

mōjō Rising

A Q&A with Fred Taylor, the innovative managing partner of Texas-based Mojo Racing

By Shelby Downs

Fred Taylor knows a thing or two about good mojo. He creates it everyday for Southwest Airlines as the uniquely-titled Senior Manager of Proactive Customer Communication. Now he's bringing some of that goodwill to horse racing through his Mojo Racing Partners operation.

A native of Louisville, Kentucky, Taylor grew up in the shadow of Churchill Downs, but it wasn't until he went to the track with a friend that he fell in love with the sport.

"It was amazing being there so close to those horses," Taylor recalled. "A light went on in my head, like I want to do this, I want to have this experience. At the time I didn't have the means and my family certainly didn't, so I just put it on the backburner and thought one day if I ever have the opportunity, I'd like to try this."

In the ensuing years, Taylor climbed the corporate ladder at Southwest, where president Colleen Barrett handpicked him for the newly-created proactive customer communication department. Barrett appreciated Taylor's writing style, and without a doubt, many Southwest customers do as well, since a letter from Taylor sometimes includes vouchers for free travel. Instead of waiting for people to call and complain when Southwest's service goes awry, Taylor searches for problematic situations and responds within a few days with letters of apology containing his direct phone line, a unique strategy in the harried airline industry.

Fred Taylor and his daughter Zoe give Hollywood Pegasus a tasty treat at Diamond D Ranch in Lone Oak, Texas.



“We spend time and energy taking good care of you when you come to the airport and get on our airplanes, and if your service is seriously disrupted, my team tries to follow up and take care of you after you get home so we complete that customer service loop,” Taylor said. “In order to be proactive, you have to monitor the situation 24/7/365. That gives our company the edge because we’re constantly out there looking for ways to make our customers’ experience better. Based on the feedback we’ve been getting from media and customers, our approach is unique.”

Packing a powerful punch of pragmatism and positivity, Taylor has a knack for communicating with customers. As a bonus, his success at Southwest’s corporate headquarters near Love Field in Dallas finally offered him the means to pursue his dream of racehorse ownership.

Flying Start

After exploring options ranging from breeding, claiming and auctions, Taylor sent a blind e-mail to Ken Carson, Valor Farm’s general manager. The response he received, along with a tour of the Pilot Point farm, focused his energies in a new direction.

“Ken was so nice and open and welcoming,” Taylor said. “I couldn’t believe my good luck that this guy would take the time to talk to me. He said, ‘Why don’t you just start your own racing partnership? Get some people together that share a common interest and from that, make it fun, because if it’s not fun then you’re not going to enjoy it. Spell out up front what the expectations are and what you’re getting into so there are no misunderstandings. And then build on that.’”

“So that’s what I did. I walked away from that meeting and thought that was the best advice I’d ever been given.”

To keep costs in check, Taylor drew on his experience from a previous job as a law clerk and his position as a master communicator at Southwest to draft the documents himself. He took the time and deliberate caution to spell out all aspects of partnership, from financial expectations to ethical standards.

“When I started building out the concept, I thought, ‘Why make this about me? Why not make this about giving other people the opportunity to participate?’” he said. “There are a lot of people out there like myself that have an interest in ownership, who like horse racing and want to do a little more, but for whatever reason just don’t think it’s practical. It became a mission for me to make ownership opportunities easy, affordable and fun.”

“I’m going to put the horse’s interest first, so getting in that winner’s circle is a reward for taking good care of the horse. I’m going to do it by upholding the highest ethical standards that are there, and my service providers—the sale, the training center, the trainer, all those folks—they’ll have to meet those same ethics.”

Instant Karma

As luck would have it, several of Taylor’s co-workers had dabbled in horse ownership or knew someone who had, so half his partners came from Southwest while the rest came through Carson. He limited the number of shares in each horse to 20, which kept costs affordable for partners while still offering the potential for decent rewards.

The next steps also came fairly easily. Taylor, a natural wordsmith, zeroed in on the perfect partnership name—Mojo Racing Partners. Then a veterinarian acquaintance introduced him to trainer John Good, a former assistant to Bob Baffert based in Kentucky.

“He’s not a big operation, but he’s very hands-on, thorough, trustworthy and old school in his practices and principles,” Taylor said of



Some of the Mojo partners enjoy a day of racing in a suite at Lone Star Park.

Good. “John told me, ‘If the horse can’t do it on his own with his heart and physique then he’s just not going to do it all.’ He’s medication-free, and that’s really important to us. We try to lean toward people that use medication as a last result. He’s a hay, oats and water kind of guy.”

Carson suggested that Mojo horses get their early lessons at Ed Dodwell’s Diamond D Ranch in Lone Oak, Texas.

“I love that operation out there—the people, what they do for the horses, their facility,” Taylor said. “Everything about them is set up to cater to taking good care of the animals, keeping them safe and getting them prepared to be turned over to the trainer. Ed, Scooter and Jody (Dodwell) run a first class operation, and they’ve been so nice in terms of being receptive to all of our questions and our interests.”

So far the Mojo stable has included three runners. Taylor purchased the first, a son of Fusaichi Pegasus named Hollywood Pegasus, for \$15,000 at the 2006 Keeneland September Yearling Sale. The

now 3-year-old gelding finished fourth in his debut at Turfway Park on February 9.

Last spring, Carson and Taylor attended the Fasig-Tipton Texas 2-Year-Olds in Training Sale, where a Doneraile Court filly caught his eye. Mojo Racing Partners bought her for \$3,500. When Not In My Court ran fourth in her first out at Churchill Downs on November 15, she was claimed for \$15,000. Two starts later, she found the winner's circle at Turfway Park.

The next runner rising through the Mojo ranks is Saint Brigid, a daughter of Chapel Royal purchased as a yearling at the 2007 Keeneland September sale for \$14,000.

"We're trying to prove that ownership doesn't have to be for the elite," Taylor said. "Ordinary people can be owners, and we're trying to prove it. We had our first runner, Not In My Court, and even though she got claimed from us, we're still very proud of her because we got her to that point. Now Hollywood Pegasus is proving to us that we took care of him, and it looks like he's going to be promising on the racetrack for us. Saint Brigid is a beauty and we're doing everything we can to take care of her. We are one step at a time proving out the Mojo concept."

From Fort Worth, dubbed "the worldwide Mojo headquarters," Taylor took the time to answer some questions for *The Texas Thoroughbred*:

***The Texas Thoroughbred:* How did you come up with the Mojo Racing Partners name?**

Taylor: Success in this industry to me doesn't boil down to who takes home the biggest prize. That places a lot of time, money and effort all at risk and makes it very contingent on uncontrollable things. It's more of an experience, a mission to give people what they want. The Mojo Racing Partners name, that reggae mentality, it sort of fits. It's a reflection of unity. We're all in this together. Plus mojo by itself—it's hip, it's colorful, it's a little mysterious, it's a cause. It's cool, but it has purpose.

***The Texas Thoroughbred:* How does your work influence your role as managing partner?**

Taylor: In order to make this work, I've got to make sure I'm very open about what we're doing. I want to make sure they trust what I'm setting up and what foot I'm putting forward. All of my partners love horses, but most of them really didn't know anything about ownership or how horse racing works in general. So my job was to effectively communicate to them, kind of like what I do at Southwest Airlines. I try to teach them the value of ownership, provide an educational service along the way, help them learn the ins and outs, and also protect their interests. So it became more than just a hobby. It became sort of a business to promote the Mojo concept, keep our partners happy and provide an opportunity for other people in Texas that share similar interests.



Fred's wife, Julie, and children (from left) Ben, Zoe, Olivia and Madeline with now-former Mojo runner Not In My Court along with partners Art and Vanessa Nixon.

***The Texas Thoroughbred:* So how do we get new people involved with racing?**

Taylor: That's one of the things we're trying to do with Mojo. We're not trying to be a big conglomerate powerhouse, but we are trying to be a boutique to enjoy all of the aspects of Thoroughbred ownership and know that there's more to the experience than sitting there and hoping you're going to cash a winning ticket. We want people to experience the sale, we want them to experience the process of seeing a yearling grow up to be a strapping racehorse, to go out to the training center, to visit the farms, to watch the horse workout on the backside and enjoy the anticipation that goes along with all the buildup to race day. And then when race day finally gets here and you've taken the time and the energy and patience to get that horse to the track, then you enjoy being in the paddock and you watch your horse come out and be on display. All those things you've done to prepare your horse to be at his peak performance, hopefully you get the reward of all of that if your horse runs well, and if you're really lucky you get to go to the winner's circle and demonstrate how all that hard work comes together at that moment. To me, there's opportunity to bring ordinary people into the sport and provide them with an experience they might not otherwise think they have an opportunity to enjoy.



“It’s a beautiful thing when you’re able to provide a service that your partners really appreciate”

The Texas Thoroughbred: How do you find new investors?

Taylor: Because I think it’s very important to make sure people understand what they are getting into, and it can be a little bit daunting when people see that they have to take the time to educate themselves before making the decision to get into this industry. The best way that I found is through word of mouth. My partners talk to their friends and associates about Mojo Racing Partners and how much it means to them to have that experience and how I provide that service for them. What I hope to say is that from inception in 2005 to 2008, we’ve proven out our concept and I’ve generated trust and a very good reputation with them as well as the people we work with in the industry. What we do want to promote is the Mojo slogan, “Give the people what they want.”

The Texas Thoroughbred: How do new owners enjoy the Mojo experience?

Taylor: They love it. In fact, one of my partners in Saint Brigid sent me an e-mail before Woody (Hollywood Pegasus) ran that said, “Hey, I’m having so much fun with the information that you’re providing, if there’s an opening in Woody, I’d like to take out a share.” We’d closed him out but that’s a classic example of the way my partners feel about being part of Mojo. While I was in Kentucky (for Woody’s race), I sent them postcards via my BlackBerry, and I published those under the news and notes section of the website (www.mojoracingpartners.com). It’s a beautiful thing when you’re able to provide a service that your partners really appreciate. That’s what I get a big kick out of, introducing people to this experience and having them say “this is amazing and I appreciate it.” I take the time to try and make sure they get that essence of what it’s like to be an owner.

The Texas Thoroughbred: How are decisions made within the partnership?

Taylor: As the managing partner, I ultimately make the decision

for what we do with the partnership; however, I have structured the partnership and the terms to say the majority can overrule me if they feel adamant about that. So technically that’s how decisions are made, but I always consult my partners before any decision is made, and I let them provide me with their candid feedback or their thoughts, ask me any questions they have and then we make a collective decision. As you might imagine, not everyone is going to agree. Opinions are going to be different; passion is going to be in all kinds of directions. From their counsel, I make the best decision, which I think boils down to what’s right for the horse and what’s right for the partnership.

The Texas Thoroughbred: What advice do you have for someone looking to start a partnership?

Taylor: The best advice I can give to people in this regard is the same thing that Ken Carson said—structure it so there are no misunderstandings about what you’re getting into. That is the most important thing because the last thing you want to get into is a bickering argument over who gets what or how things are going to be divided or how expenses are going to be paid. The people that get involved with this need to take the time to understand these different aspects. It’s a huge responsibility to yourself, to your family and to the horse that you’re becoming an owner in, so make sure all that’s spelled out up front. Then build in some flexibility. Don’t make it so rigid that you feel like you’re being audited by the IRS; structure it so it’s fun. If you go out and read some of my Mojo documents, you’ll see that I’ve injected some humor into it and tried to make it lighthearted and personal and take the legalese out of it as much as possible so people can relate to it.

The rest will take care of itself. If you set your priorities moving in the right direction to have fun and uphold high standards, then that’s success right there. You don’t necessarily have to cross the finish line first to experience success as an owner. You might be shorting yourself if that’s all you’re counting on because there are so many other things you can benefit from by being an owner.