

Turns out Tom Knust had a head for the horse racing biz

Larry Stewart / For The Times

Tom Knust at Santa Anita Park's Clocker's Corner.

The 61-year-old Fairplex racing secretary has many stories to tell, beginning with the bullet that went through his brain in Vietnam. Some of the best are in his self-published book about storage units.

By Bill Dwyre
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Other than having a bullet go in and out of his brain, having regular breakfast meetings with a billionaire and writing a book while claiming to not know sentence from syntax, Tom Knust is just your normal guy.

He is 61, has recently been named racing secretary at Fairplex and has a life story they ought to put on TV. If "Survivor" is taken, they could call it "American Idol."



In the fall of 1967, when every pimply-faced teenager with any sense was attempting to induce a hernia for the draft board, Knust volunteered for the Marines. "I wanted to go to Vietnam," he says.

He had played defensive tackle at Pasadena City College, left to join a traveling carnival, returned for the next season about 30 pounds lighter and was told by his coach he was no longer a defensive tackle. His grades went south and he went to the Far East.

"I was there about two weeks," Knust says.

On a search-and-destroy mission, his nine-man squad was destroyed while it searched. Knust was shot in the head, a bullet penetrating his helmet and passing through his brain before exiting.

"The last thing I remember was one of our guys standing over me," Knust says, "and then I saw his arm shot off and then everything went black."

Knust and the squad-mate who lost his arm turned out to be the only survivors of the squad.

Knust says he never lost consciousness and heard a voice that said, "When you go back, you will be all right." He even remembers being on a stretcher and hearing a medic establishing priorities, saying not to rush on Knust because "he's a vegetable."

It turns out that was wrong, and the horse racing community in Southern California has been the beneficiary.

Knust was paralyzed for eight months and still walks with a limp. Back on his feet, he gravitated to Santa Anita, where he had first acquired a taste for a good bet.

"I had an English teacher at Arcadia High who went to the races every day," Knust says. "I'd go to the morning works, bring back the times and some picks. I didn't know a verb from an adverb, but I got A's."

He eventually got his degree in racetrack management at the University of Arizona and embarked on a career that has gone from backstretch to boardroom. A racing secretary establishes schedules and works, in many ways, as the daily operational officer. Knust was that at Canterbury Downs in Minneapolis, at Del Mar and for 10 years, starting in 1990, at Santa Anita.

But in times before and after, he has also operated as a jockey agent. If he hadn't received a purple heart for his wounds in Vietnam, he'd deserve one for that.

He has had jockeys win Breeders' Cup races and major stakes and take riding titles at the Santa Anita and Oak Tree meetings. At one time, he carried the books of both Corey Nakatani and Pat Valenzuela. George Mitchell himself wouldn't have taken that on. Cease fire in Northern Ireland was easier.

"I was fine until P. Val saw Corey giving P. Val's girlfriend a kiss on the cheek," Knust says. "Then I got fired."

He had Jose Valdivia Jr. in 2004, when he rode Castledale to victory in the Santa Anita Derby.

"He fired me the next day," Knust says. "He said he didn't think I could take him to the next level."

Turns out, even God couldn't do that.

Along the way, Knust met horse owner and eventual billionaire B. Wayne Hughes and got into a weekly breakfast ritual at Coco's in Arcadia with Hughes and several others. Hughes had horses with the venerable trainer Warren Stute, who passed away in 2007.

Hughes decided to start a business of public storage units. He offered Stute a piece of the action for \$5,000. Stute said it was a stupid idea, that anybody who wanted to store things would just put them in the garage. Hughes' business, Public Storage, made billions; the \$5,000 investment offered to Stute has since been calculated to have been worth about \$700 million.

At breakfast, Hughes told stories about storage auctions held when people stopped paying rent and abandoned their stuff. One couple bought boxes of old books to read and discovered hollowed-out centers, jammed with \$56,000 in cash. A man bought some dusty old paintings, peeled back the top layer on one and found a Salvador Dali original underneath, worth \$300,000.

Knust, having survived so much else in life, took another leap and, with Hughes' blessing, wrote a book about these storage discoveries. It is perfectly titled: "Behind the Orange Door."

The self-published paperback, a fun read, will not be making its way onto the bestseller list soon and will not make the still-grateful-to-be-alive Knust wealthy.

But then, neither did Jose Valdivia Jr.