From PNG jungle
to racing icon

Ian Leslie Thomas
Racing writer, thoroughbred trainer
Born: October 6, 1939; Sydney
Died: December 22, 2005; Adelaide

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AN 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 Col-
lege 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 govern-
ment 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, Anaba-
sis, Bancal, Regal For Me and Salute For
Me. Scorn Bold won the Irwin Stakes in
1996 and 1997, Bancal 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
Meaghna and son Mark.

Dennis Markham