

Research the key to trans-Tasman success for Willets

■ DENNIS RYAN

Auckland bloodstock consultant Paul Willets could be excused for seeing double last Saturday afternoon.

With his race watching divided between New Zealand and Australia, in the space of an hour he took great delight from the wins by Ourforeignminister in the Merial/Ancare Metric Mile at Awapuni and by Buffering in the Mitty's McEwen Stakes at Moonee Valley.

On top of a trans-Tasman Group Three double to horses selected in the sale-ring by Willets, Ourforeignminister's win was a reminder of a bloodstock agent's version of double jeopardy. Not once but twice the son of Dubai Destination has been knocked down to Willets, first as a weanling in Australia and then as a yearling at Karaka.

"I originally bought him as a pinhooker for my client John Thompson, then found myself buying him again when he went to Karaka," he explains. "He was a really attractive weanling and after we had sent him to Gordon Cunningham he just kept growing on me.

"Richard Otto had a group of clients wanting to buy a yearling colt at the National Sale and given what I knew and thought of this guy, I ended up buying him for them. It might sound a bit of an unusual way of doing business and I've had to put up with a bit of good-natured jibing from John, but he was the first person to ring me after the Merial Mile just as pleased as I was to see him winning at that level."

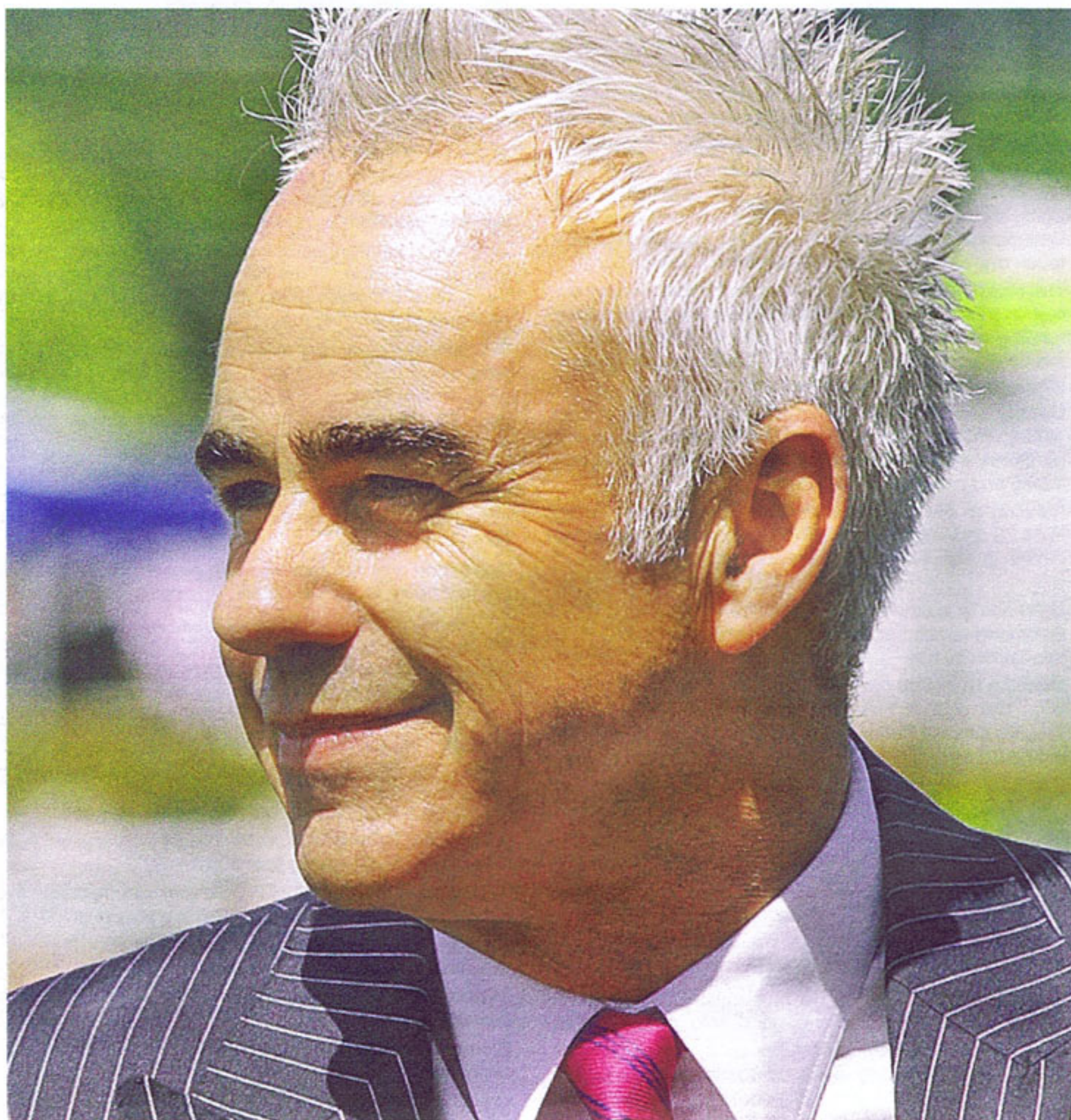
Saturday's fifth career win by Ourforeignminister, who cost A\$46,000 as a weanling, took his stake-earnings past his \$100,000 Karaka yearling price, with the promise of more to come given the sharp improvement he has made with significant wins at his last two starts. Three weeks before his \$70,000 Awapuni success he had taken the \$50,000 ITM Interprovincial at New Plymouth.

Aucklanders John and Margaret Thompson, who have a close association as well with the Otto stable, are Willets' major New Zealand clients, while he is also heavily involved across the Tasman.

"My relationship with John and Margaret goes back a long way - something like 12 years now - and it's become as much a friendship as anything," he says. "As time has gone on I'm working more and more with Australian clients and I'd say about 70 per cent of it is now with people over there who retain me."

Included in that group is the new star of Queensland training ranks, Robert Heathcote. The former European Contiki tour guide and largely self-taught horseman's most recent headlines came through the Moonee Valley weekend double by Buffering and Woorim.

"We first met when I was cutting my teeth as an independent agent and Robbie was also learning the ropes. Since then we've had a lot of success," says Willets. BTC Moet and Chandon Classic winner Chenar was an early Heathcote-trained performer sourced by the New Zealander, followed in more recent years by dual Ipswich Cup winner Our Lucas and last year's Doomben stakes winner Tabulate, who is owned



Auckland bloodstock consultant Paul Willets.

by the Thompsons.

Acting for former London-based Australian Richard Pegum, Willets bought a Redoute's Choice filly who, as Amelia's Dream, tragically broke down when winning the 2008 Silver Slipper Stakes. "That was one of those disappointments that really hit you, she bolted in and would have started a hot favourite in the Golden Slipper," says Willets, who makes the point that having become involved in the initial selection process, when a horse makes the grade it can become very much part of you.

"Buying at any level - and I always try and select what I believe is value - you always want to see your client succeed, so it can become quite a passion as you follow them through their careers."

As part of his dedication and desire to satisfy his clients' needs, Willets has built up a huge data-base, covering something like 175,000 horses that have changed hands in Australia and New Zealand over the past 15 years.

"I've seen probably 40% of them go through the ring and I'm continually updating my data-base," he says. "That entails an average of five hours a day and includes a system where if a horse wins a big race I refer back to my original notes and find that if I bagged it at sale time, I want to know why I got it wrong.

"I feel that I've got to learn from that and it's one good reason why I set up what is a fairly sophisticated system in the first place. It has taught me a lot and I think the horse I'm buying now is a big improvement on what I might have bought in the past."

Nelson-born Willets, whose attraction to the world of racing began with pedigree research, describes himself as a patriotic New Zealander, but that by

no means restricts his buying to horses bred in this country. "I love New Zealand horses - there's very good value to be had here and they do perform - but I also like buying in Australia.

"Each country has its strengths - Australia for the precocious horse that in the way of the world people now want, whereas New Zealand is still a very good source of the sound middle-distance type."

Having lived in Europe for three years and paid frequent visits back there, Willets appreciates what the northern hemisphere has to offer, especially given the shuttle stallion's place in Australasian breeding.

"These days we're streets ahead of where we used to be with the standard of stallions that breeders now have access to. On the other hand we produce horses that compete anywhere in the world and prove what a hardy horse we can breed in this part of the world.

"Choisir did something unheard of up there when he won two big races at Royal Ascot in the space of a week, others have followed suit and now we see So You Think doing a massive job for us.

"I think that New Zealand and Australia need to get together to capitalise on these sorts of horses. In the northern hemisphere our two countries are pretty much seen as one and the same, so we should be developing a joint approach in promoting what we've got."

From his own corner, 53-year-old Willets is focussed on developing what he sees as an edge in the highly competitive bloodstock trading arena. "There's nothing like success to keep your clients happy, but I'm as aware as anyone that you're only as good as your next winner." •