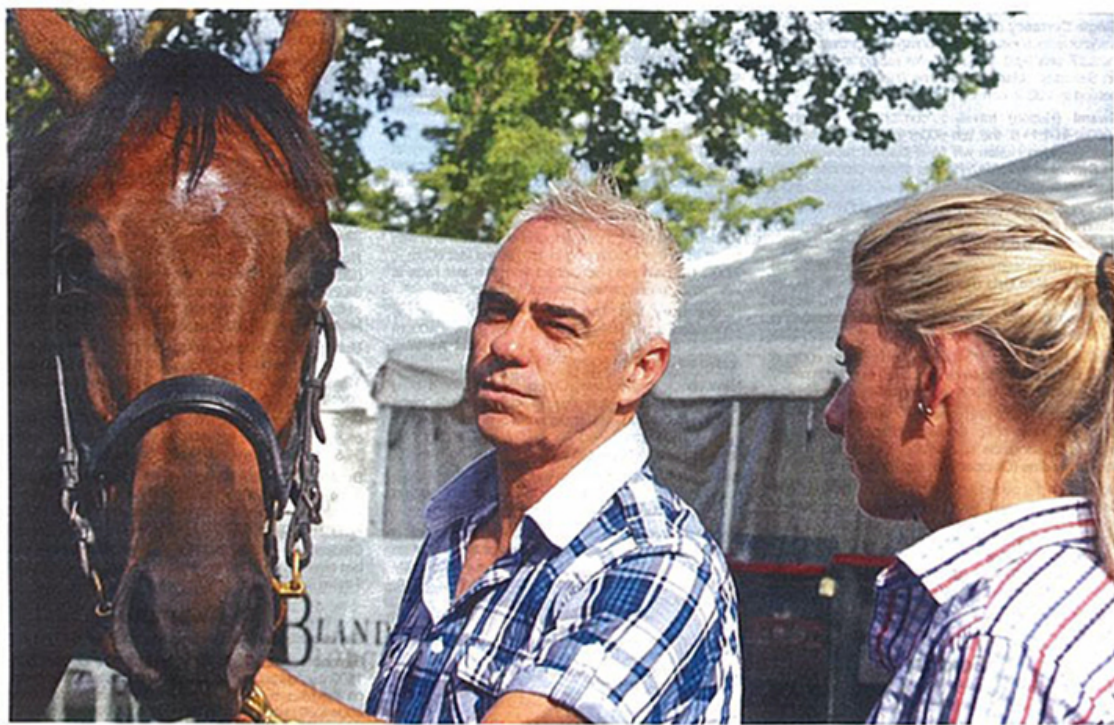


# Toorak victory the silver lining for smart Willetts purchase

PAUL VETTISE



Paul Willetts does the rounds at Karaka looking for his next star purchase.

**The best laid plans of Solzhenitsyn's owners looked to be going exactly to script a few years ago after the son of St Petersburg had attracted serious buying interest from abroad.**

Purchased as a weanling by Auckland-based bloodstock agent Paul Willetts with a view to trading him on, the gelding kept up his side of the bargain by winning at his fourth race day appearance.

That resulted in an offer from Hong Kong, but the sale fell through after a less than satisfactory vet report. However, the silver lining from that dark cloud came at Caulfield last weekend when the unwanted Solzhenitsyn blew away his rivals in the Gr. 1 Toorak Handicap.

"It was a huge thrill to see him win," Willetts said. "I wasn't there, but I'll be heading over when he runs in the Emirates."

"He'll run in the Crystal Mile on Cox Plate day first. I'm not sure how he'll handle Moonee Valley, but he'll need the run before the Emirates and Flemington will suit him wonderfully well."

Willetts bought Solzhenitsyn, who is from the Victory Dance mare Tri Victory, out of Grand Vue Lodge's 2007 weanling sale draft to Karaka for \$10,000. "I probably paid too much for him, but that sale was pretty hot at that time," he said.

"A friend of mine (Melbourne bloodstock agent) Damon Gabbedy suggested we should race a horse with a group of friends and he was the one I picked out. He was a nice staying type of horse and I thought he looked more like a Victory Dance than a St Petersburg."

"The object really was to sell him on after a trial win or as a one-win horse to the Asian market and he ticked those boxes pretty quickly. We had a good offer, but he failed the vet to Hong Kong, so I think the vet needs to reassess his prognosis – the horse has gone on to win 10 more races in something like 18 starts."

Solzhenitsyn was initially prepared at Te Awamutu by Richard Otto and won

two trials before placing at his first two starts. "Richard was always very bullish about the horse and he certainly had the ability – we ran him in a Group race (Great Northern Guineas) at his third start," Willetts said.

The gelding returned in the autumn to break his maiden and from his next five starts he picked up a further two wins and two placings.

"He'd been in work two and a half years, won a race at Ellerslie on Boxing Day, which was about the best race meeting in New Zealand, and had only won \$29,000, so I said to the other guys this is ridiculous," Willetts said.

"We decided to send him to Australia, we knew he had the ability and hopefully he could win a few nice Saturday races for us."

Solzhenitsyn was sent to Willetts' long-time friend Robert Heathcote at Eagle Farm and a further eight wins have followed with more than \$700,000 now in the bank.

"I've known Rob for 15 years and met him through his brother Wayne, who had a lot of horses at one time and I bought a few for him," Willetts said. "I bought Rob his first horse and he's gone from not knowing a thing to one of the best trainers in Australia, he's an absolute workaholic."

"When he first came back from Europe he didn't even know how to put a head collar on a horse!"

Willetts also purchased the outstanding Buffering for Heathcote and the Mossman gelding completed a memorable day for the pair last weekend with his Gr. 2 Schillaci Stakes win at Caulfield. He is now a multiple Group winner and has been placed at the highest level a remarkable 10 times.

They weren't the only duo to celebrate a stunning double with Trelawney Stud's Brent and Cherry Taylor also involved in Solzhenitsyn. Their home-bred Ocean Park had earlier in the day continued his Group One roll with victory

in the Caulfield Stakes.

A former Friday Flash form analyst, Willetts established his bloodstock business in the mid-1990s after gaining overseas experience at Whitsbury Manor Stud in Hampshire, England, and with Gestut Rottgen, a private German farm that stood Star Appeal, the sire of Star Way.

On his return to New Zealand, Willetts completed an eight-year stint with Wrightson Bloodstock and a period with a private bloodstock company before going solo. "I decided to take the plunge and go out on my own and have never regretted it," he said.

Aside from Solzhenitsyn and Buffering, his more recent success stories from the ring include the unbeaten Gr. 2 Silver Slipper winner Amelia's Dream, who was a \$250,000 purchase; Gr. 3 Merial Metric Mile winner Ourforeignminister (\$100,000); stakes winner and multiple Group One placegetter Atapi (\$20,000); New Zealand and multiple Hong Kong winner Big Quick/Best City (\$16,000); multiple Listed winner Our Lukas (\$20,000) and his dam Parfore (\$30,000); multiple winner and stakes performer Attackum (\$75,000); Alegrio (\$30,000), who is the stakes winner of 12 races and Gr. 3 Geelong Cup runner-up Dandaad (\$7,000).

However, without doubt one of his smartest pieces of business was snapping up Mandela for a meagre \$1,750 at the Festival Sale at Karaka in 2003. The durable Ebony Grove gelding won nine races and more than \$1 million.

As a three-year-old he won the Gr. 2 Avondale Guineas and the Gr. 3 Wellington Stakes before finishing second in the New Zealand Derby. He trained on to claim the Listed Evans Classic and placed in the Gr. 1 Captain Cook Stakes and Auckland Cup.

He was also a great traveller and in Australia won the Gr. 3 Geelong Cup and the Gr. 3 Chairmen's at Doomben and was the Listed winner of the Seymour and Werribee Cups. •