

I Am David

David Chester is the International Sales Manager for Magic Millions. After 40 years with the company, he is seasoned, travelled, a little bit famous, and a little bit high-maintenance too.

 JESSICA OWERS

David Chester, at 74 years old, is over the hill and picking up speed. He drives an MG with the top down, hits the gym every day, and is all about clean cars and shiny shoes. His Speedos are scattered around hotels in Asia, and he's been to just one Melbourne Cup in a lifetime of racing. Gerry Harvey called him the worst Managing Director in Magic Millions history, and Chester can't argue with that.

"I wanted to do everything myself," he says. "I wasn't a delegator. I wanted to be involved in everything... everything but collecting the debts. Gerry said I was one of his worst Managing Directors but, as a salesman, he said I was one of the best."

Chester is as seasoned a salesman as ever peered down the gunsight of a sale ring. He has been with Magic Millions since day dot, 40 years of trading and auctioning, wheeling and dealing for the same masthead. He has been Magic Millions General Manager, then Managing Director from 2002 to 2010. He is now International Sales Director, and all from the same sun-flooded ground-floor office at the company's Gold Coast complex.

"I've had the same office for close to 30 years," Chester says. "During sales, my Asian clients and older Australian breeders that I've known for years will come in through the sliding doors, skipping reception, and they'll sit down and have a cup of tea and a bit of a yarn. There are times when there can be 15 or 20 people in there, and I like that. I think this business, our industry, is a people's business, and friendships mean a lot."

Chester is sincere. He has many awards to his name, but there's not much ego. If there's pride, it's because he works hard for vendors, in particular those that are battling. He doesn't keep a record of the good horses he has sold, and is baffled that anyone would. Such horses include Subzero, Werther (privately), Tagaloo and Mystic Journey, but Chester wouldn't know. He's more interested in the other end of town. "I'm a funny sort of auctioneer," he says. "I like the lower end of the market, selling for the battler that has almost run out of money getting his horse to the sale." In the last decade, Chester has pioneered a Magic Millions presence in places like Penang, Busan and Manila. He has been in Libya, Iran and Kazakhstan, and is an unflappable local in Hong Kong, Macau and Singapore. But he's a terrible tourist. "I don't do sightseeing," he admits. "I did it once, on my first trip somewhere, and that was enough."

Chester is Australia's longest-serving bloodstock agent and auctioneer. He was the first registered auctioneer in Singapore when Magic Millions hosted that nation's first ever sale of racehorses, and he auctioneered at the very last Hong Kong International Sale in 2003 before it moved from the Convention Centre to Sha Tin. Chester has a scrapbook of such occasions, stuffed full of portraits with governors, candid gavel shots and export awards, and the man's passport is full and tired. "Singo once told me I had the best job in the world," he says. "Talking bullshit about horses."

In hindsight, it wasn't a career that Chester fell into intentionally. The schoolboy captain of Toowoomba Grammar was the son of a veterinarian and a deft cricket player, but Chester says he lacked the brains to ply his father's trade. After picking up work at Australian Estates, his first job was canvassing horses and dairy cattle. He was a shy type, however, something he shook off fairly quickly in life when, in Nerang in the mid 1960s, he called his first auction – a clearing sale selling hammers, nails, shovels and pitchforks.

Chester remembers selling horses in pre-decimal guineas. He recalls his first thoroughbred sale, selling bloodstock at the Brisbane Exhibition Ground when horses were fewer and cheaper. He says they aren't much different today, although they are presented for sale very differently, and his formula for a good horse remains simple, something along the lines of love at first sight. Across 40 years he has sold thoroughbreds in every state and territory of Australia, and has met the likes of Colonel Gaddafi in places very far from home. Chester is committed and driven, evidenced by the startling fact of his last holiday being 34 years ago.

"It was on a houseboat," says Patricia Chester, his wife of 46 years. **"Eventually I gave up trying to get him to take time off, and so we just followed him around the world on work trips. We spent Christmas one year in a Chinese restaurant in Penang."**



TRISH IS A DAZZLING WOMAN. A FORMER NURSE, SHE IS QUEENSLAND BRED AND BORN LIKE HER HUSBAND, AND ACCEPTED LONG AGO CHESTER'S WORK ETHIC AND BLANKET LOYALTY TO MAGIC MILLIONS.



PATRICIA & DAVID

In the early days, raising three young children, she took little interest in horse racing and bloodstock. But these days she is tuned in, and plays a critical role in hosting both husband and his clients.

"David is so committed to Magic Millions," Trish says. "It's his whole life, and it's been like that since I can remember. Loyalty is really important to him. He is strictly loyal, and genuinely admires Gerry and Katie (Harvey). In turn, Gerry has stuck by David. They have this little health competition between them. They are genuine friends."

Trish is in awe of her husband. Chester has been a first-class provider, and she says they have had an amazing life thanks to him, but he is also frustratingly quirky and impatient. He gets up at the same time every morning, hits the gym and the surf, star jumps, planks, and then heads to work. During sales, he will run into clients in the early morning on the Broadbeach sands, clad in bright and splendid Speedos. On the weekend he will clean the MG, because he hates a dirty car, and he is a hurried traveller. "I'm reluctant to travel with him anymore," Trish says. "David is the first person to stand up when the plane lands, and he's one of those people that will look for the shortest line at the airport. He'll send me to one line, and he'll go in the other, and he'll move into whichever one is moving faster."





TRIPOLI

Despite his decades old work-life imbalance, Chester is not materialistic. Trish says he spends nothing on himself. The MG, which caused any amount of giggles at Magic Millions, came about after 60 years of waiting. "When I first started to work in Brisbane," Chester recalls, "my old boss used to head into the hotel next door after work, and he'd call me up after a few drinks and tell me to pick up his car. So I used to walk up to the carpark and I'd pass this MG shop, and they had this beautiful MG for sale, and I used to dream about this little car and think how good it would be to have one. It took a long time!"

The very important, very buffed racing-green MG is parked every working day at the Magic Millions complex, often in the sale-ring auditorium and out of the Queensland sun. It's a privilege befitting of a man with a barn named in his honour. Barry Bowditch, Magic Millions Managing Director, says Chester has been critical in the company's history. "The international market for the Australian horse is a much better place for David's efforts," he says, "and I'm tipping that if you opened him up, David would bleed Magic Millions." He adds that while Chester is the oldest member of the crew, he's likely the fittest. "I won't be taking him on in a beach sprint any time soon."

In the corporate world, it's a rare thing for a former boss to stay on under a new one, but Chester has done that under his successors Vin Cox and later Bowditch. "He doesn't interfere," Trish says of her husband, "and I really do think it's reassuring for them that's he still there."

David is like an old father figure. He's got all that experience."

COVID19 changed Chester's working life dramatically. Travel was suddenly off and, for a man that had spent the last decade charging through Asia, it was a big adjustment. Chester is fond of Asian culture and speaks highly of its people. "I feel very comfortable with them," he says. "The Asians show a lot of respect when you're getting older, and I'm 74 now. I find Westerners tend to dismiss you a bit as you get older, but in Asia, people that are older are respected. They like to listen to you and learn from you."

For close to four years now, Chester has had a veritable sidekick in Nicky Wong, the young, deftly dressed Asia Client Advisor for Magic Millions. They are a curious but flawless partnership, a cocktail of age and youth that has worked strongly for the Magic Millions product. "Nicky is the hardest worker I've ever been with," Chester says. "He is nearly like a son to me now." Admitting that Wong is a likely successor, Chester adds that the younger man's only flaw is his trousers. "Nicky does everything right, except that he wears these pants up to his ankles."



BEIJING



GUANGZHOU



SEOUL



TOKYO



AUSTRALIAN EXPORT HERO AWARDS



MACAU

In Australia, where the average job tenure is under four years, Chester's run with Magic Millions is exceptional. The company has grown from its modest Gold Coast roots to owning half the bloodstock market and, while Chester claims no credit, he knows it is due. "Gerry said once at a staff party that Magic Millions was mine," he says. "He probably doesn't remember saying it, but he did."

The milestones roll on. In 2019, he celebrated 50 years of selling yearlings, and soon enough it will be a half-century of marriage.



QLD EXPORT AWARDS



NICKY WONG WITH DAVID AND CLIENTS AT THE SALES

BUT, DESPITE HIS AGE, THERE ISN'T MUCH OLD MAN IN DAVID CHESTER. IF HE WANTS TO SLOW DOWN, IT'S NOT OBVIOUS.

If he talks about retirement, it's because someone has asked him. "I think he wants to die at his desk," Trish says, "and he would love that, carried out of Magic Millions and everyone crying over him."



SINGAPORE



WITH JOHN SINGLETON, GERRY HARVEY & ROB FERGUSON



SEOUL



PENANG