

# Selling the Game:

## The Underlying Elements of a Memorable Ownership Experience

*There's more to owning a racehorse than just winning—it's about enjoying the unassuming aspects that make the ownership experience unique*

By Fred Taylor Jr. • Illustration by Tim Carroll

*This is part two of Selling the Game, a series of articles about the excitement of Thoroughbred racehorse ownership and how to attract new owners, by Fred Taylor Jr. He is the founder and managing partner of Mojo Thoroughbred Holdings LLC, which operates Mojo Racing Partners offering affordable opportunities for newcomers and veterans to become involved in Thoroughbred ownership. Taylor serves as a liaison to the Department of Transportation for a major airline and is a former recipient of the Texas Thoroughbred Association's Allen Bogan Memorial Award for member of the year.*

*Happy New Year,  
American Racehorse readers!*

*It's the middle of winter, and if you're like me, you're probably looking forward to the warmth of spring racing. As we cope with the shorter days and colder nights, stoke the coals in the fireplace and settle into your favorite chair while I muse over the lesser-known virtues (the intrinsic silver linings) of racehorse ownership.*



### Personal Intrigue

A few years ago, I started examining the various benefits that make ownership special. It was a question that frequently came to mind because I knew that there were more fulfilling aspects of ownership than the renowned image of royal grandeur attributed to the sport. There are numerous underlying qualities and countless subjective moments that lift up the experience and provide unequivocal satisfaction for the people who own racehorses but aren't seen or shared with the public.

I also knew once I solved the cost puzzle (which I will discuss in future articles), there were more pragmatic reasons and benefits that should be brought to the surface and highlighted to help the public to see Thoroughbred racing as a viable sporting option in which they can intimately participate. After being in the sport for more than eight years, experimenting with different types of participation options and studying what my ownership partners and the general public liked (and didn't like), I realized at the core of each person's experience is a sense of jubilation that's based on several common

(albeit personal) feelings that are inspired by the horses in which they have an ownership interest.

I also realized these personal feelings aren't exclusive. In other words, no one in the industry is intentionally hiding the individual values ownership provides or trying to keep others from enjoying the same uplifting experiences. In fact, the thinking is quite the opposite; however, the challenge of presenting these experiences and emotions to the public in a more realistic light remains the same.

### The Challenge

There once was a time when the United States was suffering through its greatest depression. During this time, the sport of horse racing captured the nation's attention, lifted the spirits of practically every man, woman and child and provided the public with something exhilarating to take its mind off of the economic calamity. Quite simply, horse racing gave people something to cheer about.

Today, the public's fascination with racing has dwindled much like the economy did during the Great Depression. As spectators and par-

ticipants, people are turning to sports and pastimes that are seemingly more wholesome, less complicated to understand and easier to get involved in.

Over the past two decades, the racing industry has struggled to agree on what the sport needs, and that indecisiveness has inhibited its ability to tell a compelling story. Since the 1980s, there have been several iterations of branding and re-branding of racing's image to encourage people to just come out to the races. Industry leaders are searching for ways to recapture the hearts of the public and bring people back to a sport that once was the most popular in the country.

The challenge isn't unique to this country either. In Europe, Australia and Asia, similar issues are at the forefront of their respective Thoroughbred industries. And, the same question is being asked. Other sporting activities and easier entertainment options are tantalizing the public's interest. So, how are we, the Thoroughbred racing industry, going to get future generations involved in the sport?

### **The Sentimental Ingredients**

When I started on my journey to figure out the underlying values of Thoroughbred racing, I was determined to find the true meaning of being an owner. I wanted to put my finger on it, share it with others and then help them enjoy the same experience. Since then, I've decided that, aside from the cost, the key ingredients associated with owning racehorses are based on three positive memory biases.

The first thing that gets the juices flowing is the understanding that what we like comes from what we think about, dream about and desire. Then, once a person takes the initial steps to get involved, there are many not-so-obvious but directly consequential things that happen daily but aren't fully appreciated until the pleasant experiences are strung together like a series of numbers (1+1+1 = a cumulative pleasing memory). And, after being in the sport a few years, one's personal feelings are usually best remembered through rosy retrospection (we don't reflect on the hard work, we just muse over the good things

the hard work provided).

These sentimental ingredients aren't delusions and they aren't tricks. They are real feelings that take place when people get involved in racehorse ownership. Through advertising, news stories and choreographed public broadcasts, we might have developed our first impressions of, and the appetite for, the sport. As the first thoughts about



Denis Blake

actually owning a racehorse come to mind, we envision being in the shoes of the proud owners standing in the winner's circle. When we take the first step into ownership, we instantly contemplate our horse's potential. Once we've been in the sport several years, we have the benefit of reminiscing about the times we've spent in the company of our horses in the barn, at the training track and in the saddling paddock on race day.

And, as our personal experiences add up, we are rewarded with a lifetime of memories to reflect on our achievements.

### **Time for Reflection**

It's during these winter months that we have the perfect opportunity to open the book of our memories, turn the pages on the times we've spent with our horses and relive the personal moments that bring warmth to our souls.

Metaphorically speaking, the sport of Thoroughbred racing provides a chocolate box of experiences that build upon themselves and paint colorful memories of sunnier places that lift our spirits when it's cold outside. And, the best part, our horses are the stars that are featured over and over again.

If you've never owned a racehorse but are thinking about taking a slice, then let me assure you that the purest pieces of chocolate come from the behind-the-scenes activities. It is this collection of lesser-known experiences leading up to the race that builds the base of and provides more potent memories than the race or the result by itself.

So, let's take the time to explore a few of the hidden truffles that form the basis of ever-lasting ownership experiences: The atmosphere

in the barn area, the personalities of horses and one of the special places where preparation and anticipation come together in a glorious moment right before the race.

### **The Backside**

One of my favorite places at the racetrack that's a constant source of my fondest memories is the barn area (also known as the "backside").

In the mornings, rain or shine, sleet and snow, there's always a flurry of activity taking place. The trainers, riders, grooms, hot walkers, farriers and vets are going about their business of tending to the equine athletes. People and horses move together in an understood motion like traffic intersecting on city streets during rush hour. Watching all of it happen at once can be confusing and a little intimidating at first; but, once you become familiar with the surroundings, you begin to appreciate and take comfort in knowing there's a rich tradition, a natural rhythm and a synchronized method on the backside that happens every day at racetracks across the United States. And, it's been happening this way consistently for more than a century.

Standing in the barn door is a good vantage point to see the horses as they go to and from their training routines on the track. Upon their return, the horses are first walked around the shed row (the pathway in front of or between the barn stalls) to help their bodies cool down as their muscles relax after the morning's exercise. Once settled, the horses are bathed either inside in a shower stall at the end of the barn or outside in the sun. As the cool water cascades over their warm bodies, vapors of steam rise up and disappear into the morning sunshine. Before being returned to their stalls and fed their breakfast, the horses dry off either by being hooked up to what looks like a carnival ride (an automatic walker that gently guides the horses in a steady circle) or hand-walked again around the shed row.

Later in the day, the morning's training activity gives way to a settled calm and peaceful tranquility as the horses rest. I like strolling through the neatly kept barns and visiting with the horses in the afternoons or evenings because it provides a mellow, pleasing and mildly intoxicating feeling that's not unlike being in a barrel house at a bourbon distillery. Other than the birds chirping and the call for horses that are being readied for the next race, the barn at this time of day is usually tidy and quiet. The air is cool and fresh, and there's a gentle breeze blowing through the shed row that conjures up an aromatherapy mixture of fresh hay and sweet feed.

Being able to take in the sights, sounds and smells of the backside is a special aspect of owning racehorses. Once you're familiar with and understand the way the stable is orchestrated, you'll begin to appreciate the barn area as a uniquely pleasing environment. Many of the best memories I have are of my family, friends and partners

interacting with the horses in the barn—it's definitely time well spent.

### **Horse Personality**

The ways a horse behaves and interacts with you will create a lifetime of memories that you'll enjoy reminiscing with your family, friends and associates.

I've had the privilege of creating ownership packages that included 16 different racehorses. With every horse, I remember how each one interacted with its respective owners and visitors. Some were relaxed and gentle and welcomed the attention. Others were feisty and could become "nippy" if they didn't get a scratch or treat. And, one veteran was a little grumpy and didn't like being messed with. Once you learn a horse's particular personality, then the opportunity to develop a relationship and special memories will follow.

The keys to a positive interaction with any horse are to respect its space and understand that a horse sees the world differently than a human. In this regard, one must understand that horses are flight animals, and their attentiveness is based on a survival instinct. As such, they're always scanning for potential danger because if they think they're in danger, their best defense is to quickly get away from what they think could attack them.

### **Horse Expressions**

A horse's ears are like eyebrows on a human. Unlike eyebrows, however, a horse's ears rotate independently like radar. Up and forward, indicates that the horse is alert. Flipping back and forth, tells us the horse is curious about what's going on. Pinned back is a warning that it is agitated and intent on snapping at you. By paying attention to a horse's ears, you can gauge the mood of a horse right in front of you.

Because horses' eyes are positioned more to each side of their face, they have monocular vision, meaning what they see in one eye will be different than what they see in the other, in addition to binocular vision (like humans). Whether their heads are down or up, horses are constantly looking for anything that could hurt them. Horses have to turn their heads to see what's directly in front and behind them. Thus, when you're standing near a horse, it's best to be at a 45-degree angle to their face and gently place your hand on their flank if walking toward their hindquarters. This way, the horse knows where you are at all times and is less prone to become surprised by your presence.

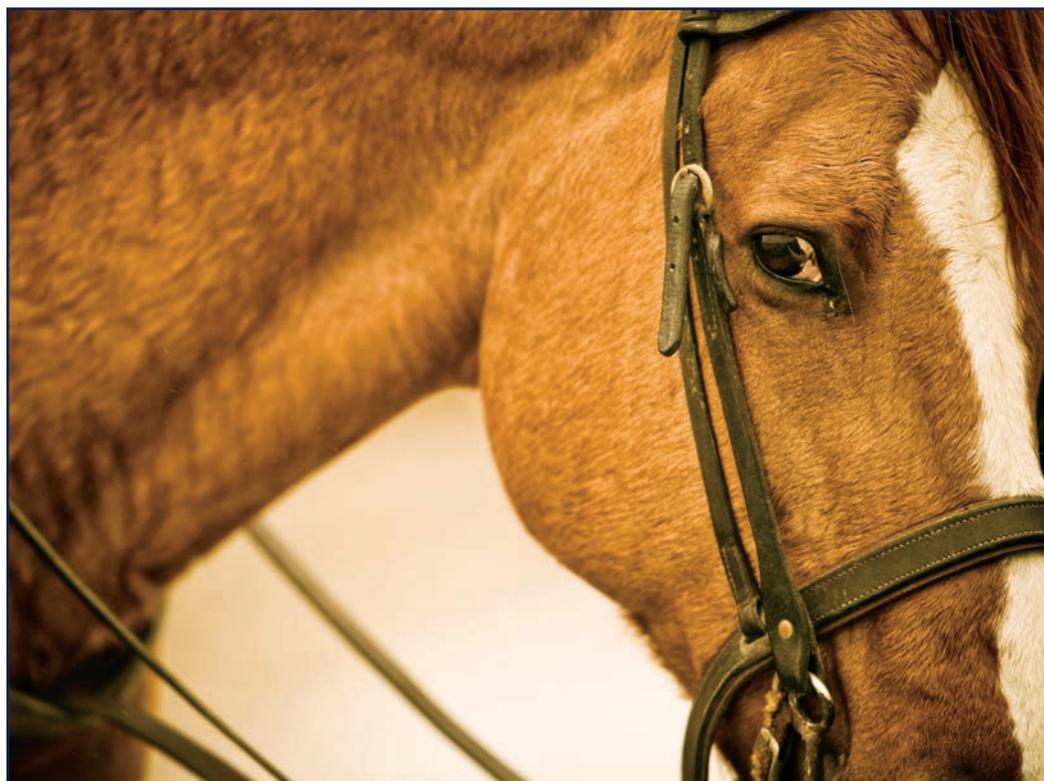
A horse's tail movement is also a good indicator of its mood. Constantly swishing about indicates some sort of aggravation, tucked down and between its legs as it walks or runs is a sense of fear and up while galloping is usually a good sign of satisfaction.

So, as you're trying to get to know your horse, it's best to watch its "expressions." Your horse's ear, eye and tail movements are not only adorable but also serve as important indicators of the horse's mood and the action it's about to make.

## Horse Sounds

Though horses can't talk, they do communicate by the sounds they make. Perhaps the most obvious is the whinny—it's a high pitched, audible greeting to let you know they are happy to see you. When a horse sighs and nickers, it is offering a more subtle form of contentment. These sounds are very pleasing, and once you get to know them, it'll make you feel welcome to be in their company.

Horses also create secondary sounds that are just as gratifying as comfort food. When horses nuzzle your hair and sniff your ears, it offers a cool and friendly reminder of the more gentle qualities they possess. As they graze, they make a "guttural ripping" sound as they pull the grass from the ground or the alfalfa from the hay ball hanging next to the opening of their stall. Their munching generates a sturdy assurance that life is good and they are happy. As horses walk across



pavers, their hooves drum a steady "clop, clop, clop" cadence that no other animal has the ability to produce, and when you hear it, the marching rhythm will immediately capture your attention.

## The Saddling Paddock

Being inside the saddling paddock on race day is a privilege for all owners and a reward for those who have worked hard to prepare your horse for this moment. And, on a sunny day, it's also one of the best places to soak in the atmosphere of the sport itself.

On race day, owners are allowed into a track's saddling paddock to watch their horse have the racing tack (reins, saddle, saddle cloth, etc.) installed. The trainer will greet the jockey and go over any last-minute instructions. And, it's an opportunity to chat with fellow horsemen and wish them luck as a sign of good sportsmanship.

When your horse is being led into the saddling area, it's a lasting moment of unadulterated pride and excitement. No matter what you know or think, butterflies will form in your stomach and you'll start praying that your horse runs a big race. As you watch your trainer put all of the equipment on your horse and make the final preparations, you'll reflect on all of the things that have come together to get your horse ready for this race. When the rider emerges from the jockey's room and your racing silks shimmer in the sunlight, for a moment, all of the "what if" possibilities fade away as you marvel at how great it is to be there, how glad you are to be involved and how magnificent everything looks.

In addition to being the place where the horses are saddled for the races, the paddock offers the public a closer look at the horses on which they are planning to bet. It really doesn't matter if it's a stakes race or a claiming race, there's always plenty of people viewing the saddling area—especially with the advanced technology of world-wide simulcast wagering—to see if your horse looks like it has what it takes to win the race. As you're standing there surrounded by hundreds of racing fans (sometimes thousands for big events), don't forget about the times when you've been on the outside looking in and be sure to mentally give thanks to the fans for their support.

Once the tack is on and a racing official verifies each horse's identity, the runners are led into the walking ring for additional viewing by the connections and fans. As the horses are paraded around, each trainer keeps a watchful eye on his or her horse's disposition. In the background, you'll hear a racing analyst provide the patrons with his or her commentary and selections. Naturally, you'll hope to live up to the expectations if your runner is considered to be a contender, but the commentary doesn't really matter at that point—you are a living part of the wonderful atmosphere that's taking place.

When a racing official shouts, "Riders up!", it's time for the race! Your trainer will give the rider a "leg up" onto your beautiful horse and the bugler will trumpet the "call to the post." At this point, your level of energy is so high you can hardly see straight, and that's when the trainer gives you an assuring wink and says to the group, "Let's go have some fun!" ★