

From PNG jungle to racing icon

Ian Leslie Thomas

Racing writer, thoroughbred trainer

Born: October 6, 1939; Sydney

Died: December 22, 2005; Adelaide

IAN Thomas was always a keen punter but the farthest thing from his mind when he went to New Guinea in the early 1960s was to be involved in the racing game.

Born in Sydney, he came to Adelaide with his family and attended Prospect Primary School and later Adelaide High School. He then ventured to Urrbrae Agricultural College where he won a scholarship to Roseworthy Agricultural College.

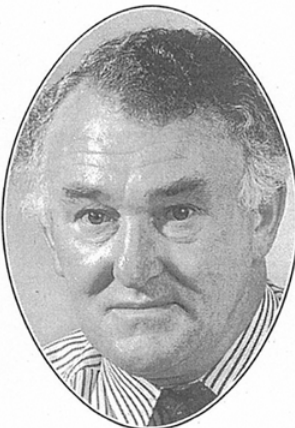
Ian completed a three-year course in two years to receive a Diploma of Agriculture.

The attraction of earning 33 pounds a week working for the New Guinea government saw him head there for two years doing subsistence agriculture surveys, with his first posting being in the malaria-and-crocodile-infested Sepik River area of the north coast of Papua New Guinea.

He told a friend that during his stay he found a good book, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and decided to learn one new word a day. That decision was to stand him in good stead in later life as a gifted wordsmith when he turned his talents to journalism.

At the age of 23, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and pensioned off back to Adelaide for treatment. He lost a kidney but eventually made a full recovery.

In 1964, he started working for rural



weekly newspaper *The Chronicle*. As Ian put it, there were two rural newspapers at the time, the other being *The Stock Journal*, and they had different work philosophies: "*The Stock Journal* would get young journalists and teach them agriculture. *The Chronicle* would employ people with an agricultural background and teach them journalism... that's how I came to work for *The Chronicle*."

Ian was a natural at journalism, including sub-editing and layout, but by the time he became chief sub-editor he had developed

a keen interest in racing. He eventually took over the racing pages of *The Chronicle* and later he joined *The Advertiser* racing staff when Kel Gillespie (who wrote under the name of Tracery) was chief writer.

Gillespie retired in 1977 and Ian was given the top job, which he held with distinction until he retired in 1995.

He was chosen as Australian Racing Journalist of the Year in both 1990 and 1992 for a series of articles on Oakbank and its jumping characters, the first year of David Hayes as a trainer, and the state of the South Australian racing industry.

While journalism was his gift, Ian also had a passion for training horses. From the early 1970s until recent times, he prepared a number of good city winners from a small team. He started helping the late Arthur Mooney at Morphettville and also became good friends with other trainers Pat Barns, Max Williams and Ernie Watson.

His best horses were Scorn Bold, Anabasis, Bancel, Regal For Me and Salute For Me. Scorn Bold won the Irwin Stakes in 1996 and 1997, Bancel the Lord Mayor's Mile and Regal For Me the Robert A Lee Stakes, to give Ian his biggest successes as a trainer.

In recognition of his racing involvement over many years, the SA Jockey Club named a race in his honour at Morphettville on Saturday, January 7.

He is survived by his wife, Irene, daughter Meaghan and son Mark.

Dennis Markham