



Wise Guy

BY LENNY SHULMAN

The ups and downs prevalent in the world of horse racing are enough to send any participant hurrying to the nearest shrink. But Rob Whiteley has taken that equation to the next logical level—earn a doctorate in counseling psychology and *then* enter the Thoroughbred business.

A father of five, the 62-year-old Whiteley approached horses as he did psychological analysis: study for years, accumulate all the

*It's all academic
for breeding wizard
Rob Whiteley*

knowledge one man possibly could, and then set that academic process to work picking out horses. Against the odds that

keep many people from realizing a profit in commercial breeding, his system has proven out for Whiteley. Bring up his name and the first adjectives you hear are “smart” and “intelligent.”

First, as the builder and director of Carl Icahn's Foxfield operation in the 1980s and '90s, and today as a successful breeder—having co-bred stars such as Badge of Silver, El Corredor, Roman Ruler, Henny Hughes, and Strong Hope—Whiteley's years of bloodlines study and appraisal work for Fasig-Tipton have paid grand dividends. You can almost see him behind a Sherlock Holmes pipe explaining his methodology: “Elementary, my dear Watson.”

Whiteley was not born into racing. Although his childhood was spent in the San Diego suburb of Chula Vista, he didn't attend either Del Mar or Caliente, preferring an adolescence of immersion in various athletic competitions. “I'd get up and think about which sport I'd play that day,” Whiteley said. “I connected with sports and was infatuated with them. I marvel at how academics pursued me because I was so taken with sports.”

The books eventually replaced the balls, and after getting a master's degree from Rutgers University in New Jersey, Whiteley headed to the University of California at Berkeley for his doctorate. The pressures of the program soon had him seeking a hobby. “I discovered that only six people had graduated from this program in five years. It was so intense and competitive that eventually you reached a point of diminishing returns and you needed something else to do.”

Already the father of a 3-year-old boy, Whiteley decided to take his son to Golden Gate Fields, just minutes from the Berkeley campus. “We were sitting in the sun and he was pointing at the horses and I'm like, ‘What is this game all about?’ I loved the horses as athletes, the jockeys in the colorful silks, the expressions, the drama. I come from a family of runners and I respond to runners. There were a lot of things going on there. I had maybe \$4 a day to bet, but I kept going back and getting further into it.”



ANNE M. EBERHARDT PHOTO

Rob Whiteley with Smooth and Classy, who delivered a Strong Hope filly in April

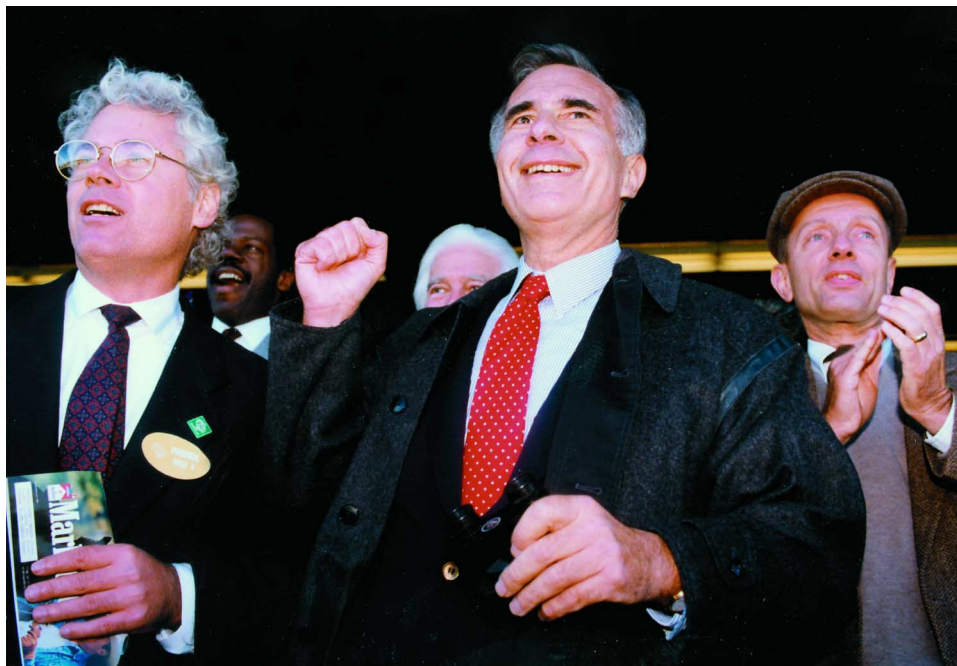
Crisscrossing the country again, Whiteley ended up back at Rutgers as head of the graduate program in counseling psychology as well as doctorate, master's, and applied programs. As a hobby, he began breeding and raising horses on 54 acres in Califon, N.J., on a farm he called Liberation. "My neighbors thought with me coming from Berkeley that the name had some subversive, radical meaning," Whiteley said. "But I liked it as a generic word. A lot of people would come out from New York City and find their own form of liberation."

Soon Whiteley was moonlighting as a handicapping instructor in adult education classes and taking students on field trips to Monmouth Park. "It was one of those snowballs," he stated. "I loved horses and the intellectual stimulation. I wanted to be hands-on. I built a barn myself and raised a bunch of Jersey-breds and continued falling in love with the whole thing, but I never thought I'd do it as a profession. I'd raise three or four a year and take them to sale, and it was uncanny—I'd lose \$10,000 on every one of them. Not 15. Not eight. My wife used to laugh like crazy. She'd ask, 'Did you lose \$10,000 on the one today?' And I'd say, 'Yep. Well, no, actually \$9,970.'"

Whiteley would regularly call the *Daily Racing Form* offices in New York for answers to questions. Over the phone, he established a rapport with a young librarian there named Steve Haskin, who today is the national correspondent for *The Blood-Horse*. "He'd call to ask me to look up stuff," Haskin remembered. "He loved to talk pedigrees, sales patterns, and the business side of racing. Rob was very professorial in the way he spoke. He seemed intelligent and had obviously studied and done his homework."

COLD CALL

Whiteley's academic workload got the better of him after a dozen years. He left Rutgers and helped design and develop a school for teenagers with emotional and behavioral problems. Hunterdon Learning Center, located near Liberation Farm, has been going strong for 30 years now, and Whiteley still consults. He also became involved with putting out a magazine for New Jersey's Thoroughbred owners and breeders. Just after the first issue appeared, Whiteley received a cold call from John Finney at Fasig-Tipton, who had started TECO (Thoroughbred Equity Co.). They were monitoring collateral for banks and had to appraise a vast quantity of horses. Charlie Harris, Ric Waldman, Reiley Mc-



Whiteley with Carl Icahn watching Meadow Star at the 1990 Breeders' Cup

Donald, and Craig Bandoroff were involved at the time, and they needed someone to help with the appraisals.

"I was putting the magazine to bed one night and the phone rang, and that's how my life went in the horse direction," said Whiteley. "So I went to work for Fasig-Tipton and I soon saw how we could develop the division as a profit center. They gave me the title of president of Fasig-Tipton Appraisal Services. I built an office at the farm and probably did 10,000 appraisals in three years. It gave me an extensive acquaintance with all classes of horses from stallions to foals in terms of their valuation."

When the horse market tanked in the mid-1980s, TECO started a leasing program in which they would lease select-sale fillies for five years. They needed someone to do projections of valuation over the term, and Whiteley became that person. "I took about 2,000 select-sale fillies and tracked them through their lifetimes to develop a valuation," he said. "I learned a lot about horses' value over time. For example, a broodmare will experience about a 30% loss in productivity over her lifetime. That's a huge amount of wastage to overcome if your goal is commercial breeding for profit. That kind of awareness helped me with the kind of discipline that's necessary in order to develop a business plan and buy properly. That is the key—you can control what you're going to pay."

Another phone call from out of the blue, this one from noted financier Icahn, resulted in the two men turning Foxfield into a leading commercial breeding enterprise. How many people in this game can say that

their entire operation ran exactly according to plan? This one did. The blueprint was to buy fillies that would run well on the track and become valuable producers once retired. Whiteley joined with Icahn, who had become famous for authoring corporate takeovers, in 1986. Six years later Foxfield boasted 120 broodmares. The six original fillies Whiteley purchased for the operation all became either stakes winners or stakes-placed. They included 1990 champion 2-year-old filly Meadow Star, and Rose's Cantina, who Whiteley picked out of an allowance race and purchased. She went on to become a grade I winner of more than \$720,000.

"There's no end to miracles," Whiteley said while trying to explain Foxfield's success. "I just saw an interview with Bob Dylan where the reporter asked him how he wrote so many amazing songs. Dylan replied, 'I don't have any idea.' He then rattled off these run-on lyrics and said, 'You tell me how you do that.' He was a channeler. Now, I'm not saying I'm a channeler and I'm not comparing myself to Dylan, but I wonder how Foxfield worked like it did. What a run; 18 years, and a profit each year...before depreciation, anyway."

"It just happened. If I were to reconstruct and rationalize, my fascination with the sport really paid off. Having been an athlete, maybe, subliminally, I picked up an attitude or manner that was helpful. Carl Icahn brought a perspective. He said he wanted to get good horses for 50 cents on the dollar. So I was always under pressure to buy right, and that helped with the profitability, if not with performance."



Yearling Sale Preview

SHARE THE EXPERIENCE

When Icahn decided to get out of the business a couple of years ago, Whiteley had just a handful of broodmares on his own, mostly projects that had problems. But he was also involved in co-ownerships during that time with a select group of friends. In the mid-'90s Whiteley underwent heart surgery, performed by Californian Dr. Chris Elia, and the two went on to co-own and co-breed an extensive number of fine horses through Liberation and Elia's Oratis Thoroughbreds. In 2001 alone they co-bred three yearlings that brought \$230,000, \$250,000, and \$340,000 at the Keeneland September sale. They also co-owned Silveroo, the dam of grade II-winning Badge of Silver, who unfortunately died as the runner was making a name for himself.

"I didn't realize Chris was such a great surgeon," Whiteley noted. "Throughout my participation, as much as I enjoy the horses, I also enjoy the people and I like to share the experience with friends."

Whiteley has stepped up his broodmare purchases in the past 18 months, buying

approximately 80. His extended network now includes Kentuckians Tom Evans and Pam Clark of Trackside Farm; Jim and Pam Robinson of Brandywine Farm; Rick Trontz of Hopewell Farm; Christine Hansen of Montessori Farm; Needham/Betz Thoroughbreds; Peter O'Callaghan; and Richard and Audrey Haisfield of Stonewall Farm. Whiteley, who now owns or co-owns some 300 head, boards mares at all of the above entities, and allows each to act as consignors when sale time comes around.

"I think it's fair and important to let those farms have first dibs on selling them," said Whiteley. "They don't make a lot of money on boarding, and if somebody has conscientiously taken care of a horse, they should be able to take it to the sale and finish the play."

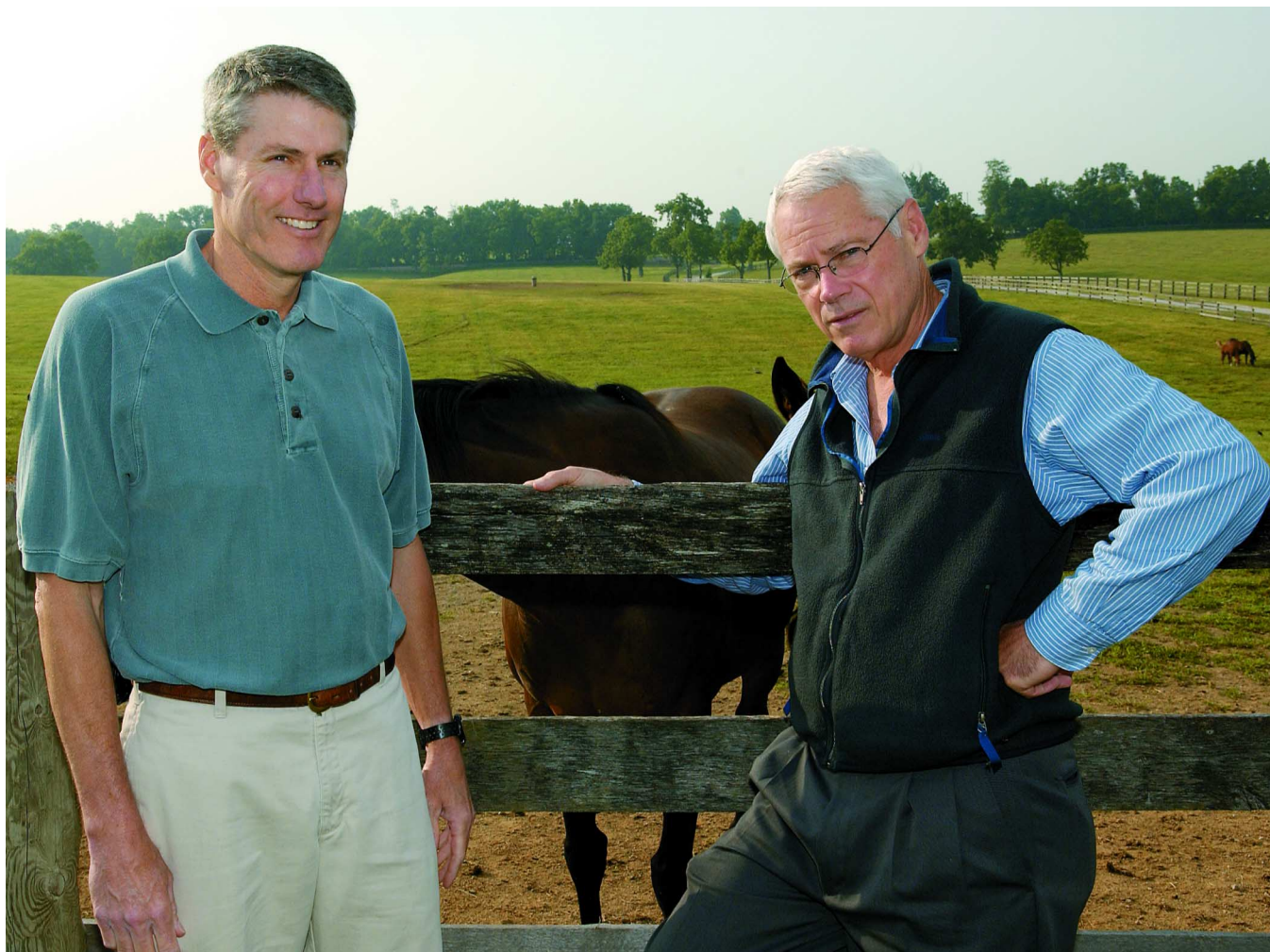
"It's been interesting and fun to work with Rob first with the Foxfield stock and now with the Liberation stock," said Evans, owner of Trackside Farm near Versailles, Ky. "He's brought a lot of good horses through the farm over the years, and we've observed the type of horses he buys, and how he manages them. You definitely can pick up patterns. He's got a good idea of what he's try-

ing to accomplish and how he's trying to hook the mare and stallion up physically."

Among the producers Whiteley co-owns are Shining Through (with Trackside Farm and Arthur Seelbinder's CHO), the dam of \$1.7-million yearling and grade II winner Strong Hope, \$430,000 yearling Houndstooth, \$1.4-million yearling Venetian Sunset, and \$750,000 yearling Shining Armor; and Silvery Swan (with Needham/Betz Thoroughbreds), the dam of \$500,000 yearling and grade I winner Roman Ruler, and of a \$2.7-million 2005 yearling filly by Mr. Greeley.

"Rob is a very knowledgeable guy and I like dealing with him," said Elia, the retired heart surgeon. "But I'm not in on Silvery Swan, Shining Through, or Meadow Flyer. I didn't do such a great job on his heart that he put me in on those," he said, laughing.

"You could not ask for a better partner," stated Pam Robinson, who co-owns some 60 mares with Whiteley. "He is a quiet person who can get lost in the shuffle, but the matings he has done and the resultant offspring make him probably one of the best breeders in the country."



Trackside Farm owner Tom Evans with Whiteley

FAVORITE SIRES

Given his academic background, it should come as no surprise that Whiteley threw himself into the study of bloodlines. But what is surprising is his short list of favorite sires. "This is brash on my part, but I think Crafty Prospector is probably the greatest stallion ever," Whiteley said. "I helped arrange for him to go to Brookdale Farm, and I bred to him a lot. I think he had 31 winners from 35 foals in his first crop. He was pigeonholed as a sire of sprinters and never received the respect or appreciation he deserved. Bred correctly, they can go a distance of ground, and on turf, too. Agnes Digital, I think, was the best horse in the world for a while, and won races from six to 10 furlongs, because the Japanese didn't have that sprinter mindset. If I was in racing instead of commercial breeding, half my barn would be Crafty Prospectors.

"Silver Deputy has been a fabulous sire for us. And of all the stallions I've bred to and observed over the last 20 years, Mr. Greeley consistently gets the most athletic and well-balanced individuals. He can put a little extra leg on a mare that needs more height; he can help knees. He just gets an athlete. I have to like El Corredor and Strong Hope since they're the most beautiful horses I've co-bred. El Corredor is already kicking butt, and Roman Ruler and Strong Hope are interesting prospects.

"In commercial terms, sure it can hurt you not breeding to fashionable stallions. But it never hurts to have a quality runner; that's what establishes your reputation and helps your mare. I've given away upside revenue because I've loved a particular stallion, but money isn't the only thing. Being in commercial breeding, I can't imagine anyone is in it if their primary goal is to make money. You can't have a 30% loss over a broodmare's career, pay the inflated stud fees, have crooked foals, have a veterinary-influenced public too fascinated with looking for the perfect horse, and legitimately hope to be profitable.

"For me it's the challenge and the intrigue. And when a mating works, the satisfaction. Knowing you did the right thing and it proved out. I also really like fillies and foals."

INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT

Whiteley believes in giving back to the industry. He is on the boards of Fasig-Tipton and Thoroughbred Charities of America, which raises and distributes money to various organizations that aid horses and workers. Along with Evans and Brookdale Farm owner Fred Seitz, he established the Horse Farm Workers' Educational Assistance



BENOIT & ASSOCIATES

Multiple graded winner and sire El Corredor was co-bred by Whiteley's Liberation Farm


Fund 10 years ago, which gives scholarships to children of workers on Kentucky Thoroughbred farms for post-high school education. In 10 years it has awarded some 300 scholarships.

Another area Whiteley is involved in is the sale process. He is on the board of the Consignors and Commercial Breeders Association (CBA), which is producing a series of booklets to, in his words, "help buyers and sellers discern and interpret the veterinary information they're given in terms of implications for later racing performance." Whiteley believes there are too many buyers focused on finding the perfect horse at sales.

"I believe if you're going to look for problems, you'll find them," he stated. "Today we have a sale scene with a significant number of frustrated buyers who have missed out on good horses. And as sellers, there's nothing more frustrating than knowing you have a crackerjack horse that

might have a slight lucency in an ankle or a tiny OCD in a spot that's never going to bother the horse, then have to take a huge discount and watch the horse go on to become a graded stakes winner."

In some circles, the CBA is looked at as a response to the Sales Integrity Task Force movement of the past couple of years, which has pushed for more openness in the sales process and an end to dual agency. Whiteley maintained that the origins of the CBA came a year before the SITF was established. But by the time the groundwork was all laid, the two organizations emerged almost simultaneously. "We heartily endorse what the SITF is doing with the abolishment of undisclosed dual agency," Whiteley said. "It's frustrating to have a horse that's better than somebody else's by a long way, and then get half the money or less because there's something extra for the agent in the other deal."

The two organizations are at odds, however, over issues such as the disclosure of surgeries in sale horses. "My personal view—I'm not speaking for the CBA—is that mandatory disclosure sounds like a fine objective, but the tremendous amount of data collection, and the time and expense to create an accurate database over a lifetime simply isn't worth it," Whiteley said. "This has never been an issue of importance to many people. There is little research in terms of knowing if corrective surgery is a plus or minus in racing performance. Personally, I don't care. I want to see the horse in front of me. If it isn't showing any clinical signs and there aren't any blemishes and the horse moves the way I want it to and the limbs are how I want to see them, I'm fine with it." 

Rob Whiteley

Age: 62

Personal: Married; five children

Job: Head of Liberation Farm, a breeding entity. Formerly managed Carl Icahn's Foxfield, a breeding and consigning concern

Top horses co-bred by Liberation Farm: El Corredor, Roman Ruler, Badge of Silver, Henny Hughes, Strong Hope, Secret Liaison, Sagacious, Itty Bitty Pretty

Top matings planned for Foxfield: Better Than Honour, Blushing K. D., Crafty Friend, Great Navigator, Sunshine Street, Vaudeville, Helmsman

Quote: "Commercial breeding has always been a very difficult enterprise in which to make money, and it's becoming more difficult. I sense there's a reduced number of buyers. Crackerjack, premium horses bring premium prices, but the median horse often is not profitable."

