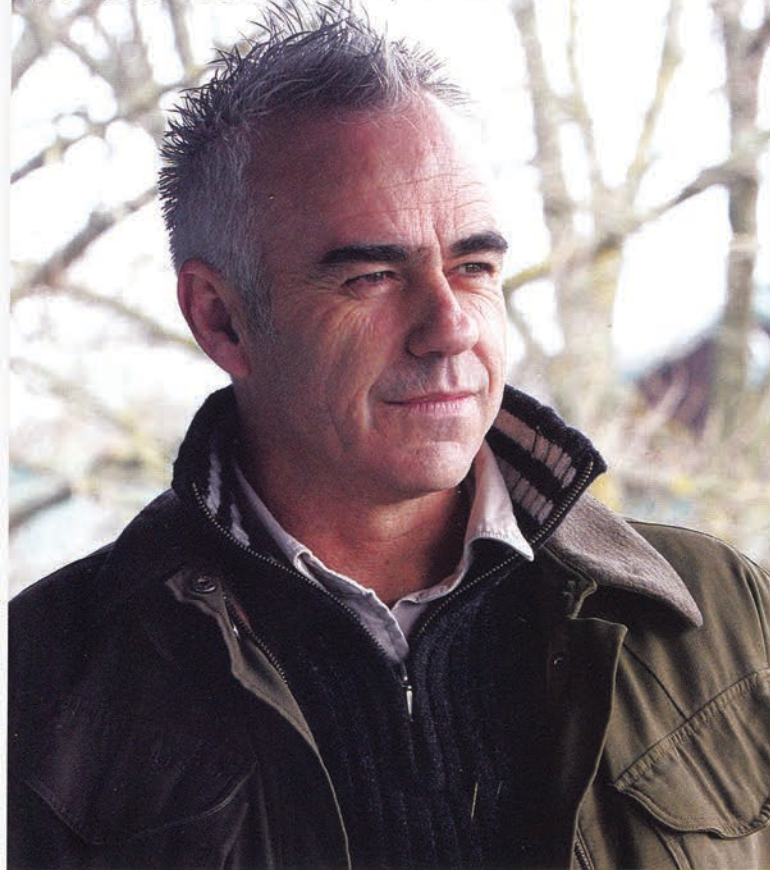


## Paul Willets new ground in the north

By Amy Bennett



Tattersalls has long been a happy hunting ground for buyers from Australia and New Zealand, but while Antipodean buyers have enjoyed huge success at the company's horses in training and breeding stock sales, it is rather more rare to see southern hemisphere buyers in action during the foal sales.

Paul Willets may indeed have been breaking new ground when he purchased three weanlings during the four-day Tattersalls December Foal Sale, which saw over 700 foals come under the hammer.

With prices rocketing at the Autumn Horses in Training sale, it is perhaps inevitable that some buyers are seeking to get a jump on the market by sourcing their future Cups horses before they have run.

Willets points to both the quality of European horses as well as the international nature of the industry as the reason behind his first buying foray to the weanling sale.

"European horses are doing so well in Australia, and I have always thought that the best bred horses in the world are from Britain," he says. "Racing is now like Formula 1, the best horses just go from country to country. Red Cadeaux must spend more time on a plane than he does in his box in

Newmarket!

"I said to a few of the guys I buy for in New Zealand and Australia, 'let's stay off fashion and just buy a nice horse, with good conformation but perhaps a pedigree that is a bit out of fashion. We've had a lot of success doing that at home and I think it will work again here'.

"I'm buying for one of my major clients in New Zealand and a couple of brothers in Australia. I had to set a budget as obviously we have to factor in the shipping costs, but the plan was to average out about 15,000gns a horse."

The plan worked like a charm, with the three Willets purchases costing an average of 14,000gns (approximately \$29,148)

The trio includes a Sakhee colt out of a Bertolini mare that was placed in the Group 2 Ribblesdale Stakes at Royal Ascot, bought for 14,000gns on the first day of the sale. Willets then had to wait until the final day to add more to his shopping list, snapping up a King's Best colt from the further family of Americain for 10,000gns and a colt by the first-crop sire Zoffany from the family of the Australian stakes winner and multiple stakes producer Ice Cream Sundae.

A few days later, Willets added another weanling to his haul when pur-

chasing a Stormy River colt from a useful French family for 11,000 euros at Arqana's breeding stock sale in France.

While Willets has a huge knowledge bank of pedigree knowledge, once at a sale he prefers to look at the individual rather than its page.

"With a filly, she really needs a page when you buy her. With a colt, even if he doesn't have a page when you buy him, he can perhaps be the one to make it," he explains.

"A pedigree only tells me how much I will need to pay for a horse. There is too much emphasis on pedigree I think, rather than on what an individual looks like. I like an athlete, a good walking type and a bit of leg, a good head and a good attitude."

Looking at the attitude of the horses emphasizes one major difference in how weanlings are reared in Europe rather than Australia and New Zealand. Willets explains: "I found it harder here to analyse the attitude because they have been handled so much compared to weanlings in New Zealand and Australia."

Whereas many buyers at the foal sales are looking for a quick pinhooking turnaround at the yearling sales next year, Willets and his partnership are playing the long game with their

purchases.

"The plan is to fly the foals to New Zealand in February, domicile them in Waikato where they will be gelded. I've had a lot of success with gelding horses as weanlings; I think they do a lot better," Willets says.

"After that, they will be left to enjoy the end of the Kiwi summer and autumn and then probably be broken in as late two-year-olds. We won't get serious with them until the autumn of their three-year-old year.

"They will be nurtured in New Zealand and then sent to Australia as four- or five-year-olds to take advantage of the great prize money there. We've left it open-ended as to whether we end up racing the weanlings or selling them. If one won his first start and you were offered \$600,000 from Hong Kong, you'd be crazy to turn it down."

The December sales may have been Willets' first buying trip to Britain, but it was far from being his first trip.

"When I first decided I wanted to work with horses, the industry in New Zealand and Australia was still quite rough and ready. I wanted to come to Britain and learn how to do it right from day one!

"All I did as a teenager was study and write pedigrees - homework went out the window. I worked on racing

publications for two years before I went overseas.

"When I got to Britain, I came to Newmarket, walked into the office of Sam Sheppard [former chief executive of the European Breeders Fund] and said 'I've never worked with horses but I want to learn and I don't care what I get paid!'

"He put me in touch with Chris Harper at Whitsbury Manor Stud and I went to work there when they had the stallions Young Generation, Hot Spark and Sparkler. After that, I did eight months at Gestut Rottgen in Germany - I went over there on a horsebox, didn't speak a word of German, but it was a great experience.

"After getting back to New Zealand I spent a couple of years working trainers then I went to work for Wrightson's in 1985 and was there for eight years, mainly in the pedigree department.

"In 1993, I worked for a husband and wife agent team and when they split, I decided to go out on my own.

"I was thinking when I was bidding on my first horse 'who would have ever thought when I first came to Britain that one day I would be here at Tattersalls buying horses?'"

Since operating on his own, Willets has compiled an enviable record of

success, with his roll call of purchases including Buffering, bought for just \$A22,000 and who won his third successive Group 1 when taking out the Winterbottom Stakes just days before Willets arrived at Tattersalls; the top-class middle distance performer Kaapstad Way; the hugely talented Rosehill Silver Slipper winner Amelia's Dream; the dual Group winner Solzhenitsyn, bought for \$10,000 as a weanling; and the Group 1 winner Classic Marco who cost just \$A8000 as a yearling.

Although Willets has enjoyed success with horses bought at all ages, he much prefers focusing on weanlings.

"I love buying weanlings, it is my favourite occupation. They're uncomplicated; they haven't been manipulated as yearlings have been. With a weanling, what you see is what you get, whereas horses that go through a yearling preparation have had so much done to them. I don't think a typical yearling prep is good for them, it's like kids going to boarding school," he says.

It may be a few years before his scheme bears fruit, but Willets is not ruling out another buying trip to Tattersalls. In the meantime there is plenty to look forward to with his quartet of European purchases.