

Tim Yakteen in Profile

By Steve Schuelein



When the two trainers who have taught you the basics of thoroughbred racing are Hall of Famers Bob Baffert and Charlie Whittingham, it is bound to show.

Tim Yakteen, who graduated cum laude from the shedrows of Baffert and Whittingham U in 2004, carries the long, lanky frame of Whittingham while his brown hair is beginning to show streaks of Baffert white.

Yakteen, who turns 45 on July 29, paused from his duties during a recent afternoon at Hollywood Park and recalled the valuable lessons he learned from the two icons.



Yakteen with Thoroughbred Training Legend Charlie Whittingham

Although the two offered stark contrasts in personalities and training philosophies--Whittingham the consummate old-school proponent of infinite patience, Baffert the erstwhile quarter-horse conditioner more attuned to speed and precociousness--Yakteen found innate similarities in them as gifted horsemen.

"Both Charlie and Bob would look at their horses and read their overall condition--their weight, their attitude, their coat," said Yakteen. "Enough can't be said about that. They were attuned to how their horses looked. Their horses always looked good."

Yakteen often thinks about Whittingham, who died in 1999, and talks frequently with Baffert, whose advice he still cherishes.

Yakteen, born in Germany and raised in a small Bavarian town there, still has trouble believing 27 years have passed since his parents recommended he move to the United States following his high school graduation and join an older sister who lived in Cypress, Cal.

"July 4, 1982, I landed at LAX," recalled Yakteen. "I remember driving and asking myself where the fields are? I didn't see any crops."

Locating his sister following 30 miles of freeway shock, Yakteen enrolled at Cypress College and began looking for a job. The industrious teenager had no experience with horses but discovered Los Alamitos--which at that time offered both harness and quarter-horse racing--down the street and found his initial stable work with standardbreds.

In time, he made contact with Baffert when he was a leading quarter-horse trainer and went to work for him in 1986. It did not take long before Baffert suggested the first change in Yakteen's career profile.

Yakteen's real first name is Haitham, which sounded like "Hi, Tim" to most of the stable help unfamiliar with it. "Bob said if I was going to make it in this business, I was going to have to change my name," said Yakteen, who was dubbed Tim from that point on.

Yakteen continued college and earned a two-year degree at Cypress. But his heart was with the Baffert stable, where he decided to invest his future, something his parents were less than thrilled about. "They asked how I could shovel manure for a living?" said Yakteen before he was able to calm them down and inform them about the bigger picture of the sport.

Joining the Baffert barn full time began an exciting ride for Yakteen, who was able to travel the world during two stints with Baffert sandwiched around a six-year period with Whittingham from 1991-97.

"One of my first trips with Bob was with a quarter horse named Zipinthecash in the Sonoita Futurity in Arizona," said Yakteen. "We left Los Alamitos in a two-horse trailer to Nogales, Ariz., where Bob's parents had a ranch, and shipped to the fair at

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"It was quite an experience," said Yakteen of the late 1980's journey to the hinterlands shortly before Baffert began the transition to thoroughbreds. "They brought in the tote board there on the back of a pick-up truck."

When Yakteen rejoined Baffert for his second tour in 1997, the colorful trainer had meteorically risen to the top of the thoroughbred world.

"I went with Captain Steve in 2000, when he won the Dubai World Cup for \$6 million when it was the world's richest race," said Yakteen. "It was my first time to Dubai.

"I couldn't believe the facilities that Sheikh Mohammed put up," said Yakteen. "If there is a horse heaven, that's what it looks like."

Yakteen thought back to Sonoita a dozen years earlier. "From that to win the Dubai World Cup for \$6 million," said Yakteen, shaking his head in disbelief. "They were the two ends of the spectrum."

Yakteen had already become an international globetrotter with Whittingham. "Charlie sent me to the Japan Cup with Golden Pheasant in 1991," said Yakteen, who was as awed with the racing environment in Tokyo as he would be in Dubai.

"I was very impressed with the graciousness and facilities," said Yakteen. "When Golden Pheasant won, it was the richest race in the world at that time. Then to go to Dubai a few years later and win the Dubai World Cup when it became the richest race in the world was too much to believe."

Yakteen also visited Saudi Arabia when Whittingham shipped Cezind to Riyadh to run in the King's Cup for The Thoroughbred Corp.

Pretty heady stuff for a young immigrant who took a job without any promises that his career would reach beyond a quarter horse stable at Los Alamitos.

"I remember in 1988 when Bob started dabbling in thoroughbreds and claimed Hidden Royalty for \$32,000 at Del Mar from Brian Mayberry for Mike Pegram," said Yakteen. "I remember my heart pounding at Del Mar. From Los Alamitos, \$32,000 was a lot of money."

Yakteen recalled another early acquisition. "I remember when Bob bought Thirty Slews at the Keeneland September sale," said Yakteen. "When he brought him in, he was a really big yearling."

Thirty Slews would go on to become an even bigger horse and win the Breeders' Cup Sprint in 1992. Baffert could forget about his night job.

Baffert and Whittingham were also responsible for making it easier for Yakteen to go on his own in September, 2004. Yakteen's breakthrough horse was Sabiango, a German-bred with which he won the Kentucky Cup Turf Handicap only a few weeks into his new role.

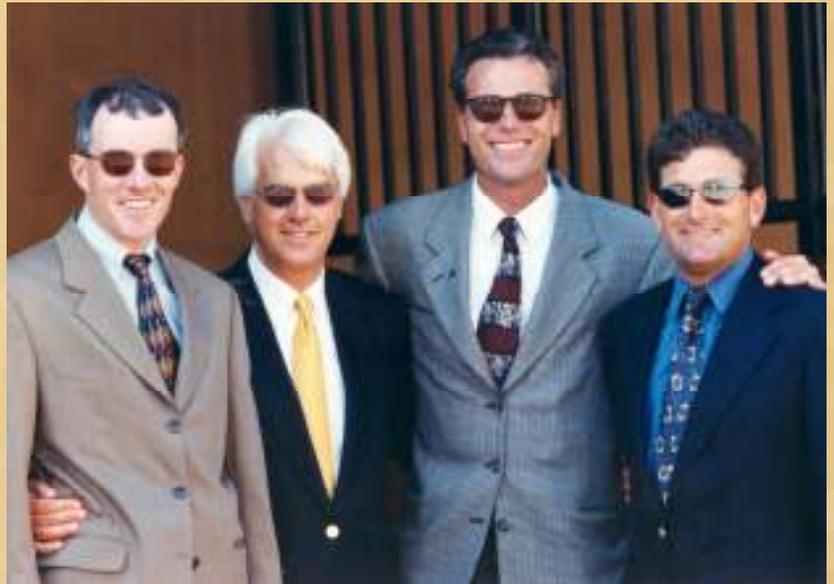
"Charlie had trained a German horse named Lomitas when I was with him who had the same owner as Sabiango," explained Yakteen of the connection. "I got to know some members of the Gestut Fahrhof team. They later sent Sabiango to Bob because of my association with racing manager Simon Stokes."

Although Baffert was officially listed as winning the Grade I Whittingham Memorial Handicap with Sabiango in 2004 at Hollywood Park, assistant Yakteen was deservedly given most of the credit since he supervised his training with a Baffert division at Hollywood Park while Baffert remained at his Santa Anita headquarters.

Sabiango, leased by Monty Roberts, was turned over to Yakteen a few months later when he staked out on his own. Yakteen still keeps up with Sabiango, who stands stud in France and whose first crop of 2-year-olds hit the track this year.

Yakteen also enjoyed turf success with Stratham, an Irish-bred colt who won stakes at the Oak Tree, Santa Anita, and Hollywood Park meets in 2005 and 2006.

"After he won the Pinjara at Oak Tree, I planned to run him in the Generous at Hollywood Park, but that was the year they canceled turf racing during the fall meet," said Yakteen. "I wanted to run him at Santa Anita, but they had a very wet winter and he kept getting rained out of all his turf races before he won the La Puente.



Enduring friendship out of the Baffert Barn—
Trainers Eoin Harty, Bob Baffert, Tim Yakteen
and Jim Barnes (asst. trainer to Baffert)

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"Thank goodness Stratham won the Will Rogers here before it got eliminated!" said Yakteen of the stake that was one of three removed from the Hollywood Park calendar this year as part of a cost-cutting move.

Yakteen lives in Monrovia with his wife, HRTV analyst Millie Ball, and their two sons, Sam, 4; and Ben, 2.

Yakteen trains 25 horses at Santa Anita and employs John Applegarth as his assistant. "Our game is a competitive business, and you always look for your next stars," said Yakteen. "I'm going through a restructuring phase trying to recruit some young stars."

Like most everyone in the racing industry, Yakteen worries about the future of the sport in general and California in particular.

"We're in a very vulnerable era right now," said Yakteen, pointing to the triple whammy of the uncertain status of Hollywood Park, a dwindling horse population, and increased competition from other states about to institute slots. That on top of a struggling economy.

"We're behind the eight ball," added Yakteen. "We need slots or we're going to see a big flow of horses going out of California."

Yakteen kept his fingers crossed. "Hopefully we'll get some breaks and some issues will get resolved in the near future," he said.

You don't spend 18 years working for Bob Baffert and Charlie Whittingham without learning the meaning of optimism. □