

# BREEDER PROFILE

## Shannon Nixon

**Shannon Nixon, the vice-president of Harness Breeders Vic, is one of the most successful and enterprising young breeders and owners in Victoria. In this interview with *Track Bred* editor Peter Wharton, Shannon shares his thoughts on breeding for the yearling sales arena and offers ways to increase ownership and attract new customers to our industry.**

### **How did you first get involved in the Harness Racing industry?**

Growing up in Birchip, I would attend the trots in the days when the local club conducted two or three restricted meetings each year. Many locals also trained a horse or two on a hobby basis and so I enjoyed following their fortunes around the tracks of northern Victoria. As I got older I would jump at any opportunity to get down to Moonee Valley after Saturday afternoon sport and I enjoyed having a punt on the trots, although I cannot lay claim to much success in that field.

My first venture into horse ownership came in the form of the Classic Garry broodmare, Troika. A group of friends and I each put in \$500 to purchase the non-winning, maiden matron in the hope that she would produce for us a champion after being put to the court of the well-credentialed stallion Exotic Earl. While Troika did produce the seven-time winner Sipowicz from that mating, the exercise triggered my interest in standardbred pedigrees to the point of an obsession. I was, as they say, bitten!

### **How many broodmares do you currently own? Which are the best of your current broodmare band?**

Meaghan and I presently own 10 broodmares. Without question, the best of those is Aluring (Armbr Operative-Play The Field). Her first three foals have all contested Group 1 races, the best of those being Our Femme Fatale, who was successful in the Group 1 Vicbred Final for 2YO Fillies. Aluring is a very kind mare to be around, is a great mum and never misses a beat in the breeding barn in terms of fertility. We are hoping the challenger to her title amongst our broodmare band will be the recently retired Bettor Give It, who is in foal after providing us with many racetrack thrills in the short time we have owned her.

### **Who is the best horse you have bred?**

Our Femme Fatale. She has raced at the top level for the whole of her two-year-old and three-year-old seasons and netted 14 wins in that time. We feel absolutely blessed to have a filly like her, as she has provided us with the wonderful experience of racing in the rich juvenile series and the joy of doing that with a group of friends and family as fellow owners.

### **What is your criteria in selecting a suitable stallion for your broodmares?**

I don't have a particular recipe, however, like most breeders, I look for stallions whose pedigree, physical attributes and racing style will complement that of the mare. I place a great deal of importance on successful crosses, particularly looking for the patterns amongst

top juvenile performers. This process will usually produce a shortlist of potential suiters and I then look for the most marketable outcome in terms of the pedigree and type of yearling I need to present at the sales some 2 ½ years later to attract the most interest.

### **You have been a regular vendor at the Australian Pacing Gold yearling sales over the years. What are the reasons behind your success at breeding and preparation for the sales arena?**

I have had some success in selling yearlings at the sales in recent years, although I did only sell two of my four offerings at this year's edition of the Melbourne APG sales! In presenting yearlings in a pretty unforgiving market I try to play the percentages to enhance our chances of a successful sale. The yearling must be sired by a commercial stallion, from a mare with a 'black type' pedigree, related to recent top class winners, be a well sized individual and preferably male!

In terms of preparation and presentation, I usually only prepare three or four yearlings, so I am able to cater to them on a very individual basis. Each is lunged and walked in hand everyday and so I know very intimately how they are developing, eating, growing, responding to exercise, etc and this has enabled me to ensure that come sale day, I have done everything for each horse to ensure that he or she will be presented to his potential.

### **You have been involved in syndication for several horses that you have bred and bought. Do you see syndication as the way forward in Harness Racing ownership?**

I see ownership and syndication as key factors in sustaining and growing Harness Racing. We are presently racing five horses with five different groups comprising friends and family members, with three yearlings booked in for next year's racing team. Many of those who comprise our syndicates are first-time owners and a great percentage of them are now very keen attendees and punters on the harness racing product. Syndication has provided them with relatively cheap access to horse ownership (with fillies we have bred we usually lease shares so there is no upfront cost), the enjoyment and pride of seeing their own horse compete and the social benefits and camaraderie provided by meeting like-minded people and cheering home their horse with their fellow owners.

Many of us have been in workplaces or sporting clubs where a colleague or teammate has a horse running. In my experience, word quickly travels and friends make their way down to the TAB to have a couple of dollars each way on that horse. Each time a person



**“ I see ownership and syndication as key factors in sustaining and growing Harness Racing ”**

Pictured: Shannon Nixon and his wife Meaghan with promising Art Major juvenile Atticus

is exposed to such an experience, the opportunity has been created for a future punter or owner to enter the industry. Syndicates mean that more workplaces, sporting clubs, TAB's and Pubs host these encounters and the conversations that lead to growth in the sport – while not guaranteed – will occur more regularly.

### Who has had the biggest influence in your career as a breeder and owner in Harness Racing?

I haven't had a particular mentor as such, however, I have paid very close attention to the practices and direction taken by many successful breeders. Some of the breeders who have influenced me in that sense have been Mick Lombardo, Rob and Julie Van Dyke and more recently, I am amazed by the regularity with which Bill and Anne Anderson of Lauriston Bloodstock are producing top class juveniles. In terms of an ownership mentor, I probably need one of those, as I can be a bit of a sulk when our horses don't go well. I do however feel that I have the celebration component down pat when we are lucky enough to win!

### What changes would you like to see occur in harness racing overall in the next few years?

I think that the last decade has been a very challenging time for Harness Racing and indeed many sports and entertainment providers that share our space have had to adapt and change their offerings to remain relevant and appealing to the discretionary dollar. I do not envy the job of our industry administrators, as they must walk a fine line between redefining and adapting a product to meet the needs of a more discerning punting clientele and maintaining the confidence of change-averse participants – of which I am one.

Having said that, I believe that the raft of investment in infrastructure and enhanced integrity measures in the past 5-10 years – particularly in Victoria and NSW – has prepared the foundations for some energetic attempts to grow our industry and I would like to see the following three areas allocated greater resources herein:

- Marketing – Aggressive, well resourced and research-based marketing which attempts to reach new customers and take ground off our competing codes
- Ownership Retention and Attraction – An enhanced trackside experience for owners will ensure that those who already invest in the sport will continue to do so and advocate to others to do the same. Syndicate ownership, durability of the standardbred, accessibility of participants, relative affordability, beauty and temperament of the animal, etc. These are competitive advantages of Standardbred ownership and should be exploited at every opportunity to entice new owners from outside the industry
- Enhanced levels of engagement and co-operation between administrators and participants - I would like to see future strategic direction in our state of Victoria, determined through broad and thorough consultation with participants. The success of our industry and its strategic goals is dependent on the combined efforts and support of all participants. Without consensus, any change is very difficult to achieve, regardless of the commitment and genuine intentions of decision makers.

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P: 03 5829 9566

E: [conference@gveguine.com.au](mailto:conference@gveguine.com.au)

F: 03 5829 9307