

ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Gunther bought into Glennwood Farm in 1986

# TAKING STOCK

Financier John Gunther  
breeds terrific racehorses

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BY LENNY SHULMAN

**AFTER GOING BUST ON A** stock deal as a young man, John Gunther studied, got his broker's license, and carved out a lucrative career in the financial world. And that gives us valuable insight into his stunning accomplishments in the Thoroughbred industry as well.

Gunther, the product of a hardscrabble youth spent on a small farm near Carseland, Alberta; a university dropout; and a former longshoreman has never used a bloodstock agent to buy horses nor employed an outside consignor to sell one. Despite or because of his stature as a self-made man, Gunther has excelled at breeding horses.

From a broodmare band that rarely numbers more than 20, he has bred nearly 40 stakes winners, 15 of them of the graded variety. And his 2018 crop of 3-year-olds, which includes the brilliant up-and-comer Justify, could almost fill up the starting gate of a stakes race by themselves.



JESSICA VANDERGIJK



**John Gunther has bred nearly 40 stakes winners from a broodmare band that rarely numbers more than 20**



PHOTOS COURTESY JOHN GUNTHER

On the waterfront in Vancouver

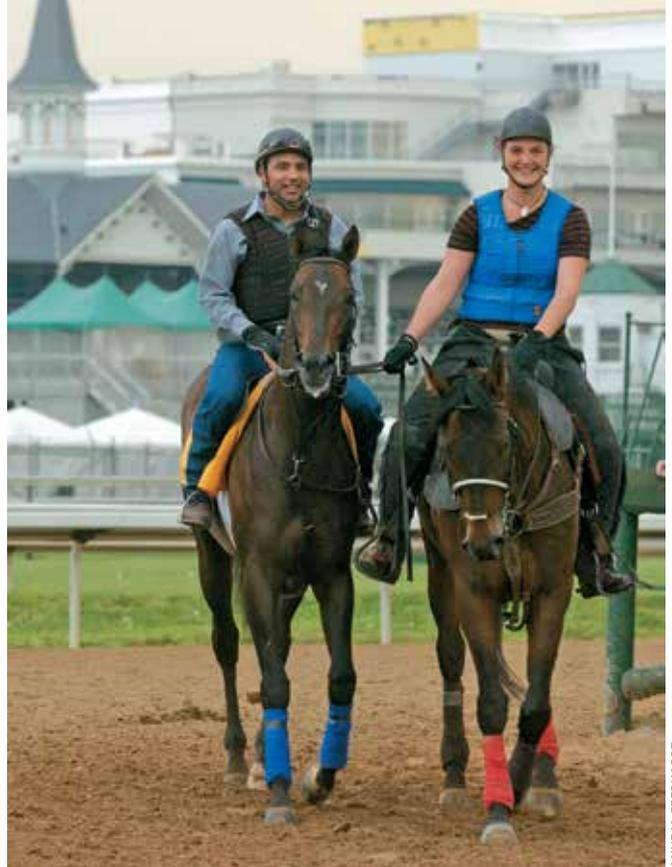


The family farm near Carseland, Alberta



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Gunther's Last Gunfighter winning the 2013 Pimlico Special



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Eye of the Tiger training for the 2003 Kentucky Derby

Gunther's rugged, no-nonsense exterior hides a quick laugh that comes deeply and often as he describes the vagaries of his life's path and his adventures in the Thoroughbred game. While admitting to good fortune along the way and to the sizable contributions of his daughter, Tanya, to the operation, Gunther has also put in his time—more than 40 years of studying past performances and pedigrees—and gambling—to the point where he possesses a sixth sense about buying fillies and mares (often at thrift-store prices) and turning them into black-type performers and producers.

With stunning regularity he has perpetuated families that have improved under his care. There is a Canadian frontiersman's spirit to him that allows him to select with minimum doubt both horses and people with whom to do business.

Said Steve Irwin, a native of the Bronx who has been a friend for more than 30 years, "John has a nose; a very strong sense of people and who's real and who isn't. He can sit in a room and tell you who can write a check and who can't. He likes things straight out. When he says, 'This is the deal,' that is the deal. There's no mucking around with it later on. We've done deals as partners in lots of different things, including some horses. There's no facade, no phoniness. He's a really right guy."

After the early death of his father in Vancouver, Gunther, as a child, was sent to live with an aunt on a farm that raised cattle, pigs, wheat, barley, and oats. He was immediately impressed with the team of horses that harrowed the fields, which led to a lifelong love affair with them.

Returning to Vancouver, Gunther followed in the wake of several relatives who worked the waterfront as longshoremen. During his three years unloading ships, Gunther hopped across



Mythical Bride, the dam of Vino Rosso



Stage Magic, the dam of Justify

the road from one of the piers to Hastings Park on weekends “to lose my bankroll.” Significantly, his Hastings outings also put the dream into him to own a horse one day. During that time he met a woman who was into show jumping, and Gunther bought a horse for her that he found out later was a Thoroughbred. After they married, the couple moved up to the Yukon Territories for work and sent the mare to a farm, whose owner talked Gunther into breeding her. Gunther raced her first foal, and Pallascheck ended up winning four races for him.

“It was a strange way to end up with a racehorse,” Gunther allowed. “But it got me hooked.”

Another strange twist led to Gunther’s principal business. While working the docks, he met some stockbrokers in a beer parlor and followed their tout, investing in a stock that soon went to zero. Putting aside his work gloves, he took the Canadian Securities Course and became a stockbroker himself, investing 45 years in Jones, Gable and Company (now Leede Jones Gable) and rising to senior partner in the firm.

“My partners are in Toronto and I’m in Vancouver, which works quite well,” he said. “Apparently they think I work every day because they haven’t hauled away my desk yet.”

While Gunther must have spent at least some time actually working at securities, for decades he has also studied

everything about the horse business. He still pores over past performances daily, noting the breeding of allowance and stakes horses. He devours industry publications, and that gambling bug is still with him. All of that information schools him when he buys yearlings and breeding stock or decides on matings.

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***He’s very bullish when he believes in a mare.***

***He will continue to invest in them.”***

— TANYA GUNTHER

After playing around with cheap horses on the West Coast, Gunther began traveling to Kentucky to buy a yearling or two of some substance. In 1986 he bought into a farm outside Versailles called Glennwood, and within three years he’d bought out his partners and has owned the 400 acres since. He was also inspired by a friend in the brokerage business whom he accompanied to buy yearlings.

John Toffan had gotten lucky in the mining game, drilling a rich gold mine, and he proved lucky with horses as well.

Toffan’s stable eventually included threetime classic-placed Mane Minister, multiple grade 1 winner Free House (\$3.1 million), multiple grade 1 winner Bien Bien (\$2.3 million), and grade 1 winner Pacific Squall. Toffan boarded his horses at Glennwood and was its largest client when the farm accepted outside stock.

Toffan’s good fortune must have rubbed off on Gunther. Early on he raced multiple grade 2 winners Wall Street Dancer and American Chance, each of whom earned more than \$800,000. Because he loved Phone Trick’s speed, Gunther purchased the filly Dial a Trick as a yearling in 1991 for \$85,000. Although unraced, Dial a Trick produced multiple graded stakes winner and Kentucky Derby (G1) starter Eye of the Tiger (by American Chance) and stakes winner Wildwood Flower, both bred by Gunther. Wildwood Flower in turn issued Gunther-breds such as 2015 Besilu Stables Florida Derby (G1) winner Materiality and 2014 Gazelle Stakes (G2) winner My Miss Sophia.

In 2003 Gunther was shopping at Keeneland’s November sale when a Storm Bird mare caught his eye, and he purchased Marozia for \$50,000. Stakes winner Andromeda’s Hero popped up under the mare shortly thereafter. Gunther sent his purchase to Bernardini and bred multiple grade 1 winner and millionaire Stay Thirsty. Bred to Lemon Drop Kid, Marozia pro-

GRADED  
STAKES  
WINNERS  
**BRED OR  
CO-BRED**  
BY JOHN  
GUNTHER:

Bending Strings\*  
Eye of the Tiger  
First Samurai  
Idle Rich  
Last Gunfighter\*  
Materiality  
Moviesta  
My Miss Sophia  
Tamarkuz  
Tiger Moth\*  
American Justice  
Mo Town  
Stay Thirsty  
Devil by Design\*  
Stevie Wonderboy  
\*homebred

ADDITIONAL  
GRADED  
STAKES  
WINNERS  
**OWNED OR  
CO-OWNED**  
BY GUNTHER:

Kimberlite Pipe  
Molto Vita  
Two Trail Sioux  
American Chance  
Wall Street Dancer



PHOTOS COURTESY TANYA GUNTHER

Daughter Tanya Gunther is responsible for Glennwood's success in recent years

duced Without You Babe, the dam of Las Vegas Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile (G1) winner (and Gunther-bred) Tamarkuz.

Saratoga Cat, whom Gunther bought as a weanling for \$50,000, produced multiple graded stakes winners and Gunther homebreds Last Gunfighter and Tiger Moth, the latter already a 2018 winner of the Houston Ladies Classic Stakes (G3). Saratoga Cat's daughter London Mist produced Dancing Belle, second in last year's Sorrento Stakes (G2).

Gunther parted with \$24,000 for Molto Vita as a weanling, and she became a graded stakes winner for him and produced Grazie Mille, the dam of grade 1 winner Mo Town, whom Gunther bred with Eurowest Bloodstock; and of Gunther-bred stakes winners Jaguar Paw (in partnership with Eurowest) and Venetian Mask. Miss Brickyard, a \$100,000 buy, issued European multiple group stakes winner Moviesta.

"I've never used a bloodstock agent, or anybody else," Gunther said, laughing. "I did it myself by looking at a lot of horses over the years and getting a good handle on it. I've also gotten lucky, I think. It's not just the physical. I study pedigrees and always have. I've studied race results going back to the 1970s. I still have *Thoroughbred Records* with Secretariat and Ruffian on the cover. I have religiously read publications for years and years."

Gunther does enjoy help these days when planning matings but hasn't needed to go outside the family for that aid. Tanya, who also sports a background in finance, has taken up the bugle's call at Glennwood, and studies spreadsheets in much the same way her father pores over publications. The process is working because the Gunther-bred

3-year-old crop of 2018 is beyond even their wildest dreams thus far.

On The Warpath, who won two starts as a Gunther homebred, was sold privately to Sheikh Mohammed, and he's nominated to the UAE Derby Sponsored by The Saeed & Mohammed Al Naboodah Group (G1). Without You Babe, after being sent to Frankel, produced Without Parole, a Gunther homebred nominated to the French and English classics. Jaylan, by Scat Daddy, was bred by Gunther on a mating Tanya did for a client (Cudney Stables), and is nominated to the French classics. She won her 2018 debut for Al Shaqab Racing at Deauville March 2. Vino Rosso, third in the Sam F. Davis Stakes (G3) and fourth in the Lambholm South Tampa Bay Derby (G2), is out of Mythical Bride, whom Gunther bought for \$42,000, and is on the Triple Crown trail.

And Justify, whose second dam Magical Illu-



Justify as a foal at Glennwood

sion was a Gunther sales purchase, broke his maiden so impressively in February and came back to score in a March 11 allowance optional claiming race that trainer Bob Baffert is talking about him for the Triple Crown series. That is an amazing crop for a 20-broodmare band.

"You can't expect them all to carry on and run in all the classic races, but to have so many with the potential to do so is incredible," said Tanya. "A lot of studying and research goes into buying the pedigrees and doing the matings. Dad has more of a gut feeling approach, and I'm more analytical, going backward and forward over and over again. I try to provide good ideas and advice while not letting my sensibilities get in the way of his vision; it's a delicate balancing act at times. We do some sparring."

No knockout blows needed. Father is lavish in his praise of daughter.

"I owe a lot of our success to Tanya. She grew up on the farm here (Gunther's ranch/farm in Langley, outside Vancouver) and has pursued her passion for horses. She's planned a lot of these matings and is responsible for the success we've had in recent years. Her dedication and hard work have made Glennwood what it is today."

While Gunther has raced his share of stakes winners, most of them are sales horses who didn't meet their reserves. He will still get a pang of regret from selling a fine specimen but well realizes that's how the system works.

"The first one that drove me crazy was (eventual grade 1 winner) First Samurai," he said. "I raced his dam Freddie Frisson and I didn't want to sell him, but I did. When you're breeding these horses, you need the cash flow. I'm not in a financial position where I can race them all; I'm in the breeding business. Naturally you regret selling a bit, but you have to realize you have the family and you benefit down the road when one excels."

"I put some high reserves on these horses. Justify (who sold for \$500,000) and Vino Rosso (\$410,000) were both



COURTESY STEVE IRWIN

Gunther with longtime friend Steve Irwin

spectacular-looking yearlings, so I put high reserves on them hoping they wouldn't sell, but they did anyway. I put a high number on Without Parole at Tattersalls, and he almost got sold. After years of experience, you can pretty well tell which weanlings and yearlings have the potential."

Added Tanya, "We have sold our best, and that's a necessary aspect of the business. You feel good about other people liking these horses as much as you do. I have pride in them, so there's some regret. For my dad and me, racing a good horse is much more exciting than that one point when you sell them. When you're saying goodbye partway through the journey, I always have a pang. But our breeding program is a success because the goal is having a racehorse and not just a sales horse."

With the success of his families, Gunther has generated enough homegrown talent to the point where he has been able to pull back on breeding-stock purchases. One area he is expanding into is European bloodstock, and he bought the mare Dance With Another in foal to Frankel.

"I love Frankel," he stated. "We went to Royal Ascot and saw him win the Queen Anne Stakes (G1, 2012) and he was so amazing. We raised the Frankel and got a decent price for him at Tattersalls. We've sent a couple of mares to Europe to breed to him, Galileo, and Sea The Stars. We

bought a yearling a couple of years ago by Montjeu whom we raced with Andre Fabre. That was Impressionist, who won a listed stakes, and we're breeding her now. We're racing Beyond the Sea, by Sea The Stars, with Fabre, and she finished fourth in two group stakes last year. I want a mix of bloodstock."

Asked to explain her father's success, Tanya employs a thoughtful moment.

"I think a theme for him has been his believing in the families and continuing to invest in them," she said. "Some people will turn mares over if they don't get a superstar in the first couple of foals, or else reduce the

type of stallion they breed them to. But he is very bullish when he believes in a mare, and he keeps going. Some of our 3-year-olds this year, he had the grandmother and continued to believe in them.

"He's very good at identifying good, deep families. Even if a particular mare wasn't a spectacular racehorse, he sees the family underneath, and he also has a good eye for an athletic build on a mare. If they're not perfect in front, he'll still see an athlete from the side or something in the overall package."

Although he has accomplished a great deal since his days unloading ships, some things have remained constant for the guy who loved going to Hastings Park with his paycheck burning a hole in his pocket.

"The racing is the most exciting aspect to me, the racing and the gambling. I'm wired up all the time," Gunther said with a laugh. "I've got Vino Rosso and Justify, who could both end up in the starting gate for the Derby, so I figure I've got to get a bet on. Since Canadians can't do online betting, I'm going to have to fly to Vegas before they run back." (Justify went from 25-1 to 6-1 in the futures after his latest score.)

According to his friend Irwin, Gunther should be careful when he gets to Sin City.

"John's no good at casino gambling," said Irwin, "but when it comes to horses, he really knows what he's doing." **BH**