

The Simple Game

An Irish Jockey's Memoir

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Thomas Foley

With a Foreword
by Otto Thorwarth



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***D**edicated to Mam, Dad,
and my Little Boys*

Foreword

The first time I became aware of Tom was in 2009 at Kentucky Downs, a European-style race track located on the border between Kentucky and Tennessee, near the city of Franklin and just off Interstate 65. The course is unique among American tracks in that its surface is grass and not dirt, and instead of the traditional oval shape associated with American tracks, the course resembles a lightbulb lying on its side.

Although I am not a fan of riding at Kentucky Downs, Tom seemed to be in his element, an advantage probably stemming from his days as a steeplechase jockey and the fact that most, if not all, steeplechase races are run on grass.

Tom and I actually met a year later while waiting for our turn to audition for Walt Disney Studios' feature film *Secretariat*. We exchanged stories about our careers, but mostly we shared some laughs over our lack of acting ability.

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As fate would have it, I landed the role of Ron Turcotte, Secretariat's first-call jockey, and a month into filming, I discovered that Tom was cast as Jimmy Gaffney, Secretariat's exercise rider. We had a chance to congratulate each other while in Louisiana where we were shooting some of the scenes for the film.

Rain delays during the shoot allowed Tom and me to visit for hours on end. On most days, we traded war stories about our riding careers, as well as a few pertaining to our personal lives, but on one particular night, we decided to try out the cuisine at a local karaoke club. I thought that my primary reason for coming along was to enjoy a good meal and to lend moral support for those brave enough to get up on the stage, but, as I found out later, Tom had other plans.

We had a great time, but by the end of the evening, Tom said he wasn't leaving until I sang at least one song. I did, and I think that was the most nervous I got during the entire filming of the movie.

After my singing debut, if I can call it that, my friendship with Tom grew. We continued talking and then one day he told me about his book. I asked him to send me a copy of the manuscript when it was finished.

He did, and from the first page on, I felt as if we were back in Louisiana talking to each other face-to-face. I was taken by Tom's ability to make me feel this way

and felt that a lot of his stories could have been my own by just changing a few names here and there.

As I read through the manuscript, I easily related to the fact that we all struggle to find love, to form strong and lasting relationships, and to find our place in this world. I also connected with the idea that understanding ourselves is a never-ending process.

What struck me most was the frankness with which Tom shared his story. Most people seem to think that the life of a jockey is all glamour and glitz, but as Tom clearly shows it is anything but that.

The psychological impact that the “Sport of Kings” has on the minds of pint-sized athletes are numerous. Jockeys are expected to meet weight limits and to ride horses that they sometimes know have no business on a track, and they are given little credit when they win and all the blame when they don’t. Jockeys are also required to spend long hours away from those they love; which often means that they miss opportunities to build solid relationships.

Even so, most jockeys are willing to sacrifice all to become the best in the business.

In horse racing, as in all professional sports, you will find that driven attitude to win and to be the best at

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the highest level. The sad part is that probably less than five percent of jockeys ever experience that kind of success. Some never reach the top because they lack the talent or made bad career decisions. Then there's those that just never get a break.

After the reality of never reaching the pinnacle of the sport sets in, jockeys have three choices; they can leave the sport, find another job related to the business, or they can fall into the routine of an adrenaline driven grind of being an overworked and underappreciated jockey.

Tom's story is unique in that he came from Ireland as a boy and in time enjoyed tremendous success as a steeplechase jockey. It was only after experiencing personal problems that he selected to ride on flat tracks. At this point in his career, he could've selected to run away from racing altogether, but the crazy part about racing is, that once horse racing gets into your blood, it never really leaves.

There is just something special about the relationship between man and beast working together as one. The relationship is a little like marriage; when you find that special horse, it is like finding your life partner that

only you connect with, it becomes a magical partnership that keeps you coming back for more.

As you will discover, there's no doubt that Tom's life was destined to be lived among horses and horse racing and that the sport and horses would play, and continue to play, a huge role in shaping his life. When Tom told me about his book back in Louisiana, I thought that if it was anything like the Tom I was getting to know that it would be something special. I was right.

The Simple Game is one of those books that makes you feel as if the writer is talking to you and that you're forming a friendship with each passing page. As you know, that takes deep-seated honesty, and that is exactly what Tom gives; probably because he doesn't know any other way.

I am proud to call Tom my friend, and know that you will be too.

Enjoy!

Otto Thorwarth

August 2010



*The “flipping bowl,” every horse race track
in the world has one.*

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Flipping

There were no tears in his eyes.

Tobey Maguire, the actor, raised his head and looked into the mirror. Sure, he had the distressed look on his face, but there were no tears; trust me there's always tears. Maguire was playing the part of jockey Red Pollard in the movie *Seabiscuit* and was purging himself of his latest meal in an attempt to lose weight.

What Maguire was doing is sadly enough my area of expertise and has been a ritual I have performed many times a day for the last few years. I am an expert at the rite of purging so I can tell you that there should've been tears.

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Watching Maguire, I felt cheated. I mean, here was a guy getting paid millions to play this part, and I felt for that kind of money he could've at least shed a few tears. Hell, myself and sixty percent of the jockeys riding in this country do it everyday; we do it and brush back the tears just to get our shot at riding a winner or making a decent paycheck.

Our tears are not shed in pain or anguish; our tear ducts tear up in order to clear themselves out as you do this to your body. We call it "flipping" or "heaving," and it runs rampant and unchecked throughout every horse track in the world. The practice is not even frowned upon; it's catered to.

Most jockeys' quarters have a special toilet that is shaped in a square. They're called "flipping bowls". This toilet is solely there for performing the act. Most jocks' room toilets will have four stalls. One through three will have a sign posted inside reading "no flipping in these stalls," yet magic door number four gets all the action.

It's not uncommon to see riders lined up waiting to use it and making jokes about the guy inside who is making ungodly noises. I've made these jokes myself as a way to keep my mind off of what I was going to do when my turn came. The odd thing about it was that we would just stand in line waiting and not use the other toilets. Looking at it now, it's funny when I realize that we even had rules for bulimia.

So how do you become a flipper? For me it was easy. I was at dinner with a few riders, and at the time I was trying to do it right and stick to a diet and use my head. I noticed that most of the other guys were tearing into these huge meals. They didn't seem bothered by the fact that they had to make weight the next day. My curiosity grew to the point that I had to ask, "How can you eat all that and keep your weight in check?"

Big mistake, as the answer I was about to hear would change my whole world and lead me down a road that eventually meant the loss of my passion for racing, a passion I am now trying to desperately rediscover.

"I don't keep it," was the answer.

"What do you mean you don't keep it? What do you do with it?" I asked.

"Easy," my buddy said smiling at me, "I flip."

As with most things in life, one question led to another. "How do you do it?"

This got a few laughs from the five jocks at the table as it's not exactly rocket science, but the answers I was about to get revealed that there was a lot more to this than one would think. Hard lessons as well as trial and error had made this simple procedure of flipping an art form, and I was about to be given the crash course on the basics.

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“First thing, kid, drink plenty of soda. You’re going to need it to push everything in your belly back up.”

This introductory statement was followed by one lesson after another: Things like never eat chunky solid food as it hurts coming up, or avoid spaghetti as it can stick in your throat. As these facts started flying at me from all sides, I made a mental checklist. Pretty soon, one of the older guys took over and laid it all out.

“Eat ‘til you feel like popping,” he said pointing his fork at me, “as it will help when you reach for it. You drink your sodas and when you’re loaded up hit the john and get yourself in a crouch; kinda like your riding position and just reach in and push on your tonsils a bit and the rest will happen.”

Even though all the jocks seemed fine with the idea of flipping, some part of me wasn’t. I knew it was wrong.

I didn’t grow up in a household that tolerated wastefulness and really that’s all flipping was; wastefulness.

Before the night was over, however, I decided to give it a try. I didn’t feel comfortable having my first time trying it to be in a crowded restaurant so I decided to wait until I got home.

Leaving dinner, I stopped at a gas station and armed myself with the tools needed to perform the act. I didn't want to try anything solid because you never know how it will turn out, and God forbid I didn't drink enough soda and choked on something. Ice cream seemed the way to go. Two quarts of the stuff and a few sodas, and I was on my way.

Like most things in life, you never forget your first time. I downed all the supplies and headed to the bathroom. Assuming the position, I reached in and did as instructed.

For some reason, the ice cream, and most of my dinner, came up rather easily and the idiot kid in me realized that I could have the best of both worlds: I could eat what I wanted, and all I needed to do was flip.

The realization was like you see in cartoons when a good idea is had; a giant lightbulb lights up. It was very much like that, and the sad part is that the lightbulb would burn out, as would I over the coming years.

I think about that dinner so much. Looking back, it highlights how green I was to the life on the track and that of a jockey. Sure, guys were quick to tell me about

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flipping, and some even warned me about the long term effects, but, by then, I was in no position to listen to their advice, and really, it wasn't something I wanted to discuss with anyone, especially the people I had to compete with every day.

As a jock, you never want to show your weaknesses as it just sets you up for a fall when you do. When you compete in such a dangerous sport and in such tight quarters you learn the weaknesses of the other riders very fast, little things that might give you an edge when you're getting close to the wire. You know when guys are weak. You know when you can put them in positions they can't get out of because they're scared and will pull back. Because of this, there was no way I was going to talk about how flipping was starting to make me feel.

I know it sounds strange, but it really was just part of the game. I started flipping at home or in private. I managed to give the impression that I didn't actually do it at all. I got so crafty that the other riders believed I just stuck to a strick diet.

I'd become so good at hiding my "dieting skills" that I'd slipped into a very secretive world; a world that would lead to a very lonely existence.

My typical day would begin with a cup of strong coffee with three sugars to get the heart pumping, and then it was off to the track for morning work. The sweet coffee came in handy as it woke me up and made me sweat off a few pounds during the morning's work. Then it was off to the races to get through the day's calls and then, the Good Lord willing, home.

I never made flipping right before a race a habit as it made me feel dizzy. However, on occasion, I did do it and felt afterwards that I could've ridden better. I don't think it ever cost me a race. You know, when you're not one hundred percent you can easily put others in bad positions because you're not fully able to do your job. Its a bit like riding injured; it happens all the time but its really not right.

*I*t was when I was at home and no prying eyes could see me that the hardest part of my day began. I tried to limit my flipping to nighttime as it was easier just to eat the one meal and pop a few sleeping pills and fall asleep and not deal with the headaches and dizziness that followed. It's sad, but over the years, I became like a mad scientist with the whole process. I learned which foods came up easier, or didn't sit too heavy on my stomach. I figured out which foods were hard or

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could choke you. The jockeys were right; spaghetti was the hardest to deal with.

Eventually, I learned that when I tasted the bitter taste of stomach acid that I had gotten all the contents out. This allowed me the opportunity of relaxing and going to sleep without the worry of having to spend hours in the sauna the next day. So, yes, flipping was my saving grace.

For the first few years flipping didn't seem to bother me, sure there were the headaches or bouts of dizziness when I overdid it, but all in all, it seemed to be the best way to eat and ride and not be driven crazy by a diet.

For me, the fact that the guys I looked up to seemed to be doing it made flipping seem more like the normal way of doing things. Yes, gorging yourself like a tick then sticking your finger down you throat and pulling the trigger was normal.

One thing leads to another; it's a saying that is probably as old as time, but in a world of bad habits it rang true. I'd been flipping for over a year when I started realizing that I wasn't able to get everything up anymore. I'm sure that my body was fighting me for every morsal as it wanted to keep enough so it could

function, but I wanted to get everything out so I could play the game and ride.

Given all of this, laxatives soon followed. Like everything else I learned at this stage of my career, I had asked one of the older guys who was bigger in frame what he did. “You must do more than just flip to keep the weight off,” I casually suggested to him one day. It was another question I could’ve lived without asking.

In the beginning, I popped a couple of laxative tablets just in case I didn’t manage to empty my belly. The laxatives made sure that my system was cleared out before I had to report my weight.

Over the years, a couple of tablets became five or six just to get them to be effective. I imagine that it’s like every other drug that you abuse; over time you develop a tolerance for it and need more and more of it for it to work. This was the case here. It’s hard to write this as even now I feel stupid for falling into a lifestyle that led me down this path.

After three and a half years, things came to a head one day while I was preparing for a race. I finished using the “normal” toilet when I noticed a lot of blood in my stool. I’d seen bits of blood before and never thought much about it, but this was different. Yes, this was very

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different. There was so much blood that I nearly vomited looking at it.

Right then, I knew that I was at a crossroads. The years of bad diets and laxatives had caught up with me and I was staring at the result in the bowl below me.

I walked back to my locker. My valet, Danny, knew something was wrong. "What?" was all he said and then he added, "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I leaned into him and told him what had just happened, and the first thing he said was "you idiot, why didn't you tell me you were doing these things? I'm your valet, man. You need to talk to me. Remember the kid that died at Colonial years ago? Well, that's the same shit he was doing."

We sat there for a few minutes and thought about how best to deal with the situation. We agreed that seeing a doctor was the first move.

Climbing into my pick-up that night was hard because I knew that riding horses was slowly killing me.

Foreword

As I drove home, I thought about everything that had happened to me in racing and wondered how I'd arrived at this point in my life.