

## West Point Thoroughbreds: Bellwether Racing Partnership sets standards, reaps rewards

Marion E. Altieri (Saratoga Today)

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When Macho Again takes to the field on Saturday for the Whitney, he's bringing his strong, long stride onto the Saratoga oval--and his June 13 victory in the Stephen Foster at Churchill Downs. It's a heady thing, to race a horse of Macho Again's caliber--but the partners in West Point Thoroughbred's stable of owners have come to expect quality horses and spectacular moments. West Point has built a reputation of cautious optimism, a conservatism in racing that is the hallmark of good judgment. This method, of watching before taking action--and then seizing the day--has made West Point one of the most popular racing stables among handicappers and bettors. If West Point has a horse entered in a race--odds are very good that that horse has a chance. West Point horses aren't hastily thrown into a race or inappropriately entered in a competition for which they're not prepared.

Since 1991, West Point Thoroughbreds has built one of the most prestigious racing partnership organizations in the United States. With 400 partners and 80 horses in their stables across the country, West Point is a stellar example of perseverance; in-depth knowledge of the industry and insightful management of their horses' careers and lives.

Tom Bellhouse is the Executive Vice President of East Coast Operations for West Point Thoroughbreds. Bellhouse brings to his job the best attributes possible for a man in his position: a wealth of professional experience, in concert with passionate love for the horses and extraordinary networking skills. Honesty is key to the successful administration of his job, and Bellhouse takes very seriously his obligation to the partners and horses under his care.

Bellhouse recently provided an informative and interesting tour of Kieran McLaughlin's shedrow, a barn filled with spectacular horses of extraordinary merit and staggeringly impressive credentials. West Point's horses, some new to training and others seasoned runners--stand cheek-to-jowl with other horses with some of the best credentials in racing. Champions Charitable Man and Asiatic Boy live in the stalls next to West Point's Common Currency, Defense Rests and Rereadthefootnotes. These three horses are not out of their league: they're among peers. The young ones are learning from the best, in a community of camaraderie and nurturing that even includes the barn cat (who was receiving antibiotics for a cut).

Again the West Point theory comes into play, that of placing horses in appropriate situations--and that includes the crucial decision of placing horses with the trainer who will bring out the best in the horse, and encourage her/him to stretch out, finding the very best in the horse and growing that horse's career.

Bellhouse is adamant about the importance of proper placement of a horse in the quest for racing immortality. A horse who is entrusted incorrectly to a trainer who doesn't understand the psyche of that horse, or the idiosyncrasies of that pedigree line--will fail. Ideally, horses, owners and trainers work together to make a team that benefits all involved, and West Point Thoroughbreds is a company that is informed by the intellectual assessment of a situation--testimony to the West Point education of Terry Finley, the company's founder. The strong emotional connection of partners in a horse with their steed is the end result of careful, thoughtful consideration of the horses', partners' and company's needs. No partnership is created or horse acquired before the situation has been evaluated through this lens of knowledgeable analysis of all parties involved.

Bellhouse is enthusiastic about his job, but the first thing that strikes one is that he appears to be not working at all. His easy smile, friendly handshake and sincere, honest manner immediately put others at ease--humans and horses alike. A tour of McLaughlin's barn with Tom Bellhouse feels like a morning spent with a new friend and his horses. The immediate sense of ease is key to success for Bellhouse, West Point and "his" partners. When people buy into a racing partnership, they need to know that there's a person who is available to them and who will not discount any of their questions or concerns as being irrelevant.

Tom Bellhouse of West Point Thoroughbreds performs his job with the grace of one who genuinely likes his profession and those in his care. The horses and partners who work with him every day of the year are satisfied, happy and successful. This is the proof-positive that West Point Thoroughbreds is a company that hires only the best, races only the best and works to benefit everyone involved. The American business community would do well to study West Point Thoroughbreds and Terry Finley's methods--and integrate it into their own operations manual. West Point Thoroughbreds: at the top of their game for a reason, and that reason can be summed up in two phrases: thoughtful planning and nurturing staff. Those phrases may never be in the West Point brochures--but they should.