

**Interview with MARTIN TALTY
Manager International Department EMIRATES RACING ASSOCIATION, DUBAI**

The phrases “steady she goes” and “all things in moderation” would probably cause consternation if they ever came up in an Emirates Racing Association (ERA) board meeting. Expressions like this simply don't exist in an organization that in less than a decade has re-defined the concept of world-class racing.

The staff of the fledgling International Department should not, therefore, have been overly surprised when a 2003 Committee meeting unveiled their role in promoting the latest jewel in the ERA's Marketing Crown: a nine-week International Carnival culminating in the now famous US\$6M World Cup.

The Group's mission: to take this US\$21M prize and sell it to the World. And whilst other Clubs might have spent years labouring over such a project and ramped up massive infrastructures to support it, this group of three was given a promotional time scale of a mere three months.

When asked if they were successful, the man who heads the Department just grins in the typical self-effacing fashion with which he acknowledges all his major accomplishments.

He's one of Australia's more valuable exports: Martin Talty.

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Talty is no stranger to deadlines or indeed, to Dubai.

A former student from St Leo's College in Sydney's Northern Suburbs (a school familiar to many as that which also graduated Mel Gibson; "but many years before me" Talty hastens to add), he spent the formative years of his career at the *Sydney Morning Herald* alongside fellow copy boy (now racing editor) Craig Young, under the master guidance of Max Presnell.

He had grown up as part of a family that had maintained an ongoing interest with the thoroughbred industry. His parents counted Bert Lillye and the Brassels amongst their circle of friends. Today, one brother, Mick, runs Edinglasse Stud whilst another has a link to the good producing mare Procrastinate "who just keeps churning out those expensive yearlings". Despite this, Talty confesses that the animal – and indeed the sport – which has consumed a considerable percentage of his life span had nothing to do with him attending his very first race meeting at Rosehill.

"I went to watch the TV" he admits, his Australian accent noticeable even after eight years as an expatriate.

I look puzzled. He gives a short embarrassed laugh, explaining that the Sydney race courses were the first places anywhere in Australia to offer colour television. It was a desire to see that – not the horses – that drew him to the track.

Always a diligent follower of the International Form, Martin left the *Herald* after ten years to edit the racing pages of the *Eastern Express* in Hong Kong, and when that paper closed the following year, he freelanced in London for six months before returning to Sydney.

Shortly after his arrival home, a media role in Dubai became available and within six months he was residing in the Emirate. Then in 1999, with another Australian ensconced at the helm of the ERA, Les Benton, Martin was offered – and accepted - the position as Head of Media and PR with the internationally recognized governing body for horse racing in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

I ask him why it is that so many Australians have managed to forge such successful careers in the international racing Industry:

"I suppose that there is something inherent in all Australians," he says "a sense of adventure, a willingness to always have a go at something once. Australians also have an ability to adapt and are very good at what they do. That's not decrying any of the other Nationalities of course" he hastens to add "But Australians ARE very, very good at what they do."

His words are vindicated by news that Kerrin McEvoy had joined the Godolphin Stable as their number two rider and Damien Oliver had accepted the number one riding position for Japan's leading trainer Kazuo Fujisawa (taking over from Olivier Pezier).

We stroll through Nad Al Sheba's International Village as we talk. Whilst the home of many a corporate marquee and cocktail lounge on World Cup night, the Village's alter ego is the local golf links. Workers kneel on the manicured turf as they run a brisk coat of fresh paint over the newly erected picket fence that encircles what will be the Fashions on the Field stage. Everywhere is the sound of incessant hammering; sound checks for the various PA systems cutting across on regular intervals.

"This place will be heaving tomorrow night," he comments.

While ensuring that horses enjoyed year-round sun had certainly never been a novel idea in the Industry, the thought of mass maneuvering legions of horses from various parts of the world back to the UAE for winter was seen as questionable by many. Balanchine's success in the 1994 Epsom Oaks and Irish Derby underwrote the experiment and Godolphin's ongoing global success continued to highlight the importance of their winter base. Then, to the surprise of many, the

International Stables at Nad Al Sheba were completed and the invitation mat was suddenly put out for others to follow suit.

The question that has to be asked in such a case is: Why? If a tactic is so obviously benefiting one team, why open it so freely to competitors? And to confuse the matter further - the Sheikhs didn't want to just open it to their rivals - they also wanted to PAY for it.

It all comes back to the role that racing plays in the wider Dubai development plan. This is not just about furthering the sport but about promoting greater awareness with an international audience.

Martin also reveals that whilst the concept of the 2004 International Carnival was new there were a number of international trainers who had already sampled its benefits. Leading English trainer Luca Cumani brought a small team of horses to the Dubai to campaign during the 2001 winter, among them Arkadian Hero and Endless Hall, his two runners at that year's World Cup meeting, while Kuster and Vicious Circle ran during the regular season, the latter finishing second in the Nad Al Sheba Gold Cup. Demonstrating the wider benefits of a Dubai preparation, Endless Hall was fourth in the 2001 Dubai Sheema Classic but stayed on at Nad Al Sheba and was prepared for the Singapore Airlines International Cup in May the following year, a race that saw him lead throughout to defeat Jim and Tonic and Silvano.

In 2003 the international influx continued – this time with South African trainer Mike de Kock whose stable (including Ipi Tombe and Victory Moon) won prize money in excess of US\$2.7 million. Other trainers who have reaped the benefits include Mark Johnston, Richard Alford and Richard Whitaker.

With these proven results, the ERA decided to formalize the offering. But in typical UAE style the list of incentives for trainers bringing their horses to Dubai in 2003/4 was the definition of enticing:

- 10 meetings over a nine week period;
- Total prize money over the 2 month period (from 29 January to 27 March) of US\$21M with an average of US\$117K per race;
- Of the 55 races held during the Carnival, 16 were run at listed or Group level, 6 on turf and the remainder on dirt (so in total: 20 on turf and 35 on dirt);
- A US\$2K rebate was paid to every starter that finished 5th to 10th in every event (excluding maidens, 3 conditions events and World Cup day);
- The Racing Club paid the costs of transporting the horses to and from Dubai;

- Overseas trainers were able to use state-of-the-art facilities at the International Stables adjacent to Nad Al Sheba racecourse at no charge;
- Overseas based trainers were also eligible for a US\$50K prize during the Dubai international racing carnival, the award decided on the number of wins during the 9 weeks and open only to those trainers based internationally;
- There were 2 inaugural turf races for fillies and mares, the US\$130K Cape Verdi Stakes over 1600m and the Balanchine Stakes over 1777 m;
- The Dubai feed mill allowed trainers to develop a unique feed program for their horses made up of the highest quality feedstuff imported from around the world;
- A warmer climate meant there was no European winter to contend with; and
- State of the art stabling.

It's a long list. And with Martin and his crew committed to an extended overseas road show to promote it – its temptations have indeed appealed. Within just two short months they had succeeded in attracting 85 international horses and 23 trainers from 11 countries.

"It's been much more successful than we ever dreamed it would be and next year I think it will be extraordinary," Martin reports with trade mark enthusiasm. "We would love to be in a position to say 'house full' - not that I think that that will ever happen as everyone will always be welcome anyway.

"The good part about it is that quite a lot of horses who came for this year's Carnival graduated into being World Cup day runners: Jack Sullivan in The Derby, D'Anjou, Surveyor, Right Approach, Evolving Tactics, and Crimson Palace. If say a horse like Evolving Tactics was in Ireland, rated 104, he may not have got a run in the Duty Free. But the fact that he was here, we saw him, he won well, his grading rose and bang, he went straight in. That's the advantage that these Carnival horses have got plus they've been here for quite awhile, they've adapted to the conditions, they've raced under lights and hopefully we might have a few from them do well tomorrow night."

His wish is reflected in the results. In total 17 horses from the International Racing Carnival run on Dubai World Cup night, collectively securing US\$3,540,000.

I ask how big it can get.

"I wouldn't be surprised if next year we didn't have between 150 and 180 international horses here" Martin says "In terms of the crowd – well, the last 2 years they have only just started things in the infield there on the golf course so, how long is a piece of string?" The potential for this place and the potential for the whole of the racing in this country is mind blowing"

Tomorrow is the 9th running of the Dubai World Cup, bringing down the curtain on Dubai's inaugural Carnival. But for a man with such an instilled work ethic it will remain 'business as usual'.

"When things slow down that's when my real work kicks in – I'm off to try and find the horses for next year" he says. His mobile hums and he glances at it. It's Tim Martin. Talty has promised to whisk the visiting Australian trainer on a tour around the International Stables. It's then on to another social function entertaining all number of international guests.

It's all part of the job. But in helping to re-define Dubai's place on the international racing stage, this is one Australian taking it all in stride.

Katrina Partridge

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