

Thoroughbred-owning attorney wins some, loses some



A.J. Wolfe/The Commercial Appeal

John Harris has a collection of horse racing paraphernalia in his law office. He and his son own Harris Thoroughbreds, LLC, which is putting 54 percent of its horses in the money since 2001.

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By David Williams
May 6, 2007

In our more adventurous moments, we might say there are two sorts of people: those who crave another identity and those who have one.

A visitor to John Harris' Downtown law office will see the prominent attorney's other side -- owner and breeder of thoroughbreds that race at such tracks as Kentucky's Churchill Downs and Keeneland and New Orleans' Fair Grounds Race Course. The shiny green silks of Harris Thoroughbreds LLC are framed on the wall, and pictures abound of the horses Harris owns with his son, Jeff.

"I decided if I was going to be a horseman, I'd better get on with it," said Harris, 69, of his late-in-life pursuit - his stretch run, you might say.

Harris had loved the sport since his teenage years in St. Louis when he'd visit the nearby Illinois tracks, Fairmount Park and old Cahokia Downs, with "anybody I could get to go with me." Later, as an undergraduate at Tulane, he developed something of a routine -- mornings in class, afternoons at the Fair Grounds.

"It just always excited me," he said. "I felt like at some point in my life I would like to own some racehorses."

First, though, he lived a life and had a career -- law, which also called out to him in his high school years.

It's as a lawyer he's mostly known -- these days focusing on business law and managing trusts and family partnerships at Harris Shelton Hanover Walsh, PLLC, one of the city's largest firms.

And, despite stepping down as managing partner in January, a lawyer he'll stay.

"I have to have," he said, "a law office to come to."

To visit Harris in his 27th-floor office at One Commerce Square is to believe -- naively, as it happens -- that attorneys naturally make fine horse owners.

After all, both pursuits demand -- but don't always reward -- preparation and strategy.

As even the best at both know: You can't win 'em all.

Tom Amoss, Louisville-based trainer for Harris Thoroughbreds, gets a nice little laugh at our theory.

"I've trained for a lot of attorneys," Amoss said, "and I would say that John is not the typical attorney.

"My opinion, they're pretty aggressive people. And I don't see John that way at all.

"John is laid-back. Like anybody, he may get a little frustrated, but he handles everything in stride. He's my kind of guy."

Indeed, in conversation, Harris comes across as humble and soft-spoken -- but also as serious, determined, passionate.

"He's very driven," said son Jeff, 44, account supervisor at advertising and marketing firm Chandler Ehrlich. "He's determined to make Harris Thoroughbreds as successful as possible."

Harris Thoroughbreds is a business, not a hobby. It's an expensive sport, after all -- Harris' first horse cost \$100,000, at the 2001 Keeneland yearling sales. The father and son now have seven horses -- which they have to travel to see, from a Kentucky farm to various tracks around the country -- and costs include a trainer, vet bills, a breeding consultant, stud fees that typically run \$15,000, even a CPA firm that specializes in horse racing.

All that, and there's no guarantee a horse will ever run a race, much less win it.

(And when your horse *does* win, 10 percent goes to the trainer, another 10 percent to the jockey).

"Making money in the horse business is tough," said the elder Harris, who, to prepare himself, attended seminars for potential owners staged by the Thoroughbred Owners & Breeders Association. "You've really got to run it as a business, and watch your expenses. We try to do that.

"In the long run, I expect to make money."

Harris takes this view even though his first horse to race might have spoiled him -- Dear Lou Lou won in a photo finish, Nov. 4, 2001, at Churchill Downs.

"We won the race and didn't know what to do," Jeff said. "We had to ask them how to get to the winners circle."

Since then, Harris horses have won 16 races and finished in the money 54 percent of the time. Dear Lou Lou and Magic Sunset both topped \$100,000 in winnings.

Dear Lou Lou was the second horse the elder Harris bought, for \$50,000 from a private owner.

"I didn't much like her name, but she turned out to be a terrific horse," Harris said. "Her running style was to run almost dead last, and then start moving up as they neared the stretch -- and at the end she was always flying."

A leg injury to Dear Lou Lou led Harris Thoroughbreds into breeding. Her foal, Louie Louie, is expected to start racing this summer.

So it goes with horse racing -- there are up and downs. You ride them out, sometimes winning, sometimes not.

For some attorneys who take up the Sport of Kings, that apparently can all be a royal pain.

Not so, for Harris.

"He's competitive, and I mean that in a good way," said Amoss, a member of the Fair Grounds Hall of Fame and trainer of the 2003 Kentucky Derby horse Lone Star Sky.

"There's a lot of ways to be competitive that maybe aren't very attractive. John is very competitive with his horses. He enjoys racing, and he enjoys winning.

"But he also has a side to him as a race horse owner -- and that is, the understanding of winning and losing, and being able to accept both."

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John H. Harris Jr.

Profession: Attorney with Harris Shelton Hanover Walsh, PLLC; thoroughbred racehorse owner and breeder, with son Jeff Harris in Harris Thoroughbreds, LLC.

Age: 69

Family: Wife, Betty Jane; daughter, Julie Knox; son, Jeff Harris