all talking and pointing out their houses in the distance. One said, 'Yeh my house is up there on the hill' and another said, 'Yeh I just live over there on the other side of the hill' and they were sort of geeing me up saying, 'Oh where do you live Johnny?' They were trying to stir me because I had to drive to work twice a day from Brighton and that sort of stuff - and I said, 'Your binoculars aren't strong enough to see my house!'

"Anyway Bart popped up and he said, 'Don't you worry about John. Just a matter of time before he'll pass you lot and he'll be living on the harbour behind us...just a matter of time.' And that was the best compliment because he shut them all up!"

It was not the only time the Legend showed his faith in John.

"He (Bart) couldn't get around the stables while you were working because he was allergic to the dust but after work he would come out and go through the horses and you'd go round and say, 'Boss, this horse is going shin sore' and he'd say, 'I'll back you. You know, if you want to keep going, we'll keep going but if you want to spell him, let's spell him.' And he always had your back and it gave you confidence going forward with your horses, to make decisions, when to push or when to pull with horses, and mate, it made me as a trainer because it gave you



*John Thompson at his Randwick stables - "You've got to move on, you can't hold grudges"*

confidence."

"Like I said, I walked out of there (Leilani Lodge) eight foot tall and bullet proof, Patinack Farm knocked me back down a bit, it sort of dented your confidence, in what you went through, but coming out of that and having to work hard and make it a successful stable again...I knew I could do well with the horses that I got because I still had that confidence with a horse but it was the money side of things which was a worry because I was owed so much money and I had to pay so much money going forward but I backed myself.

"I went to the sales and I bought a horse and I thought I am going to get it going and I am going to sell it. So I bought this yearling - a Mossman off Stuey Ramsey - and I got it going, and I got it going good, and I got it to win a trial, and win a trial impressively and I sold it to Hong Kong and I got out of all my debt. One horse."

Would you do it all again, knowing what you know now, do you think?

John pauses for a few seconds, lets out a sigh and says, "Nup."

Then repeats his answer four times in quick succession.

"Nup, nup, nup, nup. You're better off being in Chris Waller's shoes than John O'Shea's...I reckon. Being your own boss, you've got a

multitude of owners, you're in charge of your own destiny, you don't answer to anyone. O'Shea answers to people, he's not in charge of his destiny, he's getting pushed and pulled in different directions of where horses should go and be aimed at. Yes, he doesn't have the money worries but it's a different kind of stress. It's different. You don't sort of realise until you're in that situation but it's different. And a public trainer still has the pressure to perform and has to go to sales like I do and put your head on the chopping block, go into debt to buy horses then you have got to go and sell them, but it's a different type of pressure. Pressure to perform - you have to get results, we've spent all this money, you've got all these nice horses, we expect two or three winners a weekend. That's the pressure you are put under."

What would be the best advice you would give someone out of that learning experience going forward?

"Don't put all your eggs in one basket. When you are in those jobs, you're getting pressure put on you from people who don't understand and don't know horses and what your horse's limits are. They don't understand it - all they see is the dollar sign and the bottom line and you're limited on what you can do with an animal."

“I remember the day Dad left Inghams he said to us boys, it was the day that he finished, he said, ‘There is one lesson to be learnt for you boys out of this - don’t put all your eggs in one basket!’

“And before I took the Tinkler job - he (Dad) never even knew, I got flown to his farm to have a sit down meeting. I didn’t say yes, I just said, ‘Look, I need to go away and talk to Bart, and have a think about it.’

“I came back, talked to Bart, and Bart said, ‘You’re mad!’. He said, ‘The guy’s got a reputation.’ And what it came down to was money, young family, mortgage, and a chance to better yourself and at the end of it, however long it lasts, at least you’ve trained winners and your name was out there to be a trainer - good or bad.

“The final thing was when I saw my old man and the only thing which was ringing through my head was his words - ‘Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.’

“And he said, ‘Yes but, it’s a good opportunity, you’ll never get this opportunity again ever. I guess you’ve got to give it a go.’

## **PART TWO CHINA**

When one door closes, another one opens.

One can never say John Thompson doesn’t like a challenge.

If running a training operation across five states before its highly publicised demise wasn’t hard enough, John then took up the task of organising China’s first ever race meeting - from scratch!

“At the end of Patinack I met Mr Teo (Ah Khing) through my connections at Bart - Dato Tan Chin Nam - he recommended me to Mr Teo to go to China and set up the first race meeting there in China. Because I was winding down with Patinack - it was probably a good time to get away from here for a month and get my head around something else rather than the depressing state that I

was in here.”

“So I went there for six weeks and got that meeting set-up with the horses they purchased from here and the horses they purchased in Europe.

“Amazingly every horse we took from Australia and Europe, every single one of them raced at the meeting, which I thought was a great effort considering where they had all come from, to be trained for the meeting and have no injuries. They all raced, they had a good successful day and off the back of that Mr Teo rewarded me with First Seal to train.

“When I came back Patinack eventually folded and I was left with First Seal which obviously she is a superstar and got us a Group One and off the back of that more people have come into the stables, more clients.”

So she was really the catalyst...First Seal...rewarded to you from that trip you made to China to help with the racing?

“She was the catalyst. I got to know Mr Teo and his family while I was there, in the six weeks I basically lived with them. He got to know that I was genuine and loved horses, obviously got the job done, was good with them and he rewarded me with First Seal.”

“Three months before (the race meeting) I actually went to China. I went up there for a week to do the early stages of planning, like this is what you need to do. You need to get stewards in from down here to run the meeting. Just ground level, this is how you build a track and need an enclosure and all that sort of thing. I ordered all the bridles, all of the feed, for the horses when they got there.

“And from that week you know living with him (Mr. Teo) again he got to know me and realised I knew what I was talking about so when I came back here he said, ‘I want you

## **HOW A YEARLING BOUGHT FOR \$5000 TURNED IT ALL AROUND**

“When I went to China it was September, just coming into the Spring Carnival. The sale season starts here in January - and I was looking for one horse to buy - it’s all I could afford at the time. I bought a horse, trained it up and got out of debt by selling it to Johnny Size (in Hong Kong).”

“When it went up there it won its first start for Johnny, and got me out of trouble. Off the back of that I thought I am going to do this again - so I did it again. I bought a yearling for \$5,000 (by Husson) and I just sold him for \$330,000 to Hong Kong.

“Good results from not a big outlay. Horses have got me there sort of thing you know.” (John laughs).

to go to Think Big Stud and look at my 30 horses. I want you to grade them from 1 to 30’ - which I did, to my credit First Seal was No.1 (John says with a laugh)...flukey...no I like to think!

“A few months later when the race meeting was done and off the back of that grading of the horses, he (Mr Teo) said, ‘I am so happy with the job you’ve done with us, I want to reward you with your top pick’ - which was First Seal - and I was able to reward him with good success with her and again he’s rewarded me with more horses after that.

“Each time I’ve had success he’s rewarded me with more horses so he’s my biggest client and best supporter. I’m good friends with him and to this day I will be doing my best to keep the success going.”

John reflects on his career for a moment - his ‘sanity saving humour’ never far away.

“I’ve been around the world, I am the only Australian trainer to train a stakes winner in China, in mainland China, feather in the hat.”

“Only trainer to have a horse to beat Winx - a couple of times.” (John laughs).

But just as John's fortunes started to change for the better with First Seal and she was destined for more stakes success, the conqueror of the champion Winx was found to be carrying a rare injury.

"Never seen it before in a horse - 25 years I have been doing it - never seen it in a horse and get it in First Seal. She's gone through the (Autumn) preparation and at the end of it we were a bit disappointed with her last couple of runs so we did a full vet check and found a broken bone in her back leg."

"She had a wound on her back leg where she got galloped on out of the barriers when she raced against Hollers - second up out of the four runs. The wound wouldn't heal and obviously when we x-rayed that leg checking all her joints, we x-rayed every leg, we found a broken splint bone in her back leg so she had to have that surgically removed and I am sure it will make her a bit more comfortable.

"It was the same leg as the previous issue where she had a growth in the back of the foot! Amazing!"

### **The day John was nearly escorted off the Magic Millions sale complex for life!**

"Nathan Tinkler was the type of guy who was the ultimate positive fellow (supreme optimist). Right up until the last horses were sold I don't think he thought they were going to get sold. You know he was the first sale they had (on day one). The sale had to reach some figure and as soon as the sale reached that figure he had me go and buy the rest of the horses back that he wanted and made me hated in the industry because people had come from all over the country to go and buy (these) horses out of his sale."

"And here I am buying them all back. I nearly got thrown off the grounds (at Magic Millions). They called me aside and said, 'Mate, you can't be doing this' and I'm saying, 'Mate I work for him, I am doing



*Courtesy John Thompson Racing*

*First Seal's broken splint bone being operated on and removed*

what I am told, you need to sort it out with him.'

"But their like, 'If you buy another horse we're going to escort you off the property and you'll get life.'

"Anyway, I bought all the horses back and 12 months later they were back at the sales getting sold again!

"Interesting experience to say the least."

### **How James Cummings came to train with his grandfather Bart**

So John the other life you could have chosen would have been just staying at Bart's until he retired and then going out on your own?

"Yes, and my brief before I left Bart's was: 'You're not allowed to leave until you find a replacement.' I said, 'Well no worries, I'll do my best' and I found James. And he was working in his Dad's (Anthony) office at the time. I remember the look on his face, I remember the look on Anthony's face when I was in the middle (the Randwick trainers hut) and I announced that I was going to do it (leave Bart's and go to Patinack) and Anthony and James were sitting there and James was....I don't know what he was doing, playing with his phone or something."

"And I was looking across the room at Anthony, there were a couple of other trainer's there, I was talking to Anthony (about going to Patinack) and he said: 'Big risk, going to work

for that guy' because Anthony had already lost his (Patinack) horses to Jason Coyle.

"And another thing was Jason Coyle was having success but I knew that I was offered all the (Patinack) horses, so I knew he (Tinkler) was obviously going to take the horses off Jason which was stressful for me - knowing Jason and being friends with him but at the end of the day as it was put to me (by Tinkler): 'It's going to be you or somebody else so you either take the job or someone else will get it and they're (the horses are) still going off (leaving) Jason and Gai and all the other trainers, so they're all going under one banner (now).'

"Anthony was asking questions about the job and then I said to Anthony, 'But my brief I got before I can leave Bart's, I'm not allowed to leave until I can find a replacement and train him up.'

"And Anthony said, 'Oh, ok, have you got anyone in mind?' and I said, 'Yeh, I've got the man for the job and I think he'll be good, he's a bit young and new obviously but I think he's a good kid and I think he's got a bright future, very smart and I think, he hasn't run a stable yet but he'll pick it up quick. And Bart he's a hard boss but he's a good teacher.'

"And Anthony goes, 'Oh ok, who's that?' and I said, 'Him' and I pointed



Photo by Lisa Grimm

Sir John Hawkwood (B Spriggs) winning the 2016 \$755,000 Group 1 The Metropolitan (2400m) at Randwick

at James.

“And Anthony was like, ‘What?’ and I said, ‘James’ and James, like, nearly fell off his chair and he goes ‘Me?’ and I said, ‘Yeh, you’ and he goes, ‘Are you serious?’

“I said, ‘Yeh, I am.’ I said, ‘I think you will be good for the job’ and I said, ‘It’ll do you good.’ And you could see he went white!

“And Anthony said, ‘Aw, you’re throwing him in the deep end there, I don’t know if he is ready for that’ and I said, ‘Just do it because if you do it, he’s (Bart) in the twilight of his career, if you want to be in this industry look at the top 20 trainers on the premiership, he’s trained 15 of them. If you want to be a trainer, you need to do time with Bart.’

“And he (James) was panicking and I said, ‘Mate, I’ll walk you through it the first few weeks - trust me - you’ll be right. Just take it day by day, listen to the Boss, do what he says, and you’ll be sweet.’

“And mate, he was fine. He’s a

smart kid, took it up, hasn’t looked back.”

#### OTHER QUESTIONS

**Do you notice significant changes in training today as compared to your Dad’s era?**

“Yes, this day and age owners are a lot more involved with modern communication. In my Dad’s era - he probably talked to owners once a month. Whereas now you are talking to some owners daily - whether it’s through a text, phone call or an emailed report. It’s incredible - the rapport you have with owners is a lot more enhanced today.”

“With the horses, pretty much the same. The training has improved a bit with modern science. We feed - I would say - a lot better because of high protein, low carb diets and you know what to feed and what not to feed these days. Whereas back then you probably didn’t. You can streamline your feed a bit more too. It was good doing time with Bart with that too (feeding) because obviously his

mentor was Percy (Sykes) who I got to spend a few years with which was incredible and he also owned Ranvet which is the leader in thoroughbred science as far as new products, feeding and nutrition go.

“So not only did he just tell you what to feed, he taught you why to feed it and what’s in it and what protein levels are in all your different grains e.g. you feed a lot of corn because that’s high in energy, oil barley the same. Your tick beans, split peas are high in protein but very low in carbs, stuff like that.”

**The whole cobalt saga - any thoughts about it?**

“Disgraceful for racing. Very disappointed that people try and cheat. Probably suspected for years something was going on when you would go to the races and you knew your horse was in tip-top order and should win and one of these horses miraculously came out and beat you. You sort of suspected something was going on and for that to be confirmed



John Thompson, Blake Spriggs and the happy connections of Sir John Hawkwood after winning the 2016 \$755,000 Group 1 The Metropolitan (2400m) at Randwick

was disappointing.”

**The Championships, what did you think of the concept? Can it be improved?**

“Everything can always be improved I think. Good concept in the fact that the Spring Carnival in Melbourne was getting away from us and the Clubs here they were working against each other. But now it is one Club they’re working together and trying to make a Carnival that rivals the Spring Carnival in Melbourne.”

“And I think they are gradually getting to that. Still not perfect but I think it is probably never going to be international because it’s the wrong time of year for the internationals to come here because they would rather go to Dubai and Hong Kong then come here in the Autumn. In the Spring they will come. If the prize-money’s good - which it is - you’re going to get interest and I think the Grand Finals of racing in the Autumn it seems to be building. It is a good idea.”

**The whip rules - the changes - fan of them or not?**

“I am not a fan of flogging horses

but I would have thought the change in whip was enough to the padded whip, softer whip and just use a common sense approach of when a jockey is flogging a horse and it’s at the back of the field and its obviously not running on, I think those jockeys needed to be dealt with more severely. But changing everything (with the rules) its changed racing a bit in the fact that riders won’t hit horses before the furlong which you know your lazy casual horse struggles to win a race because it’s not put into the race because they are worried about the whip rules. Whereas these sort of horses could be encouraged to come into the race and then the last furlong they have already been wound up, they coast to the line, whereas now you are not allowed to hit them so much - five times before the furlong - those big sort of lazy horses they stay lazy. I thought there would have been a happy medium with them going from x to z - I thought there could have been a y sort of thing.”

Do you think it (the whip) will ever be fully abolished e.g. like just used maybe as a steering mechanism/aid?

“I don’t know, it’s hard to say. I think it could never be outlawed because it has a use. Not just a use for making a horse go faster but controlling them. Getting them around the corner or teaching a horse to go forward rather than sideways or backwards.”

**Would there be one thing that would make your like easier as a trainer? Anything at all you would like to see changed?**

“Yes - less rent! (John laughs) It is very difficult to run a stable at a profit if you are doing things correctly because you need a good amount of staff and to feed horses properly these days is very expensive. And to chuck on top of that high rent - all these three things add up to massive costs and expense. And if they could lessen one of them by abolishing the rent then you could do things even better by having more staff and I think you would get more horses to the races by being able to do the little things even more like icing horses, things like that which prevents injuries and gets horses to the races because a lot of trainers are too proud to admit it but there wouldn’t

be too many stables in Sydney run at a profit. You just make ends meet.”

What is it you love about your job?  
“Horses.”

And what is it about the horse?

“They’re an addictive animal. Just a beautiful thing to work with and it’s like having a full-time hobby that you get paid for!”

Bart famously once said he preferred spending time with horses rather than people.

“True. They don’t talk back!”

John says laughing as always but with more than a hint of seriousness!

### **MR TEO AND THE CHINA HORSE CLUB**

“China Horse Club has been a great supporter of mine. When I finished with Patinack Farm I had 50 boxes here (Randwick) and when all the Patinack Farm horses left I had just four left and I was lucky enough one of them was First Seal.”

John laughs.

“So yes, the rest is off the back of her (First Seal) and their support probably filled up the rest of the stable.”

What is the goal of China Horse Club?

“China Horse Club is actually a lifestyle, business and thoroughbred racing club run by Mr Teo and wealthy Chinese people buy into the club and invest and they’re part of China Horse Club’s racing team who have been successful in winning major races all over the world. It’s a good concept. They are also looking for stallions and they have teamed up with a couple of American studs and Newgate here and investing a lot of money so it is great for our industry.”

With a ‘who’s who’ list of owners supporting your stable now it must seem a long way from the abyss you once faced?

“It’s unbelievably humbling to have their support.”

“Like His Excellency Nasser Lootah coming here this morning to look at his colt. It is humbling to meet them. (John laughs as if it is all

a bit surreal). It’s incredible, he’s got horses off Paul Fudge at Waratah (Thoroughbreds), they’re incredibly bred, high quality horses - the future’s looking bright.”

Why do you think it is they have chosen/come to you? What do you think has attracted them towards you?

“We do our best to do well with every horse. We probably do specialise in middle distance and staying types. Just through my training, through Bart and my father (Vic Thompson).”

(John excuses himself as Mr Teo’s racing manager for China Horse Club Karl Henry arrives to inspect their horses).

### **SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION**

It’s like, for me, listening to your story, I feel like I am watching the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* (where the main actor goes to hell and back before regaining his freedom).

“It’s funny - I went through it (a major client breakup) in the early days with my Dad and the Inghams when he fell out with them. Well he was best mates with Jack but Bob was all dollars and cents and Bob wanted to go into Queensland and Melbourne and my old man wouldn’t fly.”

“So there was no way he was going to have interstate stables. So that was not going to be the case and they wanted to get bigger and he didn’t want to get bigger. He was this small, liked to concentrate, hands-on type trainer. Wasn’t a big mess - was never going to work with the way he trained.”

“So I went through that. The big stable, the building up of a big stable, the success of the big stable then getting flicked, getting moved on, starting from scratch again.

“Sort of having a bit of success there (Warwick Farm), coming to Randwick, having great success with Bart, going into a massive stable, learning that, training Group 1 win-

ners in five states, stakes winners all over the country, running five stables at once in four states, a big pre-training stable then a stable along every east coast and Adelaide and second in two premierships, won the Australasian two-year-old trainers’ premiership beating Gai, Snowden and Waller, and ran third on the Australian (National trainers’) premiership behind Moody and Godolphin.

“But with the demise of that, went from big to nothing, as I said started with four horses, built up now to fifty and having a bit of luck again.

“Building better clients, quality of horses coming in the stable, your Paul Fudges, Nasser Lootah, obviously China Horse Club have been integral in backing me, a couple of syndicators, Joe O’Neill (Prime Thoroughbreds).

“It’s good to have people giving you horses too. It’s good to know they’ve got confidence in you. Even guys like Jamie Walter, he goes to New Zealand, he knows I was Bart’s foreman, and had good success with middle distance, developing stayers like Viewed and Roman Emperor and horses like that. And he goes there buying horses with those pedigrees and gives them to me to train, to develop, sort of Oaks and Derby type horses.

“I think the future is pretty bright.”

FOOTNOTE: Since this interview with John, his stable continues to go from strength to strength, most notably with Sir John Hawkwood recently winning the \$755,000 Group 1 The Metropolitan (2400m) and First Seal returning in great style at her second start this preparation winning the \$201,000 Group 2 Tristarc Stakes (1400m) at Caulfield.

Sir John Hawkwood is entered for the \$6.2 million Group 1 Melbourne Cup (3200m) and First Seal the \$500,000 Group 1 Myer Classic (1600m) at Flemington on Derby Day.

- Andrew Speedy

