

EXPERIENCE

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50 YEARS OF LEARJET HISTORY + NETJETS' NEXT BIG MOVE
JAPAN'S RYOKANS + THOROUGHbred AUCTIONS + SICILIAN VILLAS

BORN TO RUN

Tattersalls, the world's oldest bloodstock auction, draws racehorse-owner hopefuls to Newmarket, England to bid on the one thing money can't buy: a sure thing.

BY STEPHANIE PLENTL | PHOTOS BY DAN ABRAHAM



POWER HOUSE
Tattersalls, Europe's premier bloodstock auctioneers, during Book 1 yearling sales in October. (opposite) Frankel, the "world's best horse," is worth an estimated £125 million.

PHOTOS: DAN ABRAHAM/RACINGPHOTOS.COM

For almost 400 years the sport of kings has fascinated and frustrated in equal measure. Where an artwork, real estate or even diamonds can offer immediate and definable distinction, glory cannot be guaranteed when buying a horse – despite its being tipped for racing triumph. It is precisely this unpredictability that has historically attracted British monarchs, Arab sheikhs, business magnates and society mavens to the world of horse racing. Success simply cannot be bought.

Britain is passionate about all equestrian pursuits, and the heart of its elite racing industry – the buying, the breeding and one of its Classic racecourses – is located in the modest, provincial town of Newmarket. King James I recognized turf value in its flat terrain while out hunting hares with hounds, but it was because of his flamboyant grandson Charles II that the "sport of kings" moniker was coined. In 1666, he had Newmarket stage the

world's first horse race under written rule, eventually riding his own horse to victory five years later.

Arriving at Tattersalls, the oldest bloodstock auctioneers in the world, I find the December breeding stock sale bustling with purpose. I take a seat in the gallery of the indoor ring to see one poised and gleaming mare after another being presented for bids. Though Tattersalls' highlight is its prestigious Book 1 yearling sale in October, this is the crucial European Thoroughbred mare auction: females intended mainly for breeding. Pedigree and gait are vital as these mares could foal the racehorse champions of the future.

The gallery stalls are a sea of unassuming flat caps, fleece and fur – a collection of the most discerning agents, breeders and clients in the world – and all ears are attentive to the auctioneer's relentless drone. Lot 1770, known as Seeharn, is led into the ring. She is already in foal to top stallion Dubai, >

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—ED SACKVILLE, AGENT



the winner of the prestigious Irish 2,000 Guineas race who now commands £75,000 per broodmare stud visit (also known as a “nomination” or “cover”).

Surveying the brightly lit room for barely perceptible nods, the auctioneer deftly raises the bid and his tone with each tender that he spots. After just minutes, a frisson passes through the crowd as she sells for 950,000 gns (the antiquated British monetary unit of 1 guinea equals £1.05 and is unique to Tattersalls, who retain the 5 percent).

Conveniently, I’m sitting with Anthony Stroud, the renowned British bloodstock agent who just sold Seeharn in partnership with James Hanly of Ballyhimikin stud farm in Ireland. “She had the whole package,” Stroud says simply, complimenting her superb lineage and athletic build. A succession of discreet congratulations is offered, handshakes and wry comments to the tune of “A good day in the office, eh Anthony?”

Bought on behalf of Sheikh Joaan Al Thani (the younger brother of the ruling Emir of Qatar), Seeharn will now be taken to Haras de Bouquetot, the sheikh’s stud farm in France. This is one of 14 mares that the sheikh will purchase over the four-day auction, including the top lot, Twyla Tharp, bought from composer Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber.

The recent influx of Qatari investment has made a splash in an already strong UK market, with the hitherto dominant Japanese clients being unceremoniously outbid. The Emir’s 23-year-old nephew Sheikh Fahad bin Abdullah Al-Thani only recently took up the sport, but already he has over 100 horses in training.

Sheikh Fahad’s earliest forays onto the track are a legendary example of beginner’s luck. At the Melbourne Cup in 2011 – the richest turf race in the world – he casually won the AUD3.6 million first prize with Dunaden, a horse that had been sold as a foal for a mere €1,500. Though his jockey, Christophe Lemaire, the Aga Khan’s retained rider, was undoubtedly skilled, it was utterly unpredictable: Dunaden had no notable pedigree going back 50 years. The horse’s humble beginnings further highlight the idiosyncrasies of the sport. No one appreciates this more than Stroud, who was the highly successful racing manager for 14 years to one of the most extravagant spenders in the industry: Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai. A very involved owner, Sheikh Mohammed spends whole summers in Newmarket.

There is a vital trinity to racehorse ownership: “The right agent, the right blood, and the right trainer,” explains Stroud, whose independent agency now buys as many as 300 horses a year for an international clientele. “Of course, there’s no guarantee,” he says, “but you’ve got a better chance of eliminating the risks.”

To put the numbers into perspective, 11,912 foals were born to race in Britain and Ireland in 2012. Only one can win the Epsom Derby, the most coveted finishing post of them all with a global audience of over one billion. The Queen, a prolific and devoted racehorse owner, has attended almost every Derby race of her reign. Though she has bred and owned winners of every other Classic race in Britain, the Derby has always eluded her.

Ed Sackville, a partner in SackvilleDonald, the youngest new bloodstock agency in the United Kingdom, insists the driving force for any owner has to be a sense of fun – with success as a bonus. “Think of it as going on holiday, rather than an investment,” suggests Sackville in the cozy Tattersalls bar after the day’s sales. “Enjoy it, and don’t expect a check when you get home.”

Diamond in the Rough

Early the next morning, frost has settled on the horse sculptures, lawn and perfectly trimmed hedges of Heath House Stables yard. As I’m led to the vast indoor training school, I’m reminded of an analogy Sackville had made the previous evening. “Choosing bloodstock at a yearling auction,” he said, “is like going to a school full of children to be told one of them is going to win the Olympic gold medal in the 100 meter at age 21.”

Having been skillfully chosen by an agent like Sackville for their athleticism, physicality and presence, the horses – often highly strung, skittish and difficult – are brought to a school like Heath House where their trust is won and their bodies developed.

Sir Mark Prescott, the eminent flat racehorse trainer, is gently coaxing 10 yearlings and their riders around the huge indoor ring. “Whaa-ho! Thaaaaat’ll do,” he intones from the arena’s center. With the heady smoke from Prescott’s cigar wafting about like incense, the school has the soothing atmosphere of a Buddhist temple.

“These horses are just like children,” says Prescott, who has run Heath

House since 1970, “they rely on you for confidence, so you have to be calm, never cross and treat them all the same.”

The horses are being expertly led in succession through custom-made padded starting stalls that will gradually become narrower over time, allowing them to acclimatize to the explosive beginning of a race.

We venture just outside Heath House yard to the “gallops” at Warren Hill, an expanse of sloped land with a strip of peat turf down the center. Here, the string of horses repeat their indoor lesson. With Prescott beady watching their form, their riders charge the horses up the training ground, purposefully close to the rails to make them run straight.

Prescott is adamant about schooling no more than 50 horses at a time. His system of psychological and physical training takes two years per horse. He has amassed over 1,500 winners in his career and is renowned for meticulously scanning the international race calendar for the perfect race for each horse.

Back in the yard, one of Prescott’s local clients, Nicholas Jones, arrives to survey his new colt, William of Orange. “Looking keen and mean by now, I would imagine?” he asks hopefully. “He’s covered in ringworm and lame,” Prescott retorts, characteristic of his famously irreverent humor, as he leads us to a perfect colt.

Mr. Jones, who has had several wins on the track with Prescott, proudly circles his horse, and tells me: “We owners are always expecting the trainer to produce miracles.”

Prescott’s system of psychological and physical training takes two years per horse.



STOCKS AND BONDS
(Opposite) Trainer Sir Mark Prescott; (this page) bloodstock agent Anthony Stroud; Prescott’s horses-in-training exercise on the Warren Hill “gallop” in Newmarket.



RIGHT ON TIME
Ruler of the World, jockeyed by Ryan Moore, wins the 2013 Epsom Derby.

The miracle in every racehorse owner's mind would be Frankel, the world's best racehorse over one mile. Owned by Prince Khalid Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, Frankel recently retired in triumph after a stunning 14 successive wins. Surveying his satiny, black contours with a select group of mare owners over a glass of Champagne at the palatial Juddmonte Farm stud here in Newmarket, it's impressive to learn that this stallion's stud fee for each mare nomination is £125,000.

While watching distinguished prospective clients coyly line up to have their photo taken holding his reins, I read in the prospectus that he is now reputed to be worth £125 million.

A Safe Bet

Such was the glory of Frankel's final win at the Champion Stakes in Ascot in October 2012, that it incited uncharacteristic cheers and fist-pumping from the Queen in the royal box.

When I am invited to the Epsom Derby in June, the Queen, as ever, is in eager attendance with Prince Philip at her side. The stands are bursting with men in top hats and tails and ladies in wide-brimmed hats – the sartorial etiquette still an integral part of the pomp of the single biggest sporting event in Britain's calendar.

I spot Dunaden, the 2011 Melbourne Cup winner, being led round the paddock before the day's third race and I can't resist placing a bet on Sheikh Fahad's lucky charm. On the track moments later Dunaden resolutely shadows the favorite but finishes second. The race is won for the third consecutive year – an unprecedented achievement that generates much fanfare – by a horse named St Nicholas Abbey.

The clear favorite for the day's fifth race – the much-anticipated Derby – is Dawn Approach, part-owned by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al

Maktoum of Dubai. Naturally, the sheikh is here, resplendent in the requisite top hat, with his wife, Princess Haya, in crimson. With a prize of £1.379 million, this is the richest race in the country and the sheikh's racehorse is widely tipped to win.

The crowds surge to the course railings to get closer to the action. As the starting gates open the cheering begins, but it soon appears that Dawn Approach is struggling against his jockey's demands. Spectators gasp as the horse trails behind in the last furlong. The aptly named Ruler of the World pushes forward to claim a deliciously unexpected victory and a place in racing history.

The 2013 Derby result once again proves that despite the science and artistry behind the mating, rearing and mental training of each Thoroughbred bound for the track, a race is a gamble with a huge element of uncertainty. Ultimately, the enduring thrill and seduction of the sport of kings are driven by the knowledge that every horse has a chance and every owner can dare to dream. ■

TATTERSALLS

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ROYAL SALUTE
Ruler of the World rides to victory at the 2013 Epsom Derby; the audience included Her Majesty the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh.

