

Smith's craft shaped by legends

WARWICK FARM-BASED TRAINER MATTHEW SMITH SERVED A RACING APPRENTICESHIP THAT VERY FEW TRAINERS IN AUSTRALIA, AND PERHAPS EVEN THE WORLD, COULD MATCH WORDS: BRAD GRAY

How many trainers could say they spent time under the wings of legends Aidan O'Brien and Bart Cummings?

In his early twenties Matthew Smith didn't know he wanted to be a horse trainer.

What he did know though is that he had an itch he just had to scratch and in the mid-1990s packed his bags for the UK.

He had spent a month with John Sadler but wanted to see how they did it on the other side of the world. He soon discovered that to get a job in racing, he'd have to learn how to ride.

Once he set himself up in England, it took Smith eight months to learn the basics with a riding instructor or in his words, "to be able to get around without falling off."

That led to Smith landing a job in Ireland with Pat O'Donnell in a small National Hunt yard. After that eight-month stint where he spent up to two hours on every horse, it gave him the confidence to approach Aidan O'Brien.

O'Brien wasn't yet heading up Ballydoyle and was operating out of Piltown, a small village in Kilkenny.

"Basically, all I did was open up The Irish Field, see who the leading trainer was and rang him up for a job," Smith recalled.

"When I started at Aidan's I went from riding four a morning to 10 a morning. It was a case of sink or swim. You either got on and you rode them or you did something else.

"At Aidan's you were riding from 6am to 2pm. It was eight hours riding work, every day. Purely by time in the saddle I went from being able to get



Matthew Smith – has been taught by the best in the game. Picture by Steve Hart

around to riding the horses properly."

After three-months breaking in yearlings with O'Brien's brother-in-law, Smith returned to soon find that the trainer had had been appointed the head of Ballydoyle.

"I was in the right place at the right time and became the assistant trainer," said Smith.

"It was an incredible time. Aidan had only just started really getting momentum.

"It was great experience and phenomenal riding work at Ballydoyle. I won't ride work anywhere else in the world like it."

Smith recalled riding champion three-year-old Desert King in his slow work, the first Group One winner to come out of Ballydoyle for O'Brien, but it's the Irishman's approach to

his craft and humble nature which left the most lasting impression on Smith.

"I was there two and half years and I reckon he took two days off. He was there every day," marvelled Smith.

"He always had an open mind, always listened. That's what makes him such a great trainer. He was never set by one way. He is a genius with a photographic memory.

"He taught me that you have to row your own boat and make decisions that you believe in. He always said to me that we are going to die by our own sword.

"We're either going to make it and be successful or go down but we're going to do it our way otherwise what's the point in doing it."

After then becoming foreman to Niall O'Callaghan in the USA, Smith's prior Coolmore association with Peter O'Brien and Michael Kirwan provided him with an opportunity to land a position as the assistant trainer to Bart Cummings back in Australia.

"Bart had been there and done it all already so it was completely different. However, there was the same work ethic and methodical approach to what he does," said Smith, who spent four years at Leilani Lodge.

"Bart was always happy to put you in the front line so it was the complete experience you needed before you became a trainer yourself. If you asked questions he'd tell you how it is."

Fast forward to now and Smith, who recently turned 50, has been a trainer in his own right for over a decade.



Matthew Smith (left) with Aidan O'Brien and son Joseph at The Curragh in 1996

It's been an amazing journey, all starting as a wide-eyed five-year-old tugging on the coat of his father at the track every Saturday.

Christopher Smith was a committeeman at Wangaratta Turf Club in country Victoria, the city in which Smith was also born and raised, as well as being a keen owner.

"My earliest memories of racing are my father doing the speeches and giving the trophies out at the local race clubs. Wherever he went I went, so if he was in the jockey's room, at trackwork, I was there," said Smith.

His two brothers and sister were there shadowing his old man too but it turns out none of them were bitten by the racing bug like young Matthew.

"Some things have more of an impact than other things at a young age and so my involvement with my Dad had more of an impact on me than I thought at the time. I didn't grow up thinking I want to be a horse trainer," said Smith.

Only four years into running his own operation, Smith was a Group One-winning trainer. In 2011, Hurtle Myrtle swept down the middle of the track to win the Myer Classic at Flemington.

"She was always good right from the word go. She had a few soundness issues so she didn't race as often as we'd have liked but we just had to be careful with her. She was fantastic and the best horse we've had," said Smith.

Smith credits the stable's recent run of good form to the devotion of

his wife Melissa, with whom he has two children, Claudia, aged 10, and Sebastian, 7, as well as his tireless staff and loyal band of owners. All vital cogs in the wheel.

"Mel is a massive part of the team and although she might be in the background she is there every day and plays huge part in the running of the business. I couldn't do it without her, there is no doubt about that," Smith said.

"With this momentum, we are starting to build a great team of staff around us and the results are showing. You can't do it all. That's part the genius of Bart Cummings.

"He always had the right people around him. As he was getting older, he was still training Group One winners, that didn't change.

"We have tinkered with a few little things over the past two years, trying different things here and there. We are changing all of the time. You have to if you want to keep progressing."

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