

## **Big Assist: Assistant trainers are the glue that holds big stables together**

By Steve Haskin

We all know that behind every successful man there's a woman. In the world of Thoroughbred racing, behind every successful trainer there's an assistant trainer.

Some are women; most are men. Some accompany the horses on a pony; others remain in the barn. Some have been on the job for only a few years; others are hardened veterans who have been there for decades. Some are high profile and recognizable to the fans; others are more low-key and content to remain behind-the-scenes. What they all have in common is that they are the backbone of their operations; the ones who make sure everything runs smoothly.

For the most part, there are two different types of assistant trainers: the ones who use the job as a stepping-stone to their own training career and the ones content to remain with a top stable and be around championship-caliber horses every year.

Most every top trainer today has come up as an assistant to a top trainer. Neil Drysdale worked for Charlie Whittingham; Nick Zito worked for Johnny Camp; Bill Mott and Frank Brothers worked for Jack Van Berg; Shug McGaughey and Barclay Tagg worked for Frank Whitely; Carl Nafzger and the late Scotty Schulhofer were taught their early lessons by John Nerud; Wally Dollase worked for Noble Threewitt; Neil Howard came up under Woody Stephens; Eoin Harty worked for Bob Baffert; and the list goes on.

But no organization has produced more top trainers than "Team Lukas," which ruled racing through the 1980s and for most of the '90s. Run by former Quarter Horse trainer D. Wayne Lukas and, for many years, his son Jeff, the names of the trainers who graduated from Lukas Academy can fill

a Who's Who of leading horsemen. Among the dozen or so who have gone on to successful training careers are Todd Pletcher, Kiaran McLaughlin, Dallas Stewart, Mark Hennig, Randy Bradshaw, George Weaver (who became an assistant to Pletcher), Bobby Barnett, and Mike Maker.

Although Lukas was already a champion trainer when he ventured into Thoroughbred racing, his mentor, and the one who started him on the road to success, as he did Nafzger and Schulhofer, was Nerud, who was impressed with Lukas' operation when he visited Santa Anita in the late 1970s.

Lukas says he's proud of all his assistants and feels gratified knowing he contributed to their success.

"Those guys still call me 'coach,'" Lukas said. "And I considered myself a coach, as well as a teacher. I used to say to them, 'just because I say it doesn't make it right. Question it.' We had five minutes of democracy in the morning when they had a chance to express themselves. After that, the dictator took over. We kept our assistants in the barn for a couple of years, supervising the minute details. From there, they graduated to going out on the pony and having conversations with me personally, and in some cases Jeff.

"The most important thing is to choose the right people. We had 12 guys in our operation who became successful, but there were another 20 who didn't make it and flunked out of Lukas University. We chose people who had great character and a feel for the horse business, but most important, they had to have a passion for it. Through the 1980s and 1990s we were very intense and very demanding. It took a special guy to stand up to that. We really

concentrated on management and organizational skills- being able to manage 30 grooms, make up a set list, and read the condition books. If they didn't buy into our program, we sensed it and usually got rid of them."

Of course, one of the dangers of teaching too well is having the assistants go out on their own and, not only beat you in big races, but take major clients with them, as was the case with Pletcher and Stewart, who took with them powerhouse owners like Michael Tabor and Overbrook Farm.

### **LONG TIMERS**

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Bobby Frankel and his two main assistants, Humberto Ascanio in California and Ruben Loza in New York, both natives of Mexico. Ascanio has been with Frankel for 34 years, and Loza for 30 years. Both make salaries that Wall Street brokers would drool over.

"They make a good living with me," Frankel said. "I couldn't run these operations without them. They both started as grooms for me, and then Ruben came east with me when I opened a stable at Belmont. My first year in California was 1972. When John Parisella came out there, he thought he was going to be the leading trainer, so he hired all my help away from me by offering them more money."

Frankel would never let that happen again. He promoted Ascanio from groom to foreman, and did the same with Loza a few years later. "I would think they are two of the highest paid assistants in the game," Frankel said. "All my owners love Humberto. They have to deal with him more, because he's in California and on his own more. Ruben is really good around horses. He's quiet and his demeanor settles horses down. Whenever I have a tough horse to saddle I always like Ruben to be around and hold the horse instead of the groom."

Some assistant trainers have become so identifiable with their bosses for so many years, they are perceived as alter egos. If Buzzy Tenney often seems to be joined at the hip with McGaughey, it's probably because they have a relationship that goes beyond that of other trainers and assistants.

"I've known Shug forever and a day," Tenney said. "He and I grew up together. We've known each other since elementary school and were in the Cub Scouts together in the same den. Then we played competitive golf against each other in High school. Shug left college early to go to the racetrack and I stayed on and graduated and then went to work for my father in the finance business for four years. Growing up in Lexington, I've always loved horses, and my sister was a tremendous jump and show rider."

Tenney got a job at Caliborne Farm and learned the business from the ground up, working with weanlings and sale yearlings, and then breaking the yearlings. But he became bored with the farm and went to Aiken, S.C., to work for trainer Steve Penrod. When McGaughey took the job as trainer for the Phipps family in late 1985, he asked Tenney if he'd like to come work for him.

"We've had a lot of great days and some bad days, but mostly great days," Tenney said. "Our stable is a dying breed; one of the last of its kind. Shug has maintained the excellence of the old school. He doesn't get caught up in sending out 10 or 12 sets as fast as you can. He's always taken his time with horses and has them spend a lot of time outside their stall with riders on their back. The Phippses allow you to do that. They're patient people and they let you get through the lean times and give a horse the time he or she needs. When Shug sends them out, they're as sound as they can be. It's pretty much a hay, oats, and water operation around here."

Another assistant closely associated with a trainer for many years is Tim Poole, who has worked for Zito for more than two decades. The two go back to 1971 when Poole was working for his father, George Poole, longtime trainer for C.V. Whitney, and Zito was an assistant to Campo.

“The main difference between Nick and I is I was born on the racetrack and Nick used to jump the fence to get in,” Poole said. “I was on my first racehorse when I was 2, and rode some pretty good horses early in their careers, like Ohio Derby winner Twist the Axe. I got too big to ride, and the old man kept me busy around the barn; he always had me doing something. He was grooming me to train horses, and I did train a string of the Whitney horses for a while, winning several good races, including division of the Florida Derby (gr.I) with Coined Silver. I kept the ‘B’ string at Monmouth Park in the summer, and when the old man parted company with Whitney I parted company along with him.”

Poole eventually went out on his own at Garden State Park, but when the track burned down, he quit training and went to work for trainer Bob Reinacher for two years.

“Nick had just gotten the (B. Giles) Brophy horses and he could sense I wasn’t happy, so he said to come see him and we’ve been together ever since,” Poole said. “The next year he had Thirty six Red and then came Strike the Gold, and it’s been a great ride ever since. Nick has such an uncanny eye for a young horse. Just look at how many top horses he’s picked out over the years for moderate prices. And he’s so sharp with details. He can look at a yearling and see his potential right then. If Nick likes you, he’ll do anything for you; he’d give you the shirt off his back.”

All those who have followed Baffert over the years, especially through the Triple Crown seasons and Breeders’ Cups, will

recognize the familiar face of Jimmy Barnes, who has been with him since 1998, first working under Baffert’s main assistant Harty, and then taking over that job when Harty went out on his own. Barnes’ wife, Dana, has been Baffert’s top exercise rider for years and suggested Jimmy talk to him after one of the Baffert’s assistants left to get married.

Prior to that, Barnes worked for Dave Hofmans, and previously had Whittingham’s second string at Hollywood Park.

“I was lucky to fall into the real good times, with Point Given, War Emblem, and Vindication. And we had Silver Charm and Real Quiet as older horses,” said Barnes, who grew up in Northern California and has had his trainer’s license since he was 19. “The biggest thing I’ve learned from Bob is developing young horses and getting them to the Kentucky Derby. Del Mar was always our big deal. The 2-year olds would start arriving in April and we worked hard on getting them ready and gate-schooling them.

“Bob also taught me what to look for in a young horse- how they’re built, what kind of hind end they have. When they show up at the barn he’ll show me what to look for. He makes you feel like you’re a big part of it.”

## **INTO THE SPOTLIGHT**

Several assistant trainers have had to step into the limelight the last couple of years because of medication suspensions handed out to their bosses. As a result, Scott Blasi, assistant to Steve Asmussen, and Mike McCarthy, Anthony Sciametta Jr., and Seth Benzel, assistants to Pletcher, have all moved into the role of trainer during the trainers’ absences. Blasi became one of the leading trainers in the country, substituting for Asmussen for six months, while Sciametta was the leading trainer at Gulfstream until Pletcher returned and passed him. McCarthy will always be on

record as the trainer of Rags to Riches when the filly broke her maiden and won the grade I Las Virgenes Stakes. She then went on to win the Kentucky Oaks (grI) and the Belmont Stakes (grI). Benzel was the listed trainer of stakes winners Bishop Court Hill and Carminooch at Aqueduct.

Blasi, who has worked for Asmussen for 12 years, became a household name over-night. "What made it work so well is that I had worked for Steve for so long and we have such a good infrastructure around the country, and I have such a good rapport with our owners, that it really wasn't an adjustment," said Blasi, a native of Oklahoma who worked around Quarter Horses for his father. "Believe me, everyone was a tremendous help to me, and to be honest with you, it was almost like we all had something to prove. We wanted the stable to continue to run exactly as it had been. Working for Steve, I've learned what the value of a horse is from the bottom to the top."

McCarthy, who left college after his junior year to work at the racetrack full-time, had been an assistant to Ben Cecil before coming to work for Pletcher. Previously, he had been with Doug Peterson, Walter Greenman, and Randy Winick. It was jockey agent Ron Anderson who persuaded him to contact Pletcher.

"I called Todd a few times with no luck," McCarthy said. "Finally in July 2002, I went back and spent a morning with him, and was working for him a month and a half later. George Weaver and his wife, Cindy, had just left to open their own stable and start a family. It's been the best five years of my life. I've learned so much about discipline and organization. It was great saddling Rags to Riches twice. It feels very good to know that we didn't screw her up."

Benzel, a former assistant to Bill Mott, also went to work for Pletcher in 2002. After four years of college, he made a

decision to pursue the racetrack and work for his father rather than continue his studies. Taking out his trainer's license at 18 while working at Finger Lakes, he shipped to Belmont to run a horse owned and bred by his father, and used that as his opportunity to approach Mott about a job. He worked for Mott for five years and then went with Pletcher.

"Every step I've made has seemed to be the right fit," Benzel said. "I literally went from being around \$3,000 calimers one week to working for Bill Mott and being around horses like Escena and Ajina. Bill was perfect, because I just wanted to learn and I didn't care how long it took. Bill and Todd are both class guys and they run their businesses with a great deal of respect for everybody."

Some of the top assistant trainers have been women, such as Laura de Seroux, who came up under Whittingham and went on to train Horse of the Year Azeri; and Becky Witzman, who worked for years for Dick Mandella. Two current high-profile assistants are Loretta Lusteg, who teamed up with John Kimmel in 1992, and Hanne Jorgensen, who went with Helen Pitts when she took over the horses trained by Kenny McPeck after he gave up his stable.

Jorgensen, a native of Oslo, Norway, rode in amateur races until she was 22 before coming to America for the first time in 1993. Unable to make it as a professional jockey, she turned her attention to training and returned to America for good in 1999, working as an assistant to Randy Morse. Pitts, who was McPeck's main assistant, hired her two years later. It was Jorgensen who accompanied Sarava to Belmont Park for the 2002 Belmont Stakes (grI), serving as the colt's groom, hotwalker, and exercise rider. Sarava went on to upset the Belmont at odds of 70-1. Among his victims was Kentucky Derby and Preakeness (both gr.I) winner War Emblem, whose exercise rider

was Jorgensen's boyfriend and future husband, Mike Jenner.

"Kenny was great to work for," said Jorgensen, who exercised Curlin before the colt was sold after his debut. "He's a very organized person and taught me a lot of things. Helen and I have a close relationship, and we're always talking about the horses. We try to maintain a relaxed atmosphere from the bottom up."

Lusteg grew up on Long Island, where she worked for a five-man veterinarian group while in high school. She attended Dehli University in upstate New York, majoring in animal husbandry and equine science. After working at Morton Binn's Penmore Farm in Muttontown, N.Y., she decided to come to the racetrack and eventually was hired by Kimmel.

"John's background as a veterinarian helps a lot and enables him to explain things a lot better," she said. "I think we're a pretty good team, as is the whole barn. It's a team effort."