

A Queensland Stud's United Nations

Stud owner Wes Hutchins reports one of his greatest moments in the Industry having, ironically, nothing to do with a race. In mid 2000 a Channel Seven film crew arrived at his property to welcome the internationally renowned Dare and Go. The impeccably performed and bred stallion (Alydar out of a Secretariat mare) had risen to prominence by producing the unthinkable: he put three and a half lengths on the field in the \$1-million Pacific Classic at Del Mar and ended the almost two year and 16-straight winning streak of America's darling - Cigar.

The film crew's interest signified a rare reversal of fortune for a small stud that, like many others in a similar position, has to work doubly hard to attract broodmare owners thanks to considerably lower advertising budgets and stallions that due to the commercial nuances of pedigree and/or performance may not have clocked up the all essential marketing folk lore when they retire to stud.

It's small wonder then that Wes recalls that day so vividly.

Carringbush (formerly known as Vatana) Farm is located just outside the small town of Wyreema near Toowoomba and spreads across 400 acres of prime grazing country in Queensland's Darling Downs. Its owner is former Insurance CEO who came to Stud ownership by a rather unusual twist of fate. On a routine flight back from Bangkok in 2001 Wes was victim to a heart attack. It was this emergency at 35,000 feet not his lifelong passion for the Industry that convinced Wes to purchase the stud from its Thai owners.

"Everything happens for a purpose and I started thinking about all the things that I hadn't done in my life and that inspired me," he explains.

On 1 May of this year, after a decade as the Australian Director of Vatana, Wes' flew to Thailand to sign and collect the ownership papers. His dream had become reality.

We wander the Farm as we talk, pausing at a spelling paddock that is home to four colts, two of whom have recently been broken in. They're strong, well grown, and glistening with good health. A flashy chestnut with a kind eye has more than looks on his side, his dam tracing to Dual Choice, winner of 13 stakes races through the late 1960's and early 70's including the VATC Debutante Stakes, VATC Caulfield Guineas, VRC Edward Manifold Stakes, VRC Sires' Produce Stakes and VATC Oakleigh Plate (twice).

Wes grins when asked how many mares he owns, suggesting it's "far too many depending on which member of the family you speak to". Some of his favorites include the Robert Sangster import, Super Yankee by Superlative (IRE) [a Yellow God stallion]; Decency (NZ) by Defensive Play (USA) closely related to Mapperley Heights; Windscape by Black Zephyr, already the dam of the Group 2 winner Baal Yabba and Will If I Want by Baryshnikov whose dam is closely related to the Group One winning Navy Seal.

The Stud has bred a number of winners over the years including two very popular Queenslander performers – the hardy sprinter Maltese Edition (9 wins and \$156,405) and Irish Bunny (88 starts, 18 wins, 20 placings and prize money of \$148,930) whose gritty

determination over a 6 year period earned him an almost cult-like following amongst Sunshine Coast race-goers.

“They are ‘what you see are what you get horses’” Wes comments.

As if in support of his comment the colts in front of us skid along the fence line and rear, forelegs cleaving through the sunlight as necks glide snake-like towards each other, frolicking apart again and lunging into a gallop that sends spirals of dust from their hooves as they cover a good three hundred metres in barely no time at all, snorting and rearing again as they careen to a heart plunging stop just short of the far fence.

“The handicapper puts all the obstacles in your way when you are racing,” Wes says “You shouldn’t be putting up any others obstacles via the way you treat a horse. A nice contented horse that has been raised right with everything he needs in terms of nutrition and a happy uncomplicated environment in which to do it – he’ll be a better horse for it. I know I know ... if I am so smart why I am working for a living? But I think there is something in that theory.”

With the shock death of Dare and Go in 2001 in addition to Spicy Fact (the first Known Fact stallion who stood in Queensland), the then-named Vatana was at a low point.

Despite standing the well received Latarmiss and Marechal, the Stud was struggling with increased competition from the large number of stallions entering the market place and insufficient new blood that offered breeders the quintessential differentiator.

“A number of neighbouring studs were sold during that period and it did put the acid test on how we were all competing. Basically, unless you had a damn good idea you were in trouble.”

2004 unveils a new stallion line-up that offers, in Wes’ opinion, the qualities to support his theory that the Darling Downs is “the breeding emerald of the State”. It also prompts a rather reflective question “You know, given the background of these stallions, perhaps we shouldn’t have called it Carringbush ... probably we should have just called it the United Nations?”

In addition to Forty Niner’s sire son Inflate; AP Indy’s son Storm of Indya; the multiple group placed Rain Gauge and a trio of Danehill stallions - the ever popular Queensland sire Dantibes plus Markham and My Joy, the stud offers a stallion unique to the Queensland market – Moon Rocket - who one can’t help but suspect will have many at the larger Southern studs watching his future career with barely veiled interest.

Standing at a shade over 16.3hh, the son of Zabeel out of a stakes winning mare is a richly colored bay with exceptional depth through his chest, shoulder and girth, a long length of rein, short back, and a powerful hindquarter. The sheer scope of the stallion suggests he has the potential to not just upgrade his mares on pedigree but also donate their offspring plenty of size and bone – something the Queensland buying bench favor.

His pedigree is one in demand. The unprecedented buying frenzy of colts at this year’s Easter Sales was fueled to a large extent by Darley Stud’s recent acquisition of the unbeaten and multiple group one winning son of Zabeel, Reset. Whilst Reset was being whisked off

the track and into the serving barn with the flourish of a much publicized \$15M signature, another descendant of the Zabeel line – a grandson this time – the champion Lonhro - was also making headlines with his appreciatively expensive first season sire rate of \$66,000.

Moon Rocket's dam, Sky Rocket raced for Lee Freedman and won 5 races including the VRC Rising Stars Stakes (LR), VRC Let's Elope Stakes (LR) and was runner up in the SAJC Veuve Clicquot Stakes (LR). Owned by the Shadai breeding superpower, she was mated with Zabeel before being sent to Japan where she has since also produced two progeny by Sunday Silence.

Sky Rocket offers the injection of what is undoubtedly one of the most powerful sire lines in Australia today: Danehill. Her pedigree also contains names that will be familiar to those who recently attended Sydney's Autumn Carnival – the 2 year old Triple Crown winner Dance Hero appears under the third dam, and multiple Group 1 winner (and the horse that brought Lonhro's winning streak to an end) Grand Armeé appears under the 4th dam.

A 50 million yen yearling (AUD\$700K), Moon Rocket raced only three times before his career was curtailed by injury. He won his newcomer race by 9 lengths at just outside track record time and to put this in perspective, out of 8,874 2-year olds registered in Japan in Moon Rocket's year, only 251 won a newcomer race and only 7 won by 9 lengths or more (one of these went on to win at G1 level; another to prepare for the UAE Derby). Demonstrating the possibilities had injury not intervened, one has to only look at Moon Rocket's half-brother, Meteor Burst, a listed winner at 2, who is currently rated equal third on the three year old tables in Japan (as per JRA Official Classifications as of 31 March, 2004), after his third in the high level Group 2 Yayoi-sho (2000 Guineas trial over 2000m) in mid-March and another third in the Group 2 Hyogo Championship over 1870m on 4 May 2004 (margins a half length and a neck).

"The greatest thing about Moon Rocket is that you are buying a two-in-one yearling that should be competitive as a two year old but that you know will be better when it's older if genetics mean anything" Wes states.

The Danehill cross in terms of what it can throw in the 2 year old ranks is also one that a number of leading owners including Lloyd Williams have quietly pursued. Williams demonstrated early success with his 2 year old Subscribe (Zabeel/Danelagh by Danehill) who won the Veuve Clicquot Stakes (LR) and placed in the Talindert Stakes (LR) last year. Others in his stable with the same cross include Convention and Partnership. Following the same cross but racing in the Gooree Stud colors under the guidance of Gai Waterhouse is another promising type by the name of Matras.

The person responsible for bringing Moon Rocket to Australia is 29-year old Australian Michael Tabart, a Japan-based consultant. Michael negotiated Moon Rocket's purchase from Shadai following the horse's retirement, recognizing that the Zabeel/Danehill cross would suit many Southern Hemisphere breeders. Michael owns and races a number of horses in Australia, his introduction to the industry courtesy of his grand father who was secretary of the Racehorse Owners Association for a number of years and administrative manager at John Messara's then Middlebrook Park. The stud manager at the time will also be familiar to many being none other than Vinery Australia's Peter Orton.

Due to the quirks of airline scheduling and quarantine, Moon Rocket arrived late for the 2003 breeding season yet he still covered an initial book of 29 mares. These included Windscape (multiple winner and dam of G3 winner Baal Yabba), Donnatelle (multiple stakes placed winner of 11 races), Idle Hour (Winning half sister to G2 winner Butternut), Watagan Lass (winner of 12 races), Chantique (4-times winner and half sister to Savarin – 4th in the AJC Breeders Classic).

It would appear to be a coup for the Sunshine State - and Queensland's thoroughbred industry more generally - to secure such a well bred sire at the competitive service fee of \$4,400 (incl. GST).

Whilst many large studs breed solely for the commercial yearling market, a number of smaller studs cater almost exclusively for mare owners who wish to breed and race their own horses. The introduction of Moon Rocket to the stallion roster has the potential to integrate a commercial element to the stud and reassuringly for those who wish to take advantage of that fact; Carringbush's client care program is certainly well thought of by those who have experienced it. Indeed, Wes' words: "What sets this place apart is the quality of care. If we can get a client once we keep them" appear to be spot on.

"We largely cater for a bunch of local people who are very loyal," Wes says. "The office is run by my wife and son and we keep every client well informed on what is happening with their mare. So many people say that the service they get here is the equal of other big studs they have dealt with in the past. All we have to try and do is to try and keep the owners as happy as we keep the mares. If you do that you can't really go too far wrong."

Co-proprietor of boutique QLD agistment farm Massie Lodge, Helen Robinson, reflects the views of other broodmare owners I spoke with: "I wanted my mares to go to a stud farm where I knew that they would be looked after and not treated as a number," she says.

"Not only does Ashley have a very close rapport with the stallions, but he cares for his mares. When our mare came home you could tell that she had been cared for. We had the experience of sending one of our other mares to another Queensland Stud. They not only didn't tell us when she was served but she came back covered in mud and her mane matted and tangled as well. I certainly didn't send her out that way!

"Would I send another mare back to Carringbush? Absolutely. Without a second thought."

It's not bad praise given the Stud is by far a small player on the commercial breeding scene and they have relied little on the advertising dollar to promote their brand.

I confess that as I had negotiated the road map and the distraction of the glorious day surrounding me on my way to Carringbush, part of me had wondered how this Stud maintained its profile. In this day and age Stud success is typically grounded in how well a product is marketed. To therefore come across a Stud that has not yet embraced massive advertising budgets, a website or indeed large scale yearling drafts at the annual QLD and NSW sales had me wondering just how it sustained its reputation

Two hours with stud owner, Wes Hutchins, his stud manager, Ashley Pholi ... and the horses in their care ... reveal the answer: staff, clients, and product. Amongst Queensland broodmare owners they also have what those in the marketing game call the most powerful of all promotional tools – word of mouth advertising.

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