

BREEDERS' CUP PRESENTS FRESH FACES: BRINGING NEW OWNERS TO THE GAME

by Natalie Voss | February 26, 2014 12:09 pm

Justin Nicholson is the founder and president of the Ninety North Racing Stable[1], which he launched in late 2011. Nicholson's father, Ronald, owned horses in the Kimran Stables partnership beginning in the 1980s. Justin previously formed AJ Suited Racing Stable with his father and family friends – the stable has been among the leading owners at Belmont Park in recent years. Justin also interned for Turner Sports and sports marketing firm IMG, and was a research assistant at the Hudson Institute. Nicholson graduated with honors from Emory University with degrees in philosophy and political science and attended Georgetown University Law Center.

How did you get involved in racing?

It started when I was two or three years old. My dad was kind of an older guy—he was 57 when I was born—so he knew that hobbies like tennis and golf and things might be a little harder to share as we both got older, so he got into horse ownership when I was a kid as a thing for us to share.

The best racehorse we probably had was Flying Chevron. I think I was 10 years old at the time, and he was campaigning at the very highest level of the game and that's not necessarily something that at my dad's level we necessarily thought we would be involved with. He ended up winning the NYRA Mile, which was a Grade 1, and ended up beating Da Hoss in the Pegasus at the Meadowlands. At the Meadowlands the race was at 10 p.m. and I was a kid so I was passed out in the dining room when he actually won the race. The winner's circle picture doesn't have me in it. But it was a taste of what it's like to be at the highest level of the game.

My dad did that all through my childhood and I got more and more involved with it as I grew up. Eventually, as I got into high school and college, I became far more active in selecting horses and studying pedigrees and managing our assets. From there it kind of took off and ultimately led to me launching Ninety North.

What is it like for you, as somebody who's fairly young, to be starting out in the racing industry while there's some change and uncertainty?

I think to some degree I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing if the atmosphere weren't like that, and I say that because I was involved in racing for a long time with my family and part of the incentive in starting the business is that I think it's very important that the sport do what it can to get people into it. I think a lot of the uncertainty is because of that gets put out in the press. A lot of the articles are critical ones quite frankly, because the sport only gets attention when something's going wrong.

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I think the thing that as horse owners, one of the best things we can do is to bring people in and show that it's not all negative stuff. It's harder for us to write articles and tell people that it's not what they see in the papers—it's much easier to show people that it's not what's in the papers. Ninety North was something that I started to allow people to come in at low price points so they could learn about the game and maybe they could go on to be advocates or bigger horse owners going forward. I think in a lot of ways, the uncertainty sort of fueled where I am right now.

Possibly on a related note, what do you see as the racing industry's biggest challenge right now?

I think if anybody can say it's one issue, then they're probably underestimating the scope of what's going on. There's probably a lot of stuff that floats around in the press, whether it's drugs or cheating trainers or horses going to slaughter...there are so many storylines, and unfortunately I think all of them have some level of truth to them. I think the biggest problem overall is the difference between public perception and reality. We, as a sport, have not always done a good enough job of saying, 'The cheating trainers aren't necessarily the norm' or, 'The horses going to slaughter is not something that has to happen in every instance.'

I would say really the sport is facing a perception problem, but one that I think we can do something to correct.

How do you see this being resolved?

Everything's multi-faceted. One of the things I think about it is the thing the sport has going for it more than anything else is the animals themselves. They're fascinating animals, they all have personalities and characteristics that are separate from each other. You have every kind of animal out there, just like you have different people. For somebody who's not close to the sport, they don't know that aspect of it—but they can learn.

The advantage racing as over just about any other sport or business is that we can bring people into it, through ownership itself. With public partnerships, maybe for \$2,000 or less you can be on the inside of the sport and come to the barn to talk to the trainer and talk to the person running the partnership. If there are articles written about what's going on in the locker room of a football team or corporation, you've got to put up several million dollars to see what's actually going on in the inside of that business. Racing has a weapon to combat perception issues that many sports don't in that it's much easier to get people to the inside if people in racing are willing to do that. That's something that's been kind of my mission, to bring new owners into the game and educate them about the realities versus the myth and really give them a lot of access.

Are you optimistic about the future of the sport at large?

Yes. I think one of the things going for us is that if you look around the world, there are a lot of places where racing is really thriving—you look at the way Hong Kong has developed, and there's a movement in China toward having real racing, and the UK—the sport is thrilling people all over

the world, which says it should be able to do that here once again.

You've got to believe that there are smart people working on this problem from a marketing perspective, a legal perspective, a rules perspective ... there are smart people who want this industry to go on. I'd like to believe there are a lot of angles we can come at this and there's lots of room to improve.

Endnotes:

1. Ninety North Racing Stable: <http://www.90northracing.com>

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