



A Bob Each
Liz talks to Mike Windle

For 39 years Mike "Swindle" Windle has enjoyed the ups and downs of his profession as a bookmaker. Swindle is his nickname but that was not from being a Bookie. He was named that at an early age. Little did he know his future career. When I had a chat to him about the good old days, it was all facts and figures. I guess that's how a bookmaker's brain works. It is a profession with a doubtful future, and Mike has seen the changes over the years.

"It has been an interesting journey and the racing people are good people. Older bookies are not being replaced by a new regime. There are no young bookies coming through and really anyone in their right mind would not want to be one. There's high risk and money is not there anymore. It's a hard way to make a living and electronic gambling has taken over. The average age of a bookie is now over 60"

"It all started with a bet at Flemington on Melbourne Cup Day in 1970. I put \$30 on a horse called Baghdad Note. It was 25 to one. The horse won. I ended that day with \$750 in my pocket and that was a hell of a lot of money. The rest is history", says Mike.

How did you become interested in racing?

In 1970, I went to the Melbourne Cup with my uncle who had racehorses in Dunedin. He was connected with Arthur Didham, a horse trainer and Arthur's son was a jockey Midge Didham. We knew Midge was going to ride Baghdad Note in the Melbourne Cup. I put \$30 on that horse. It was 25 to one and the horse won. The rest was history for me. I ended up with \$750 in my pocket and decided to go and have a look at Perth. It was November. I loved the weather and the climate suited me as I used to get a bit of asthma in New Zealand, I had never felt so good, so stayed for 12 months. I ended up in Albany for 10 years and over that time I was involved with horses working as a bookmaker's clerk. In 1980, I acquired a bookmaker license.

When you came to Broome in 1980 what were the Broome Races like?

A bit different from now. There were 16 horses for one race day. The meeting still went ahead. Sometimes there were only four horses in one race and two in the next. So of course, you could only bet on a win. The odds were good! In the early days Shinju Matsuri Festival was huge and the

Broome Races was a small event. Now the Broome Races has the biggest provincial cup race in Australia with \$150,000 prize money. Support comes from the TAB and some very good and loyal sponsors. It is my 39th year as a bookie and I've been on the race club committee in Broome for 23 years. There have been many changes. The big screen really gives the course the WOW factor and improves the experience for all.

How has the profession changed?

Now we have the corporate bookmakers. Punters can just get on the phone and make a bet in two seconds on sporting events anywhere in the world. There are three bookmakers in Perth and three bookmakers in Broome. Perth has two million people and Broome has 15,000. In the 70s there used to be 35 bookmakers at the trots at Gloucester Park and about the same at the races at Ascot. Now you would be lucky to see three. The digital world has taken over.

When I started there was no digital betting, no Lotto, Sky Channel and we really only had the WAFL football and racing. There was no Eagles, Dockers or AFL. Only VFL and a bit of Rugby. Being a bookie was all manual, writing up the

dockets and working out the odds all in your head. Everyone went to the races. At the Perth Cup in the 1980s, I had seven different ledgers working. I employed seven people to keep the books, plus a few more. If it was a big race meeting, you could be paying out money two hours later. We had to ticket check and number check everything manually.

These days it is instant gratification as you get your money straight after the race. I now employ only one person on race days and it is all computerised.

The only thing that hasn't changed is that it is still cash. You can arrange a credit facility but even the TAB takes only cash. Yes, we are still a bit behind the times. I am a cash man, still have a cheque book. You reckon you have to be careful with cash, but today with some of the dodgy credit cards around, that could be more dangerous.

In the 80s we would have 10 bookmakers, the minimum take would be over \$20,000 per bookie, so that meeting there would be \$200,000 in the ring. Today you would be lucky to have \$15,000 in total.

You used to get 15,000 attending the Bunbury Cup and 20,000 at the Kalgoorlie Cup. Today only around 5,000 people go the country cups. Horse racing now comprises about 5% of the options people have got. Now there is so much to choose from with regards to sport and recreation. This week Lotto and Powerball was \$150,000, \$70,000 one day and \$80,000 on Thursday, so where does that money come from. It comes from the punter, who used to always go to the race track.

What is happening in racing now is you get huge crowds on Cup Days and the rest of the year small numbers. It's the same all-around Australia.

How do you work out the odds?

Early on it was a lot of study. If there was going to be a booking plunge the bookmaker was the second person to know. Without video replay, it

was difficult to find out the form of a horse. Sometimes it was a bit of guess work and a whole lot of luck. Today with technology it is easier to study the form and be better informed.

Do you travel a lot?

In a year there are 150 race meetings in Western Australia. Travelling is a huge part of my job. After the Broome Cup last year, I got in my car at 6pm to drive to Port Hedland. I drove halfway to Sandfire in the dark dodging cattle and roos, stayed overnight and then got to Port Hedland in time for the races the next morning. It was Cup Day and there were four bookies. It was a good day. A couple of weeks later I drove to Kununurra for their races. It's over 1,000 kilometres and I stayed for a week. There's a Bookies Association which works on seniority, and they allocate race meetings like a roster.

How does the future look like for the Broome Races?

We get around 8,000 people to the Broome Cup, which is huge when you think that this is half our population. We are lucky in Broome. We're a bit unique. We race nine days of the year and we've kept it as a bit of a novelty. We are now the biggest provincial races in Australia - isn't that amazing!

Did you every have any big payouts?

In the hey day I would sometimes pay out \$10,000 to a winner. So, there has definitely some big highs as well as some low lows.

Do the same trainers come up each year?

We do get new blood each year. Jim Enright from Bunbury has been coming up for 30 years, along with the Patemans, the Parmans, and the Caseys. Kevin Collins is a local man. They usually come up for three months, bring their dinghies and go fishing. It is a good life up here in Broome.

We were recently voted the second-best racecourse location in the world. The view from upstairs encompasses the whole peninsula with all

the water over Roebuck Bay and Cable Beach. The horses being able to train on the beach every morning is pretty special. There are not too many places in the world like that.

Is a bookie allowed to bet?

In the old days, definitely not. It would have been frowned upon, but now you can. Some bookies actually own horses. If you have a really high risk on one horse, you can "back bet". it is called 'Laying off' which is taking some of the risk out of the bet, always with another bookie. You have to be on the ball all the time.

Does a lot of dodgy stuff happen?

Yes, over the years there has been amazing scams. The one that most Australians will remember is the Fine Cotton cover up. They brought a ring-in horse, one they knew would win. They made it look like Fine Cotton with white markings on his legs. It was pretty badly done and the paint started dripping. If they had managed to pull it off it they would have made more that \$1.5million. There have been some huge scams over the years. Today with all the technology they are onto it pretty quick. Sometimes strange things happen such as Gloryland beating Diamond Tonique by 10 lengths but two weeks earlier had finished over 19 lengths behind Diamond Tonique. That's a 30-length turnaround. People asked me how such a thing could happen. What do you say? That's racing!. Gloryland won the Broome Cup in 2017, though in 2018 Diamond Tonique won, with Gloryland second.

Our track is dirt - does that make a difference? Yes, most tracks are grass and ours is dirt with some oil to keep the dust down. You could compare it to a grassed golf course or the Cape Leveque road. Some of the horses really love the

track. A good example is Gloryland. She won the cup but then had a few starts down south with poor results, then comes back up here and does well.

Anything else you would like to say?

It has been an interesting journey and the racing people are good people. What has happened in this professional is the older bookies are not being replaced. There are no young bookies coming through and really anyone in their right mind would not want to be one. It has a high-risk factor and money is not in the game anymore. It is a difficult way to make a living and the online betting has taken over. The average age of a bookie is over 60 I have been one of the lucky ones to see the colourful days and had such a long association with racing.

So, from 1970 I travelled from Invergargill, to Perth, Albany and then to Broome - an extreme change of climate and lifestyle I just loved Broome and Cable Beach, so here I am today 39 years later. In between I have been a publican at the Roebuck Hotel and Divers Tavern, and a restaurant owner of Swindles, where Skylla Night Club is today. Previously it was called the Nippon Inn. I had trouble with the name as no one ever nipped out.

An interesting fact is that racing is the 3rd biggest employer in Australia. You just have to think of all the associated industries - hospitality, the jockeys, horse trainers, staff, farriers, feed merchants, bar staff, track workers. We employ about 100 people each race meet here in Broome.

So, there you go. That's Mike's story. He does love his facts and figures!