

Barry Irwin Talks Middle East Racing, Breeding Winners & The Arc

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Throughout the Racing world, there are many great characters in all different parts of the industry, but every now and again you come across someone who is more than adept in many of the facets of that industry, and in Barry Irwin, we have just such an individual.

Irwin is not just a racehorse owner and breeder, but he is also a successful journalist and former student, and at present, he is the current CEO of Team Valor International. He has been involved

in the racing industry for most of his life since being introduced by an Aunt and Uncle at an early age.

"I'm not one for titles, but I am most proud of my journalistic work as I feel in that career, I made a difference over the years. I'm quite an outspoken individual, sometimes that is good and sometimes bad, but I'm happy with some of the things that I achieved."

Shamrock Glitter ran second in the 1400m Jumeirah Guineas Trial (T) at Meydan to the Godolphin colt Legend Of Time, how has he come out of that race?

Francis sent me the videos and I watched them, I was happy with him, he ran well, and the trainer said he ate up. In real life you never know how they are until they run next so we don't know how he will react until he goes again. He is an inexperienced green horse who I bought as he has fluent action and flows over the ground. I am convinced that he will transfer to the dirt even though Francis, like most European trainers, is a little skeptical as they are not confident training on the surface. Only **John Gosden**, who has trained in the States, has that confidence. We saw him breeze on dirt and he went well but the trainer wanted him to go in this race, and despite knowing that the Godolphin horses were good, we were happy to run. We liked the inside draw, and we were more looking for a performance with a view to improving. The horse was a little unlucky in that the winner got a clear run all the way from a wide draw and our inexperience was not ideal down the inside amongst horses. I wouldn't be against taking on the two Godolphin horses again but I would expect it to be closer if we met again. I wanted to try him on dirt while we are in Dubai and but the likelihood is that we will now go for the Guineas, after which he will go to Qatar for a Group Two race. We do not make too many plans as you don't know what might happen from race to race. Let's go one race at a time which has worked well for us over the years."

You are the owner-breeder of Animal Kingdom who won the Dubai World Cup, and Kentucky Derby and placed in the Preakness and the Breeders' Cup Mile, did any particular one of those races mean more to you than the others?

Well, for an American, the Kentucky Derby is the be-all and end-all. There are two races that I've won that got me emotionally involved, that one and winning the **Gr.1 Santa Anita Handicap** with **Martial Law** a Sheikh Mohammed reject who cost us a lot of supplementary and entry fees in the region of 60% of what we paid for the horse. People laughed at us as the horse had not even run in a black-type race, but the race has a great history, even the great Seabiscuit tried to win it, and I wanted to win it, the result was very satisfying. Animal Kingdom had only breezed on the dirt once and people thought we were taking a long shot at the Derby so that was a great day and a great result.

Did you know Animal Kingdom was good from day one?



From day one I definitely didn't know how good he'd turn out. He was tall and thin as a foal and a yearling. He was all legs but then he progressed, we put him in a sale from one of our breeding partnership but when that didn't work, I brought him home and put him into a syndicate.

One day at two, he worked from the gate and did a half mile in +45 secs which was mind-boggling for a horse with no speed and not bred as a sprinter. In his first

race, he placed, and we were quite happy. At the time, I had another horse with the same jockey and trainer who had also run second. I asked the jockey to compare. He said that **Animal Kingdom** was not even a thoroughbred compared to the other horses, which was rather deflating. It was in his next run at Keeneland when he won, that he showed us what we had. That was the first true glimpse that we had something special.

You can tell the bad ones more easily it is harder to tell the good ones. The bad ones just don't have it, they can show speed, but they don't have the athleticism or the physical depth.

But a lot of horses can fool you.

In hindsight, was going to Royal Ascot a mistake?

I think so and I never really wanted to run. But we had sold a part of the horse to Sheikh Mohammed and at that point, there was no dominant shareholder. My deal with John Messara was that I called the shots up to the World Cup and then as part of the agreement he had the final say after that.

I didn't want to go (to Royal Ascot) as there was no point, I cautioned against it as he had just achieved the pinnacle and he could not run another race that would add any lustre to his profile. His race was lost in the preliminaries as there was a mare in the paddock that he got a whiff of. He showed his manhood there and used up all his energy.

Nicknamed "B-Eye" by friends and colleagues due to your knack for sourcing talent through form, how much of a gamble did you feel it was going "international" with so much racing worldwide?

I started my partnerships with a good friend Jeff Siegel, who I regard as the best form analyst in America. I enjoyed international racing more than him and we had a difference of opinion. So, I

bought him out around 2007 and added the word International. I love international racing it is more interesting and racing in the US can be boring at times.

How do you choose which races to watch and in which countries, and do you have a team of people watching and recommending or is it all down to you? Is Polytrack form and breeding stats important when searching out new prospects or is a grass pedigree more important?

It is a combination of both, we watch international maiden races in the UK, Ireland, France, Germany, and Italy and we particularly watch the 2YO races closely. We like to buy in the summer through fall as it is hard to buy a horse before Royal Ascot in the US or Europe, any horse that wins a maiden is too costly when perceived as an Ascot horse.

I do not have people who work for me as such, but I have agents who all have different outlooks and skills and they come up with a variety of horses, on average we get recommended 1-2 horses per day each year and we only buy 12-14 in total, so this involves a lot of work. I look for things specifically and it has worked well for years.

The most important for me is one thing and one thing only - how they move. When they move, I want to see no deviation in the front legs, if you have two horses coming down the straight, and one horse's legs are going forward and the other's legs are deviating then 99 out of 100 times the most efficient mover wins. I saw that in many years of watching races.

Temperament is also important, and pedigree is always last, we spend our money on athleticism, and for a long time nobody did it now they all do it."



What is the major difference that European horses bring as opposed to the solid pedigrees that you know from the States?

Europe have better training facilities and dare I say it, better trainers who serve an apprenticeship, in the US not so much. There are much slimmer chances of horses getting hurt in the way they train in Europe. The training in the US on hard tracks is difficult. When horses in Europe are hard fit and they land in the US I honestly believe that they have an immediate advantage of 5 to 10lbs as the US trainers cannot train their horses that hard for fear of injury.

After some time that advantage nullifies as the European horses are forced to train in the US. Longer slower workouts help European horses build a different body and they look different. I have been doing this for 50 years and when I started, we had the best stallions and plenty of good grass sires here in the States, but we now have less than a handful and Europe certainly has the better grass race stallions."

With the breeding of Animal Kingdom, when Kingmambo got injured, you had to make a quick decision. So, you changed the sire to the Brazilian horse Leroidesanimaux. Was that an easy decision to make at short notice and how much luck was involved there, after all, Kingmambo was your chosen sire?

There is a story here, we had a partner in Animal Kingdom who owned a good chunk of the mare Dalicia that I bought in Germany and that we had in syndication and although I was calling the shots he suggested the other stallion, **Leroidesanimaux**. When the injury happened to **Kingmambo** we had a couple of hours to decide, my choice was **Medaglia D'oro** who was a great stallion, one of the best looking ever, but he had a high stud fee, my partner didn't want to spend that much and so we ended up going with his choice of Leroidesanimaux. My wife and I looked at it and it was a quick decision and we decided it would work.

Do you always have a "Plan B?"

No!

You seem to have no problem in keeping older horses in training when many breeding outfits cannot wait to get them off to the paddocks. Is this a deliberate ploy?

I form racing partnerships I don't form breeding partnerships although we can sometimes buy for a potential stallion. My model is that I want to buy a horse for say US\$1 win US\$2 in prizemoney and then sell for more than that. We keep them running as our people enjoy the racing. Geldings are not frowned on in Europe like they are in the US where owners and insurance companies are more cautious. We also know that geldings have a better chance to stay sound as they are lighter bodied.

Romagna Mia is a 4YO British bred filly who ran in Italy and France before shipping out to the US, she won a Group Three nicely at Keeneland before bolting up recently at

Gulfstream. What are your immediate plans for her? Is she seen as a future broodmare? Did you like her sire Mastercraftsman as a racehorse?

I am approaching my 81st birthday and we have cut the breeding operation down to one mare in the partnership. Romagna Mia bought at Arqana and syndicated for about \$700,000. Usually I keep 5% to 10% but kept half here and brought in five clients into the partnership as I had a good year with a filly called La Petite Coco and I used some of those funds here. Her sire **Mastercraftsman** gets stamina in horses which is what I wanted in a filly. We wanted to race in Qatar again for a second year in a row, but transportation could not be found, so we will stay home for the Grade 3 La Prevoyante on the Pegasus undercard and make a decision about a trip to Saudi Arabia after that.

Facteur Cheval is a bit of a superstar, a 4YO gelding by Ribchester out of a Shamardal mare, impeccable breeding had a great 3YO season. Was this year a bit of a disappointment even though he ran at the highest level? Where will he be aimed in 2024?

Facteur Cheval had a great 3YO season We were not disappointed but more frustrated, to place in four Group Ones without winning. He carries plenty of condition for a gelding. He is just like an entire and has lots of energy. He didn't race



at two, so consequently at three he took a long time to catch up. Trainer Jerome Reynier brought him along slowly. They raced and won some small races to give him an education. But he was still green last year. Hopefully this year is his year to win a Group One, I believe he can win one anywhere and he will start next month in a small race in France then on to the Dubai Turf.

Orderofthephoenix won an ordinary maiden at Dundalk in October but could not have been more impressive. She is part of this new initiative that you are promoting, whereby you get other new people to Racing to get involved in ownership via syndicates in partnership with Team Valor. How is that going?

It is going pretty well I have difficulty getting US owners to buy horses in Europe, so this new instalment idea is appreciated, and fingers crossed it continues to go well.

Give us one horse to follow over the next twelve months who we may not know that well, and is there one new sire whose progeny you are particularly excited to see make the track?

A horse to follow a little under the radar is Mansa Musa a 3YO old colt by Ten Sovereigns.

Mansa Musa didn't pass the vet inspection for a sale to Hong Kong. He ran at Goodwood in a maiden race and beat **Array** who went on to win the Group Two Mill Reef and followed up with two decent runs. He is a magnificent specimen and is in Florida with Bill Mott. He will be kept grassing sprints where he will hopefully be a Breeders Cup horse. Every year at least six or seven similar stallion profiles take your eye, but until you see the progeny you don't know which will make it, but I expect **Ten Sovereigns** to have a good year, so much so that we have sent the dam of Romagna Mia to him.

Is there any race that you have not yet won that you really want on your resume and which country would give you great pleasure if you could obtain success there?

I want to win the Arc, unquestionably the highest class and hardest race to win and always most competitive – I love French Racing.

By Steve Taylor