



LEFT: John Size collecting another trophy from the Hong Kong Jockey Club.

TRAINING DAY

MEET THREE AUSTRALIAN TRAINERS WHO ARE MAKING THEIR MARK IN HONG KONG'S INTENSE RACING WORLD

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY RACHAEL OAKES-ASH

RACING IN HONG KONG is not about frocks, brand names or French champagne. Hats rarely come out, and when they do, it's usually on the crowns of expats celebrating the Melbourne Cup or some other race not held on site. It's more about money here – this is a serious business with \$A112 million up for grabs each season and the bookies reeling in over \$HK10 billion a year.

Behind it all is the Hong Kong Jockey Club (HKJC), a 150-year-old institution wielding major power over the industry. A tightly-knit enclave of influence with 12 stewards and a mere 200 voting members, it takes years to become a member of the HKJC and you need two signatures of the 200 voters just to qualify to be considered. But once you've paid

your annual \$A2000 in fees, you'll have well and truly made it into the Hong Kong elite.

Australians are well represented both on and off Hong Kong's Sha Tin racetrack, and almost a third of the horses stabled here were born and bred Down Under. Jockeys such as Damien Olive, Shane Dye and Brett Prebble have all enjoyed success in Hong Kong, but the people who have really changed the face of racing here are the trainers. An invitation by the HKJC to run your own stable here is one of the most coveted gigs in the international racing industry, and there are just 25 trainers on the island at any time.

In March 2005, *H&H* met with three Australian trainers currently making their mark at the HKJC.

JOHN SIZE

TRAINER AND WORKAHOLIC

When John Size came to the HKJC four years ago from Randwick, Sydney, he was told that socialising with racehorse owners was part of the job for any Hong Kong trainer. But John has never been a big one for champagne and small talk, and, preferring to spend his time in the stables and on the track, he turned his back on the social aspect of the job. This move paid off many times over, with John winning the coveted Trainer Premiership in his first year and then again two years running. The executive director of racing at the HKJC, Winfried Engelbrecht-Bresges doesn't dish out praise lightly, but even he described John as having "set the benchmark by which all other trainers are now judged".

So while the Chinese owners may not be able to show him off at their decadent lunches, they don't lose face as John brings home the winners week after week. In money terms, over the 2003/2004 season alone John scored 73 wins, 60 seconds and 53 thirds from 550 runners. That's prizemoney of approximately \$A13 million in just one year. "If you're good at your job and you work hard, you expect to be successful," says John when asked how he did it.

"Training is very different here," he adds, "We're only allowed to have up to 60 horses each at any one time, and they're always housed and stabled. Sha Tin racetrack itself is on reclaimed land. The language issue has been frustrating, but you deal with that. Other challenges have been the environmental factors - pollution and atmosphere contribute heavily to mucous in horses and respiratory diseases. On the upside, running a business in Hong Kong is not so hectic here because the Jockey Club does everything for you."

According to John, competition in Hong Kong is much tougher than in Australia. "At any one time there are eight or 10 international riders who are the best of the best from their country, and they're all competing against each other at the same time. Racing in Hong Kong is more about the punting than socialising. When you look into a crowd here you don't see too many binoculars. Everyone will be standing in front of television screens watching all four close-up angles of their horse in the race. But I'm the same, I wouldn't watch a race live if I can watch and track what my horse is doing close up."



ABOVE: Horses trained by David Hayes in Hong Kong have earned some \$A57 million in the 10 years he has been working here.

DAVID HAYES

TRAINER AND FAMILY MAN

In racing terms, David Hayes is royalty. His father, the late Colin Hayes, trained three Melbourne Cup winners and established South Australia's Lindsay Park thoroughbred stud and training complex in 1965. David took over Lindsay Park in 1990 and went on to win a slew of major premierships in South Australia and Victoria in his first five years. Hong Kong beckoned in 1996, and, 10 seasons later Hayes is finally preparing to return to Lindsay Park, leaving behind his mark on the Hong Kong racing fraternity as chairman of the Trainers Association and a two-time winner of the coveted Trainer Premiership. Horses from his stables here have won some \$A57 million over the past 10 years.

"Hong Kong has a great vibe about it. It's a 'can do' place," David says. "The economy of racing is brilliant and the stakes money huge. As a trainer, you don't have to travel anywhere, you live practically on site in accommodation provided by the club and everyone in the building has a common interest. There's an open house mentality with BBQs and parties and my family have a maid and a driver - you can't ask for much more than that!"

David admits that leaving Lindsay Park for Hong Kong was hard. "Moving from a rural setting in the country to a high-rise apartment certainly took some adjusting," he says. "But you can have a great lifestyle in Hong Kong; it's a very liveable city despite the lack of space. We do a lot of trekking and exploring around the parklands as a family."

That said, it's not always easy. "This is a great place for a young family," he says, "But once they become teenagers, Australia leaves Hong Kong for dead. Two of my kids are in boarding school in Melbourne and it's time for us to go home now. I will go home this year and hope to get Lindsay Park back to its glory days. It feels good to be leaving on a high."



DAVID HALL

TRAINER & THE 'NEW KID ON THE BLOCK'

Forty year-old David Hall is best known for training 'Makybe Diva' to Melbourne Cup glory in 2003. He's also trained eight Group One winners in Melbourne, including the Oakleigh Plate, the Australasian Oaks, the VRC Derby and the Salinger Stakes.

An offer to train in Hong Kong last year meant the opportunity to make some serious money in this serious world of racing, and a chance to spend some time with his old mate from South Australia, David Hayes. While he admits it was hard leaving his 'comfort zone' back home, David's first season with the HKJC is going well and he already has 40 horses in his stable.

"It was a bit of a shock when I first arrived," he says. "I had a good client base back home and have had to start pretty much from scratch here. Luckily, with the restrictions on the number of horses any trainer can work at any one time here, there's always an opportunity for new guys to have a go.

"The HKJC gives you a license to train and basically you have to catch and kill your own after that. You get three years before they start to assess your performance, but I'm fairly confident I'll be OK." David has already clocked up 10 winners this year (at the time of printing), and is looking good for his three-year assessment. He's also enjoying the trainer-friendly set up with the HKJC, "There are no costs for a trainer here and everything is run by the jockey club. I suppose that's why it's such a prize position to get a job here."

And as for the lifestyle, he says "it's fantastic". "You can play hard or work hard or do both. David Hayes is known for his escapades while John Size is known for his hard work - Me? I do a bit of both." U

Rachael Oakes-Ash travelled to Hong Kong with Cathay Pacific.
www.cathayairline.com.au



LEFT: David Hall, the Hong Kong Jockey Club's latest 'rookie,' made his name training one of Australia's most famous thoroughbreds, Makybe Diva. ABOVE: Sha Tin racetrack is on reclaimed land in the middle of the city and attracts serious betters from around Asia.