

Willowbend, Building on Strength

If you had sat down with David Lucas 17 years ago and asked him to predict what the future of Willowbend Stud would hold his answer may in fact have been very different from the current reality.

His Beaudesert property that consisted, in 1987, of a mere 42 acres that focussed on spelling and breaking-in services, would, by the start of the 2004 breeding season stand arguably Queensland's most accomplished stallion and have expanded the original boundary fence ten times over to encompass three distinct properties (140 acres for broodmares; 200 acres for wet mares and foaling; 100 acres for spellers, breaking-in and weanlings; 20 stallion paddocks for spelling; 80 boxes for sales preparation, and half a dozen walking machines).

It is the past five years that have, however, really defined Willowbend as one of Queensland's leading stud farms. In 1997, proprietor David Lucas and his wife Debra wanted to expand their existing client base so the first stallion, Clang, was acquired for stud duties. Nowadays five other stallions stand alongside their now accomplished neighbour; resident incumbents the Coolmore shuttler Monashee Mountain, plus three Danehill stallions Legal Opinion, Rock of Cashel and Geronimo.

A tall scopey stallion, Clang has an indefinable presence that continues to draw the eye even once you've moved past his yard. I have to confess that none of the photos used to promote him do him justice. By Bellotto out of the city winning mare Sudden Impulse (ex Luskin Star), Clang won more than \$500,000 on the track, victories including the Group 2 STC Silver Slipper, Group 2 MVRC Stanley Wootton Stakes and Group 3 SAJC DC McKay Stakes.

When it came time to retire him to stud the Woodlands bred colt (who is also a half brother to proven sire Strategic) had just one question mark hanging over his head – his sire line. Bellotto may well have sired more than 37 stakes winners and been a reliable producer of winners but Clang was (and remains) his only sire son. It was a big gamble. The Lucas' decided it was one worth taking.

The rest is history.

Clang went on to become champion Australian sire of 2 year olds in 2001-2, and has the distinction of being one of only four stallions to produce an AJC Derby winner (Clangalang) and Golden Slipper winner (Calaway Gal); he also achieved this in the same year. An appealing twist appears in the detail: all three of Clang's group winners were reportedly produced from \$800 mares (in fact, demonstrating the ongoing challenge of attracting "quality" mares [a situation many Queensland stud masters will empathise with] Clangalang's dam, Little Recruit, was in fact sold at the Magic Millions Winter Thoroughbred Sale in 1998 for \$500).

Corresponding with his success, Clang's books have risen exponentially in recent years. From the conservative total of 75 mares he served in 1997 his book soared to 199 in 2002 and 150 in 200. Meanwhile the commercial market also shifted behind the colonial stallions (particularly ones who could produce three Group 1 winners in their first two crops). It was no surprise therefore to learn that in early 2003 a large Hunter Valley Stud

had placed a substantial offer on the table for Clang. But in a much needed boost for the Queensland breeding industry, the syndicate of owners (headed by Lucas) rejected the \$5.5M offer and as if in defence of their decision (and underscoring Clang's local popularity), just a few months later a share in the stallion offered by Paul Bennett traded at auction for the impressive sum of \$87,500.

The success of Clang certainly provided Lucas with his much desired increased client base. It also provided opportunities for other stallions to join the roster. It was at this point that Willowbend adopted an approach to stallion selection that positioned them quite uniquely in the Queensland marketplace. Whilst other studs pursue race records or sire lines (or a combination of the two), Willowbend is committed to a strategy of standing stallions whose differentiator is very much their A-list relations. There are a number of breeding experts who would support such an approach and would state as their evidence that overriding race record and earnings is the strong belief that horses that go on to succeed as stallions are ones that come from proven pedigree lines. They need to be sons of sires of sires or grandsons of sires of sires and most important of all they must be from an outstanding female family.

The stand out example of this approach at Willowbend is the impeccably bred Monashee Mountain. There are a limited number of suitable adjectives to describe this stallion's pedigree page and it has been a massive coup for Queensland to acquire his services for the past four seasons. Monashee Mountain won two Group 3 and two listed races in Europe and was retired after being injured when running a short priced favourite in the French 2000 Guineas. By champion sire Danzig out of a dual Group 1 winner and USA broodmare of the year Prospector's Delight, Monashee Mountain is half-brother to 2003 Horse-of-the-Year Mineshaft (by AP Indy) who served his first book of mares at Kentucky's Lanes End Farm for a service fee of US\$100,000, and dual Group 1 winner (and millionaire) Tomisue's Delight.

Unsurprisingly, Monashee Mountain has proven popular at stud having served books of 85, 106 and 107 mares. Farm manager Troy Gillespie leans on the fence as he contemplates the stallion, then says "He's the best horse in Queensland by a country mile you know." Twenty trainers are said to have booked mares to him in 2004 and a book close to 140 is expected.

Whether Monashee Mountain continues to shuttle to the Beaudesert stud remains an unknown quantity following the recent news that due to his European success he will shift from his Irish base to Ashford Stud in Kentucky. You may recall that Encosta de Lago was also a Coolmore horse (who just happened to have a Victorian address) so the fact that Monashee Mountain formed part of a Coolmore triumvirate that headed the leading first-crop sires list in Europe last month may not bode well for his continuing presence in the Sunshine State.

Meanwhile, his oldest Australian progeny are 2 year olds of the current racing season. As at 6 December he has only had four starters to date including Roses of Jester (a \$34,000 yearling sold at the Magic Millions Gold Coast Premier Yearling Sale in March) who collected her sires first Southern Hemisphere prize money when she ran second in a maiden Plate in Townsville on 12 October then won over 1000m on 23 November (another starter Leanne's Wish placing in Ipswich the following day).

Another Willowbend stallion with an appealing pedigree page is Legal Opinion. A lightly raced horse (who has the distinction of having broken a nine year old class record as a two-year old), Legal Opinion is by Danehill out of Summoned (dam of proven sires Zeditave and Alannon plus two stakes producing sisters). He covered books of 95, 136 and 115 mares between 2001 and 2003 and from a service fee of just \$3,300 has sold yearlings up to \$25,000. His oldest progeny are 2 year olds of the current racing season. The stallion has had just 2 starters to date; Legal Pursuit collecting a prize money cheque on the three occasions he has raced including a win on 27 November. In a nice touch, in the race that saw Legal Opinion shift from 'stallion' to 'sire', another of his progeny, Lady's Opinion, ran second thus securing her sire the quinella. Of note, on each occasion to date that the Legal Opinion progeny have raced they have won prize-money.

Another Danehill horse whose full brother is ably assisting him in the marketing department is Rock of Cashel. What this stallion didn't achieve during his limited time on the track he more than compensates for in his bloodlines. The young horse (not yet four) was purchased outright from Coolmore last year and will no doubt appeal to those who are unable to afford the service fee of his full brother, world champion and winner of seven consecutive Group 1's, Rock of Gibraltar (who is currently serving his second book of mares at Coolmore at a fee of \$93,500). It's not the first time siblings have been used to assist a stallion with a lesser race record. Eagle Eyed and Nuclear Freeze who are full brothers to Danehill come to mind in this regard as do Without Favor and Without Fear, Private Thoughts (full brother to Kingston Town) as well as Akaaber and Seven Figures (brother and half-brother respectively to Chiefs Crown).

The stud's third Danehill stallion is Geronimo and he is another with a Coolmore connection having raced in the all navy silks after being purchased by the breeding conglomerate as a million dollar yearling. Out of the Group winner Red Express, Geronimo is the full brother to Dane Ripper (4 times Group 1 winner with earnings in excess of \$3M including the Group 1 MVRC Cox Plate, Group 1 VRC Australia Cup, Group 1 MVRC Manikato S, and Group 1 QTC Stradbroke H) and is another whose close relations are being used to promote him at stud. Geronimo is owned by a syndicate headed by well known Victorian breeder Danny Rose and racing identity Vern Rayner.

Willowbend has come a long way from its initial spelling/breaking-in operation. The property which fronts two sides of a main road and encompasses three distinct business units offers a distinctive stallion strategy that offers broodmare owners some of the best bloodlines in Australia at a reasonable price. In combination, the stud's developments have certainly pushed it to the fore in recent years. Indeed, when referring to the geographical diversity of broodmares the stallions have attracted, Troy says: "When you can pull mares from any part of Australia – particularly with the deals being done then you know you've got good stallions."