

WATTLE BRAE STUD

'Nature's Homeland' – Wattle Brae Stud – stretches across almost 2000 acres on the eastern slopes of the Darling Downs. In its 83 year history the fertile plains have been home to such Greats as Passing Glance (11 times champion Queensland sire), Pandour (4 times Champion Queensland sire and champion Australian sire by wins on one occasion) and Claudius (3 times champion Queensland sire and also champion Australian sire by wins on one occasion). The proprietors Gary and Phoebe Turkington are rightly proud of the history of their stud, which "has bred more than 240 stakes winners and thousands of winners", with success in all States of Australia.

For a stud that repeatedly rewrote the record books in the early years, it is fair to say that it drifted into a quieter period during the early 90s. Third generation owner Gary Turkington wondered if there was something else he could try his hand at, given 'breeding and raising horses' was something he had done all his life (as his father and grandfather had done before him, the family's thoroughbred business having been founded in 1921). He thus investigated a few non-equine alternatives and the stud assumed a more low key profile whilst he did so.

Wattle Brae's recent success therefore owes as much to marriage as to strategy. In 1993 Gary wed a woman well known at the time as a producer for the Australian Broadcasting Commission. Phoebe also had extensive family connections to the racing industry and in 1995 the couple merged their first love (horses) with their second (their relationship) and implemented a 5-year strategic plan to bring Wattle Brae back in step with the future.

Anyone involved in the breeding industry will know that initiatives undertaken seven years ago will (all things going to plan plus incorporating an all important dash of luck) only start to bear fruit a significant number of years down the track. It's a huge undertaking. As the Turkingtons watch the 2 year old campaigns of their freshman sires – Easy Rocking and Mr Innocent – they can rest assured that they have done a thorough job at positioning Wattle Brae to emulate the deeds of their forefathers.

The signs of change are everywhere. A Kentucky-style stallion barn and manicured parade lawn gleams on the right hand side of the main drive; the fencing and stables that constitute part of the new spelling complex still boast the scent of raw wood and paint. A number of paddocks have new troughs and watering systems and an old barn has been transformed into a comfortable client entertainment area adjacent to the main stable block. Other improvements include additional accommodation, replacement fencing across the property and the planting of 700 trees with drippers. Most clients wouldn't realize that Gary is also very hands on - personally completing all the mechanical and welding work on the farm.

"People aren't sparing any costs with their yearlings anymore," farm manager, Ian Brady explains. "And people pay for quality".

The quietly spoken manager has worked for the Turkingtons for eight years. His enviable pedigree knowledge sees him able to name a horse (in pretty much any State) and recite its pedigree page, where it was foaled, and who owns it. I gave up after three hours! He won hands down.

The stud's main claim to quality is not in the fixtures however. The stud has spared no expense in sourcing its best line-up of stallions in more than two decades: Easy Rocking, Taimazov, Mr Innocent, Joyeux Danseur and Brave Hawk.

The well bred and accomplished Easy Rocking won just shy of a million dollars in prize-money and included in his multiple group victories the Group One VRC Salinger Stakes (1200m) at Flemington. A half-brother to Hong Kong superstar Fairy King Prawn, Easy Rocking is by UK Horse of the Year (Barathea) out of the G2 winning (and Australian broodmare of the year) Twiglet. The pedigree page is littered with black type and for those who favour colonial stallions, Easy Rocking was not only bred and raced in Australia, but his dam's family is Australian as well. "Rocky" (as Ian refers to him) has a build appreciably similar to that of his namesake. He rolls in a patch of warm sand as he enters his yard then canters across to inspect the three strangers who are gazing through the fence at him. His first yearlings went through the ring in 2004 and sold to \$150,000 (averaging \$43,823 for 34 sold). His much anticipated first winner came at the Toowomba Cup meeting on October 29 when the bay colt Socialist recorded a 2 length win (in class record time) over 1000m.

Taimazov set the Argentinean turf alight in 2001, the (almost) black stallion winning 2 G1s (of eight wins in total) and was crowned Champion Sprinter for the year. Whether it's his height, frame or colour – or a combination of all three - the stallion radiates good looks; makes me wish I had an extra mare to send to him this year. He plays with the brass chain under his lip then freezes as a sound from a distant paddock attracts his attention. Then as if to ensure that everyone is awake he just as quickly tests Ian's reflexes by nipping his sleeve.

"He keeps you honest," Ian says with a grin.

Taimazov suffered the indignity of a painful injury to his groin early last season which, despite a few weeks of acute discomfort, still allowed him to cover 91 mares. In the manner of all stallion managers who deal with such things on a daily basis – uterine tone, follicle size, sperm mobility, and the act of reproduction itself - Ian leans on the fence and willingly discusses the fascinating (albeit intimate details) of the injury and the recovery process.

Taimazov will cover 120+ mares this season. His first foal greeted the world on August 1 this year. Very much in the mould of her sire, the black filly is out of Elysian (Luskin Star – Sparkling Bounty) who is a half sister to the Group One sprinter Spark of Life.

Mr Innocent (by the Mr Prospector horse Mr Henrysee out of the Kinski mare Miss Guilty) won at stakes level at 2, 3 and 4 years and his 14 victories included the G1 Doomben 10,000 and the G2 AJC Expressway Stakes. An attractive and well conformed stallion, his first crop yearlings sold to \$75,000 off a service fee of \$6,000. Ian adds a comment that you don't often hear when speaking about a stallion: "I'd trust him with my life".

Joyeux Danseur was added to the stud's line-up to avail clients of the Nureyev bloodlines that have seen recent sire success through the deeds of Stravinsky, Fasliyev, Peintre Celebre and Spinning World. Joyeux Dancer won 8 of his 14 starts (4 stakes events) including victories at Group One level on the turf. If you like a good stallion's pedigree then he has certainly got black type credentials. He is out of the group 3 winner Fabuleux Jane (by Le Fabulex), dam of the stakes placed Danseur Fabuleux who produced champion Arazi and Noverre. Tucked away on his CV is the fact that he stood his first four seasons at Three Chimneys Farm in Kentucky. A proven sire of turf rather than dirt performers In America (more than 49 winning individuals from just 82 starters and prize money of more than US\$2 million to mid-October 2004) Australia has capitalized on the 'turf' advantage and the stallion is now available to local breeders at a fee of \$5,500.

Brave Hawk (Brave Warrior ex Never Tell Tales) is a flashy chestnut stakes performed son of Brave Warrior. His oldest progeny are yearlings of 2004/5.

As part of its strategic direction Wattle Brae has embarked on an ambitious marketing plan, a couple of elements of which are worth commenting on. The stud manages a good PR programme, and to build on the Wattle Brae brand it has extensive and well placed advertising, an increased presence at the annual Yearling Sales (particularly in Queensland) and its website (an integral part of client communications) is easily one of the best in Queensland.

Clients are also increasingly looking to businesses to be donating something back to the community and in this regard Wattle Brae is one of the better studs I have come across. They have an arrangement with Taintech 2000 (a college providing equine career training to both Australian and overseas students) whereby they train up to 10 students a year. On the racing front the stud is one of the major sponsors for the Country Racing Series (which involves co-sponsoring five feature race series in country Queensland and a total of 46 race meetings). They also sponsored the inaugural Penny Ridge Silk Stocking Day at the Gold Coast on January 7, a race that forms part of the Magic Millions festival. The meeting donated its proceeds to Life Education - which raises funds for the positive health and anti-drug abuse program for school children in remote areas of Queensland.

Despite the excellent product (stallions) and services (infrastructure, sales preparation, spelling etc) and the marketing campaign to support the stud farm's brand in the marketplace, Wattle Brae is no different from many of its local competitors in some of the issues it faces.

"A couple of interstate studs are offering deals that are difficult for Queensland stud owners to match," Ian acknowledges. "People don't realize that Queensland studs don't work with the margins that some of the big NSW studs do and that makes it quite difficult to compete with them."

"The commercial factors have also changed stallion management practices," he continues. Studs now host a number of open days, stallion parades and client visits which means that traditional practices of reducing grain content to the stallions in the off season (which was said to benefit their health) has become a point of some debate given clients want (and expect) to see muscular, shiny stallions whenever they come onto a property.

"When you're showcasing stallions it's important to keep them a bit above themselves," Ian explains. "You can't disappoint people who have come all the way to see them and who are paying for service fees. But it does go against tried and true methods."

The commercial realities of the thoroughbred business may be encroaching on some traditions but in others Wattle Brae sees no change. Stallions do not serve in a barn; rather on grass to allow the sun to kill off any bacteria. Paddocks are extremely spacious and Wattle Brae has the size to allow a separate complex for mares and foals. The area of river flats is quarantined from the remainder of the farm and is rested for the seven months of the off season which guarantees quality (and healthy) pasture. It's a unique example of how this stud blends 'what's always worked' with the demands of the changing business environment.

© Katrina Partridge 2004

www.AthloneAssociates.com