

Honesty's Critical Role in the Owner-Trainer Relationship

2011 Kentucky Derby winning owner, Barry Irwin, spoke his mind about the importance of honesty in the owner/trainer relationship. It's a two-way street.

"Honesty is the best policy."

In speech as well as in action, it's a good old saying that happens to be accurate. But applying this black and white wisdom to the real-world can often times be complex and fraught with peril.



Ask Barry Irwin, Team Valor International's CEO, whose moment of naked candor following Animal Kingdom's authoritative score in last Saturday's Kentucky Derby touched a raw nerve in the racing community. When NBC's Bob Neumeier inquired as to the motivation behind Team Valor's recent decision to shift all of their horses to a single trainer, Graham Motion, Mr. Irwin responded simply, "I got tired of other trainers lying to me." Neumeier, a seasoned broadcaster who no doubt expected nothing more than a few of the normal platitudes, was visibly surprised by the comment and perhaps even more so by its timing.

The Fallout: A Mixed Bag

The comment's implications weren't good. Was the takeaway for racing fans and prospective owners watching at home that the majority of thoroughbred trainers are liars and cheats? And if most trainers are dishonest, is their deceit limited to financial matters or does it extend to questions bearing directly on the safety and well-being of the animals themselves?

While the comment was cause for colorful-content-hungry turf writers to rejoice, it not surprisingly roused many thoroughbred trainers to squeal in indignation. This was particularly true among the many former Team Valor trainers fearful that their image and careers stood to be tainted even though Mr. Irwin stopped short of "naming names."

In the ensuing days, Mr. Irwin provided some clarification, inasmuch as he was swift to state which trainers he *was not* referring to. He also offered some context for his statement. But he made it clear that his elemental message stands and that he will not be making any apologies. Any why should he apologize? It was an honest statement by a man who has felt the sting of betrayal more than once in his many years of thoroughbred racing involvement.

For many racing fans, Mr. Irwin's comments (as well as the high-profile timing of their delivery) were welcomed with open arms as the kind of refreshing candor seldom heard in a sport long considered to be a little too establishmentarian.

Of course, everyone on the inside of the game knows precisely what Mr. Irwin meant by his statement. His goal was not to disparage *all* trainers as liars but to rightly decry those who seek to take advantage of their clients. We can all agree that any thoroughbred trainer who maliciously misleads his or her clients, whether it's by way

of subtle subterfuge or egregious double-dealing, is indefensible. And any mischief that artificially influences the outcome of a race, when discovered, should rightly yield immediate expulsion from the sport as well as any and all applicable legal reprisals for defrauding the betting public.

The Trainer's View



While there are plainly some very bad apples in the training orchard, I am confident that the great majority of trainers are honest people with a passion for both the sport and the animals. It's a tough life, filled with many more chutes than ladders. To make it a career you have to love it. And the only way to survive in the long run is to have and convey a sense of honesty and integrity.

The discussion of trainers and honesty over the past week reminded me of an interesting and ironic conundrum all trainers face. For every owner who's been wronged by a "dishonest" trainer, there's an honest trainer who's been fired for delivering honest, yet unwelcome, news or advice to their clients.

Most trainers, me included, begin their stables with the purest of intentions. Naively, we think we can do everything perfectly and make no compromises. But as time goes on, trainers begin to identify the hazards associated with the conveyance to their clients of certain honest messages, regardless of how benevolent those messages are. From two-year-olds that more need time and less pressure, to older horses that require longer recuperation periods between starts, to the honest assessment of a horse's ability even when that assessment is negative, many owners are anything but receptive. In order that the messenger doesn't find himself shot, he learns to adjust the message. This professional self-preservation isn't enough to justify blatant dishonesty, but at the very least it provides an insight into why many trainers end up feeling compelled to walk a mighty fine line.

A Two-Way Street

While it is a trainer's duty to be competent and honest, it is an owner's duty to foster an environment in which honesty is encouraged and welcomed. It's a two-way street. Barry Irwin is that kind of owner and if I'd been privileged enough to have more clients like him I'd still be training.

A trainer can be unafraid to express honest sentiments when an owner is willing to take those sentiments to heart without shooting the messenger. That equals the kind of collaboration that not only wins races but also benefits the animals. That's why the Team Valor/Graham Motion partnership should serve as a model for all those racing participants who seek to elevate the integrity of the sport.

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