



David Hanley

A Skilled Horseman

Written by Glenye Cain Oakford

David Hanley has the firm handshake, calm manner, and appraising eyes of a horseman. That isn't surprising: Hanley has spent years assessing Thoroughbreds for the nearly invisible signs of talent or trouble, casting his glance over a yearling's body to assess future growth and athletic potential or running his hand down a racehorse's legs to feel for the subtle heat that can upend training plans.

What many people don't know is that Hanley's hands also have guided international showjumpers and three-day eventers to winning performances, and his eyes are as adept at measuring distances between fences as they are at spotting weanlings who will mature into profitable sale yearlings.

In his role today as WinStar Farm's general manager, Hanley draws on the rich expertise he developed during a series of successful careers with equines, as a rider and trainer of showjumpers, as a racehorse trainer, and as a weanling-to-yearling reseller. Talking horses, he

gives the impression of someone who sees himself less as an expert horseman than as a lifelong student of horses, open to many different backgrounds and points of view. But his background has, in fact, given him an extraordinarily deep understanding of the equine athlete and a wide view of the global horse business. At WinStar, he gives his passion for horses full rein.

EARLY EDUCATION

Growing up in Co. Mayo, Ireland, Hanley had only to look in the backyard to find horses. His father, who owned a drapery business in Ballina with his brother, was at home on a horse's back and trained point-to-point runners from the family's home.

"The horses absolutely loved him," Hanley said. "I can remember when I was a little fellow and we had a horse out the back of the house, when my dad would put the key in the door, the horse would start going bananas out behind the house because he knew my dad was coming. When he came home from work, he'd spend two



hours in the stall with a horse, grooming and looking after it, and he used to ride before he went to work in the morning. He had an amazing feel for horses.”

The younger Hanley’s education in horses started with show ponies and foxhunters, then continued at one of Ireland’s most famous equine establishments—but not for Thoroughbred racing, for showjumping. At age 15, he took a summer job with legendary horsewoman Iris Kellett at her Co. Kildare riding center, where the champion international showjumper Eddie Macken also was riding and training horses.

“She had a huge empathy with the horses, and even when she was on the ground teaching, the horses would look at her,” Hanley said of Kellett. “She always taught us that you finish on a good note: when a horse does something good, you make a big fuss of them. You have to challenge them to be better, but never, ever defeat them.

“I learned from riding that if you asked a horse to do something he couldn’t do, it has a negative effect. They

get worried or frightened, and their ability goes backwards. And I learned about a horse’s balance,” he added. “If a horse has a short neck or a straight shoulder, it’s harder for him to be an athlete.”

Hanley was hooked, and as soon as he graduated from high school at 18, he launched his own showjumping and



Hanley represented Ireland in international showjumping competitions.

three-day eventing career, which soon saw him representing Ireland in international competitions. He was short-listed for Ireland's 1980 Olympic equestrian team with Kilgrogan, but, after the Games in Moscow were boycotted, the horse was sold to America and became one of the early partners for future Olympic medalist Karen Lende O'Connor. Hanley went on to ride and train horses with such world-renowned operations as Stal Salland Le Cheval in Holland and Paul Schockemöhle's Performance Sales International in Germany.

After five years abroad, Hanley returned to Kellett's to open his own training program, which quickly grew until he needed to rent additional property. He clearly was on a fast track to success in the equestrian world, but while he was looking for his new equestrian property, he met an American racehorse owner who would change the course of Hanley's life—although it didn't appear that way at first.

"He'd just given the management of his farm, Whitechurch Farm, to another guy, and he said I could see if that man would rent us stalls," Hanley recalled. "But the other guy was strictly Thoroughbreds and didn't want to hear about showjumpers coming in. So we shook hands, and I never thought I'd see the American again."

But the next morning the American, former Wall Street broker and racing man Murray McDonnell, pulled up at Hanley's barn.

"He said he'd love to ride, and asked if he could ride with me," said Hanley. "I put him up on a horse, and we went off hacking around the fields and the roads. That one day turned into two weeks. He came every day and rode out with me, and we were chatting all the time about horses, about why I liked this horse or didn't like this other horse, what characteristics they had, their minds."

As their friendship developed, McDonnell eventually asked Hanley if he'd consider managing Whitechurch's five broodmares.

Soon, Hanley was off and running in an entirely new game, and his duties quickly expanded beyond broodmare



Hanley's training yard at Maddenstown Lodge in Ireland.

management into yearling prep, weanling-to-yearling pinhooking, and even training racehorses. Eventually, Hanley said, "the Thoroughbreds just took over."

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Hanley went on to train a number of stakes winners and graded stakes winners, most notably the future turf champion Golden Apples (whom Hanley also bred, in partnership with James Egan). Others included Lidanna, Be My Hope, Rosie's Mac, Connemara, and Coney Kitty.

Hanley credits his time in the saddle, and some astute guidance, for helping him reach the winner's circle as a racehorse trainer.

"It's a product of having ridden young horses and competed on them to an international level, of knowing horses' minds and how they respond to pressure," he said, "and I was very lucky, as well, that one of the riders working for me was one of Jim Bolger's ex-riders, Brian Nolan. I learned a lot from Brian."

Hanley also harked back to the teachings of Iris Kellett.

"With the racehorses, I had the same philosophy as we'd had back at Kellett's," he said. "I'd never discourage them, never overtrain them or defeat them, but try to match them with horses of equal talent and try to always have them finish up their work in a way where they were pleased with themselves, not going home

tired, beaten, or stressed.

“When it gets to the really top level, in group races, they’re all good,” he added. “So I think a lot of it comes down to a horse that believes that he’s better and he can try harder.”

Sadly, McDonnell—the man who brought Hanley into the Thoroughbred business and contributed so much to his fast start as a trainer—did not live to see all of his friend’s new success.

“On New Year’s Eve 1990, this man whom I’d known and worked for and who was a great friend to me, called and said, ‘David, we’re going to have a great year next year,’” Hanley remembered. “He said, ‘I’ve got a new partner, we’re going to buy more horses, and I’m really excited about the future.’ I thought, ‘Wow! This is taking off.’”

“The next morning, his son called me and said they’d found him dead on the kitchen floor. He’d had a heart attack.”

It was a crushing loss. Hanley and his wife Ann bought Whitechurch from McDonnell’s estate, though they later relocated to The Curragh as their breeding, training, and pinhooking operation expanded. Hanley’s pinhooking activities now extended to America, thanks to contacts he’d made through McDonnell: Egan of Corduff Stud in Ireland and Kentucky horseman Bill Betz.

Their pinhooking partnership made headlines in the U. S. with such horses as Forest Secrets and Chief Seattle, and in Britain and Europe with names like champion Rebellline and Cassandra Go, a world-class sprinter whose foals now include Group 1 winner Halfway to Heaven and, more recently, the Shamardal colt Chess Master, who brought more than \$2.7 million last year at the Tattersalls October yearling sale.

Meanwhile, Hanley’s training stable was faring less well.

In 2001, Hanley and his wife decided to shift their focus to the Bluegrass. After stints in a pinhooking partnership and then training at Hurricane Hall, Hanley settled at his own farm near Lexington, Kentucky that he and Ann named Whitechurch. The Hanleys launched a boutique pinhooking operation, offering only about a



Ann and David Hanley

dozen yearlings each sale season.

The results were phenomenal. Whitechurch topped the Fasig-Tipton July sale in both 2008 and 2009, first with a \$375,000 Exchange Rate filly that had cost just \$100,000 as a Keeneland November weanling, then with a \$425,000 Medaglia d’Oro filly they’d bought as a weanling for a mere \$85,000. At the 2008 Keeneland November auction, during a time when many were still reeling from the global financial crisis, the Hanleys paid \$165,000 for a Medaglia d’Oro colt and \$240,000 for a Tiznow filly; they sold them nine months later at Fasig-Tipton’s prestigious Saratoga select yearling sale for \$875,000 and \$725,000, respectively.

Once again, the instinct and eye Hanley developed while training and competing helped inform his eye as he navigated the highly competitive waters of weanling-to-yearling pinhooking, searching for resale prospects.

“When you’re at the sales looking at horses, you get a feel for their character and class, the attitude of the horse,” Hanley explained. “It’s a big part of riding horses, too, because you know the good ones have that character that they’re able to step up when the challenges become bigger. The more you train them, the better they get. And the way these Thoroughbreds move off the ground even as yearlings, how a horse moves off its back end and lands on its front end, also is a big part of whether they’re going to be successful racehorses.”

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TEAM EFFORT

When WinStar CEO Elliott Walden asked Hanley to lend his eye to WinStar's inspection team at the Keeneland November sale, Hanley was happy to oblige. That request ultimately led to a job offer and now has placed Hanley at the heart of one of the world's premier—and largest—Thoroughbred operations.

As general manager, Hanley draws on almost every aspect of his long and varied experience with horses. And now he gets to be part of the horses' entire life cycle, from their conception to their sale or racing careers, then back to the breeding shed when they retire to the WinStar stallion barn or broodmare band.

"It's quite a change for me from running my own 12- to 15-horse farm to managing 400 or 500 horses at WinStar," Hanley acknowledged, "but it's been a huge learning experience for me. I love horses, and there's no better job for me than going out and assessing these horses, evaluating them, raising them, watching them. The job here has exposed me to so many more horses, and the wonderful thing about WinStar is that we have so many great managers in each division. I just oversee and, if something isn't going right, try to improve things.

"But WinStar was very successful before I ever came here!" he added with a laugh. That success, Hanley believes, starts with the drive, energy, and vision of owner Kenny Troutt and Walden—a positivity that Hanley says is reflected in the rest of the staff.

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body is doing their best," he said. "That's a big part of the success of WinStar. It's a unique situation to be given the opportunity to try and do the best job you can do."

And what's Hanley's favorite part of the job? All of it.

"Being exposed to the number of matings we're doing, knowing all these mares and stallions; then watching the young horses grow and develop; to assess the yearlings and seeing where they fit, how they sell, and how they go on to do; and then to watch the ones we keep as they develop," Hanley said. He paused. "It's an ideal situation. I might start by watching horses train, and I'm out there at seven in the evening still watching horses in their paddocks. It's fascinating." ★