

OTHER PASSIONS...

Racing with John McBride

The first things one notices about Alice Springs solicitor John McBride is his relaxed, unhurried manner and his soft Irish accent. This is a man who likes to chat, to chew the fat, to converse — about the issues of the day, about the weather, about who is doing what and with whom, about anything. This is a man who enjoys the people he meets and the conversations he has with them. An old-fashioned country solicitor transposed from rural Ireland to Central Australia. An enormous leap of cultures.

John has a Bachelor of Common Law from Trinity College and a Bachelor of Economics from University College in Dublin. He completed his articles at one of the leading commercial firms in Dublin and then decided that he wanted to see the world. The choice between Australia and Canada was decided with a toss of a coin over a pint of guinness in a Dublin pub. Saskatchewan's loss was the Territory's gain. In 1981 John became Howard & Reeves' presence in Tennant Creek. He has not looked back since. Later he started his own firm in Alice Springs, which eventually metamorphosed into Povey Stirk, one of Alice's biggest.

Along the way John decided that small was beautiful. He no longer wishes to be a slave to his practice. His new found credo is that he works to live rather than lives to work. He now practises as a sole practitioner with an office in the historic Hartley Street School in Alice Springs, a charming building owned by the National Trust which features wide verandahs and thick whitewashed walls. The emphasis in John's practice is on advocacy.

John has a diverse collection of passions that range from marathon running to horse racing through to education.

The advent of his forties re-sparked John's interest in running, something he had done as a youth in Ireland. After several years of legal practice and a work-related addiction to nicotine he found it hard to

jog down Todd Mall without an oxygen cylinder handy. It was time for a reappraisal of priorities. Many miles of training later and after kicking the smoking habit he completed the Host City Marathon in Sydney, which was held over the Olympic course in April of last year.

But the real love of John's life is horse racing and race courses.

"My mother's side of the family were farmers in County Cork. Racing is a tradition down there — it's a social thing and a business thing — a way of catching up with neighbours and farmers and friends. My uncle was a parish priest in Scotland and pretty much stuck on the horses — that was his one vice — and when he was on holidays I would go to the races with him and my grandmother at the Curragh or Leopardstown. When I matriculated I remember having a whole week's racing in Scotland with my uncle culminating in the Ayr Gold Cup."

John remembers racing in Ireland in the 1960s as being a bleak experience, in terms of the weather and the facilities but rich in other ways.

"Racing in Ireland was above all a sociable experience. The racecourse was a place for good conversations about bloodlines and horses and everything else you can think of. It was about catching up with family and friends. Births, deaths and marriages, if you like. It was very much a part of Irish culture. Ireland was a rural country then and people were interested in the animals and their breeding. Gambling was a very secondary thing."

John's love of racing following him to Central Australia. It is a very different type of racing to the rural Ireland of his childhood. But there is still something about a racecourse that is universal.

"I like the races. I like being amongst race people. Races have a special atmosphere, a distinctive smell. I love the noise and the camaraderie of the pay out queue and the eerie silence of the jockeys on their mounts when they leave the enclosure and go onto the course. I like the fact that there are people from all walks of life there — rich people, poor people, desperate people and

people who know nothing about the races. It is a microcosm of the world. It can be a serious business and it can be fun."

John has owned several racehorses in partnership during his years in the Alice but his proudest achievement in racing in Central Australia is his five years as Chairman of the Alice Springs Turf Club. He retired as Chairman in August 2000.

"Racing is big business in the Northern Territory. It involves contributions from the community and from business through the sponsorship of race events. The Alice Springs Cup Carnival attracts visitors from around the country and is one of the major social events in the town. During the Carnival there are two major race meetings, a ball, a number of cocktail parties and a yearling sale. All putting dollars into the local community."

John is proud that he was part of the working party that negotiated the financial arrangements for the funding of racing in the Northern Territory into the twenty first century and that was he able to see the completion and opening of new facilities for the public at the Alice Springs Race Course. Again a long way from the bleak, windy racecourses of his Irish childhood.

John is not a person who likes to sit around and do nothing. He needs an outlet. Currently he is chair of the council of the Centralian College. A job for which he has an obvious passion. In fact education generally is a passion.

"Young people are our greatest asset. We have a duty to give them the best education and training we can. It should make no difference to the level of opportunity whether you are in Alice Springs or Sydney. Education is the key to bridging the divides between people. It is the key to reconciliation and understanding."

And another time and place for John McBride?

"I would have liked to have been a rural magistrate in Ireland in the 1960s. They were gentle times. There was no time costing then and the dollar did not rule everything. Life on circuit was a civilised thing with court starting at eleven and rarely going on too long in the afternoon. The quality of the justice seemed to be gentler then too. It would have been an idyllic existence for me."