

How to pick a yearling

Finding a successful formula when it comes to securing a top yearling remains an eternal battle. The yearling sale is thoroughbred racing's draft camp. Where trainers do battle – on all financial levels – for the best young talent to bolster their stables. **DANNY POWER** speaks to three Victorian experts to find out what they look for when they go to a sale.

A few years ago, at the William Inglis Easter Yearling Sale, Lee Freedman was leaning on a railing, under the shade of the famous Moreton Bay fig tree, watching an impressive chestnut colt parading before making its entry into the sale ring.

Freedman pointed out to a client in tow that the yearling before him was the horse the client should buy. The client, who had money to burn, studied the strapping colt striding athletically around the parade ring before offering Freedman his opinion. "I don't like chestnuts," he said.

Freedman, not one to mince words, and tired from days of yearling inspection and long, entertaining nights, retaliated abruptly. "Listen, if you want to spend \$200,000 and worry about colour, then spend it on a new Ferrari – you can choose whatever colour you like – but don't come here and worry about colour," he said.

The client was startled by Freedman's firm comment, but stood steadfast in his desire not to own a chestnut. "I've had no luck with chestnuts," he said. The fact that Phar Lap, Secretariat, Ajax, Peter Pan, Vain, Wenona Girl, Let's Elope and more recently the Freedman-trained Super Impose were chestnuts was lost in his stubbornness, so Freedman moved on. A bay, brown or grey could be found easily.

Much has changed on the yearling sale scene in the past 30 years. Once there was little pre-sale inspection of the yearlings. Horses were bought on pedigree, while conformation and type played second string. In those days, finding the sales topper was as simple as a flick through the pages of the catalogue.

The change came about in the early 1990s, when conformation became the criteria. In the US, it is claimed that Hall of Fame trainer D. Wayne Lucas changed the face of yearling sales when he started buying off looks and not the page. Lucas bought the best-conformed, most athletic horses irrespective of pedigree and price.

When Lucas began dominating the major black type races in North America, his fellow trainers and buying agents took notice. The pendulum had swung. Pedigree became an addendum to buying type and the sales pitch changed.

Yearlings needed to be prepared and paraded to enhance their physique and athleticism. For a time, the most athletic, smooth, long walkers were easy to pick, as they did it naturally. Now, with the aid of extra staff and walking machines, it is almost impossible to find a yearling who can't "walk".

In those early days of conformation buying, there was a chance of finding a cheap yearling from a small draft in a back barn, with a pedigree as thin as toast but with the conformation of an equine Anthony Koutoufides. Not now, as agents and pre-sale spotters comb the sales grounds like sniffer dogs. The so-called bargains have become hot property, the talk of the grounds. The bargains are left to Boxing Day at Myer.

The William Inglis Melbourne Premier Yearling Sale, at Oaklands Junction, is held between March 2-6. *The Thoroughbred* talks to three of the important yearling buyers on their philosophies, likes and dislikes when it comes to selecting the next champion.

A high-profile trainer with the budget to shop at the top end of the sale; a bloodstock agent buying for others; and a trainer who gambles at the sales with his own cash. >



The perfect specimen

Lee Freedman Hall of Fame Trainer

Freedman has been buying at yearling sales since the mid-1980s. As a young aspiring trainer, the sales were the market garden to his fledgling grocery store – the place where he tested his skill and knowledge of conformation and pedigree.

For a time an inspection of Freedman's stables each year would show most of his horses were a distinct type, square pegs in square holes. Freedman had a liking for black pointed bays, neat, athletic, medium-sized horses – peas in a pod.

"I have modified that over the years. You realise more and more how many good horses look different from that. If that was the criteria, then every attractive horse would be a great racehorse and we'd all be bidding on them, paying ridiculous money," he said.

Freedman does not favour any colour. He has won five Melbourne Cups with horses of four different shades of coat. Tawrrific (1989) was a bay; Subzero (1992) a grey; Doriemus (1995) a chestnut; and Makybe Diva (2004, 2005) a rich brown.

Yearlings bought by Freedman and his brothers, Anthony, Michael and Richard, include Super Impose (cost \$40,000), Danzero (\$60,000), Naturalism (\$35,000), Alinghi (\$80,000), Mummify (\$65,000) and Subzero (\$100,000).

Danzero (B c 1991, Danehill – Confidentially, by Kaoru Star) was bought from the first crop of Danehill. Freedman paid \$60,000 for the dark bay colt with a big, dopey head at the 1993 "Sale of The Sanctuary" on the Gold Coast. Freedman liked him for various reasons, but one was the fact his father, Tony, trained the grand-dam Idesa (by Idomeno) and bred Danzero's mother that encouraged him to buy the colt. "It's a help to be around a while to build a portfolio of horses you have seen or been associated with. It's an



KEEN EYE:
Hall of Fame
trainer Lee
Freedman will
forgive faults if
the yearling is an
eye-catching
athlete.

PHOTO BY MARTIN KING SPORTSPIX

important component in looking at yearlings," Freedman said.

Alinghi was another example of stored information. Freedman trained her dam Oceanfast, a luckless racehorse that he held in high regard. It was natural for him to buy her first foal by Encosta De Lago (whom he also trained) for \$80,000.

It was a yearling sale that changed Freedman's life.

In 1986, at the Trentham Sales in Wellington, New Zealand, Freedman bought Super Impose (Ch c 1984, Imposing – Pheroz Fantasy, by Taipan) for \$40,000. The leggy youngster had his faults, but Freedman liked his athleticism. Tawrrific (B c 1984, Tawfiq – Joyarty, by Noble Bijou) came out of the same sale, bought by clients. Three years later in 1989, Freedman trained Tawrrific and Super Impose to quinella the Group 1 Melbourne Cup (3200m).

Philosophy

"I look for an athlete, price aside, but what that is can be different to different people. If I like the horse, I am willing to forgive the faults. Those faults only help me determine the price. Super Impose was a prime example. He was athletic, a great walker, but he had bad legs. (Super Impose broke down before he raced, but won the Group 1 Cox Plate (2040m) as an eight-year-old).

"To be perfectly honest, despite what all the so-called industry experts tell you, there is a lot of luck involved. Some people are just kidding themselves it is all their expertise and they can go to the sales and get it right every time. That said, there are more bad judges than good judges, but good judges have their bad days as well.

"My philosophy also is determined by whom I am buying for. Buying for Slades (leading syndicators Slades Bloodstock)

we are looking for athletic horses, especially fillies – our record stands up there as we have bought a lot of Stakes-class fillies – and buying within a strict budget, whereas for up-market filly buyers like Keith Biggs, we are adding in a sexier pedigree."

Freedman says pedigree remains important, and he studies the nicks and trends that are working, but not always successfully. He remembers a disastrous foray into New Zealand in the late 1990s when he did a study of the best horses by Zabeel and came up with the theory that the female line needed to have the influence of the sires Round Table and My Babu (Might And Power and Bezeal Bay had the nick). Armed with all the right horses marked in the Karaka catalogue, Freedman bought up all the Zabeels with the "right" mix. None of the purchases resulted in a good winner.

Likes

"I want the horse to catch my eye. That first impression is important.

"I like an intelligent, attractive head, particularly with fillies. A lot of good horses have been bought off good heads, whereas they didn't have the best legs in the world. But there always are exceptions to the rule. Danzero didn't have a good head as a yearling, although he grew into himself to become a powerful striking horse. But his mother was by Kaoru Star and that stallion threw a Roman nose into his stock."

Dislikes

"I am willing to forgive most faults, but a horse who has a combination of faults – 'back in the knee' but also offset or upright – needs to be a very appealing animal before I buy it.

"I put the pen straight through small, dumpy horses and also horses with bad temperaments. There are some breeds that have ordinary temperaments, so you know what to expect."

Advice

"Do a lot of praying!"

Damon Gabbedy Bloodstock Agent (Belmont Bloodstock)

Damon Gabbedy developed his love of racing from his father, John, a Perth-based wool buyer. “Every spare dollar Dad earned went into racing horses,” Gabbedy said. A highlight for the Gabbedys occurred in 1992 when their top-class sprinter Storaia finished second to stablemate Schillaci in the Group 1 Newmarket Handicap (1200m) at Flemington.

“Mum always said that if I put the same time into my school work that I did into my racing study, I would have been a genius,” Gabbedy said.

His first job was with Goodwood Bloodstock, learning the finer points of thoroughbred conformation from John Chalmers and Simon Vivian.

Gabbedy is now based in Melbourne, where he is the principal of Belmont Bloodstock.

As a bloodstock agent, Gabbedy has a different approach to the sales from that taken by the trainers. He needs to establish his clientele and understand their wishes. Gabbedy buys for several breeders, so his expertise has been refined towards that end of the market.

However, he can claim to have signed the sales ticket for one of the most influential colts sold in Australia, the imposing Encosta De Lago (B c 1990, Fairy King – Shoal Creek, by Star Way), bought by Gabbedy for his long-time client Joe Throsby at the 1990 Sydney Easter Yearling Sales for \$140,000.

“Joe owned part of Encosta De Lago’s dam (Shoal Creek) and sold her in foal to Fairy King for \$40,000. He thought so much of the yearling from the result of that mating, he paid \$140,000 for him,” he said.

Gabbedy’s other important purchases include Mick Price’s top-class filly Bel Mer, Lee Freedman’s wonderful grey Zagaletta, the 2005 Group 1 Victoria Derby winner Benicio, Honor Lap, who won the 2002 Group 2 WA Oaks-Group 1 WA Derby double, and the 2004 Group 2 WA Oaks winner Fatal Attraction.

Philosophy

“Sometimes as an agent, buying for clients, I tend to be super critical of horses. It’s different with trainers who are buying for themselves to train. I have listened a lot to Lee Freedman when looking at yearlings to be more forgiving of faults. You only have to watch the winners walk in on Derby Day to see all the faults. Horses like Northerly and Might And Power.

“I like to get a first impression as soon as the horse walks out. If it is an eye-catching, athletic horse and I like it, then I am happy not to worry too much about faults.”

Gabbedy said it was important to know the history of the pedigree. There are yearlings you can virtually describe without seeing them.

“Take Freedman’s recent winner Viennese (B f 2005, Redoute’s

Choice – Snippets’ Lass, by Snippets) who sold for \$1.4 million. She is a small filly and if you didn’t know that her brother Snitzel (Group 1 Oakleigh Plate winner and now Arrowfield-based sire) also was small and compact, then you wouldn’t be paying that sort of money for her.”

Likes

“Personally, I love a horse with a strong rear end – the push-off power – and a horse that really uses that rear end in the walk. I call it swinging the hips like Marilyn Monroe – it’s referred to as the walk of a hooker.

“A yearling must have a good temperament.

“I don’t look at yearlings at the farms as much as I used to. There is no substitute for seeing them at the sales complex. Yearlings

can improve, or go backwards, in that short time. At the sales, it is important that they are handling the pressure. Some vendors excuse horses when they don’t perform in viewing them (‘he’s tired’) but I still want to see horses showing that ability to handle it. It is the temperament and toughness you are after in a racehorse.”

Dislikes

“Personally, the main fault I steer clear of is a yearling that is ‘back in the knee’ (if you run a straight line from the side through the shoulder and the forearm, that line should run through the centre of the knee and the fetlock joint. ‘Back in the knee’ is when the centre of the knee is behind that imaginary line. It can result in knee chips and long, sloped awkward pasterns).

“‘Back in the knee’ was once a big no-no, then along came Danehill and all that changed. Danehill himself was back in the knee and he threw the fault into many of his offspring, but they had the ability and strength of bone to overcome it.

“I also don’t like a horse that is really upright in front, like they are standing in high heels (the perfect angle of the pastern should be 45 per cent). This fault sometimes can correct itself in time, especially if the horse has the correct shoulder angulation (it is generally accepted that the angle of the shoulder and the pastern will always be the same).

“Also I don’t like a high head carriage, but, of course, there are horses who go against the rules. Northerly always carried his head high.”

Advice

Gabbedy said it was difficult to sustain your “eye” for a yearling at the end of a long, tough day at the sales. He recommended revisiting those yearlings.

“I use a colour-coded system. The first look is in blue, then black and so on. Sometimes you get a different picture of a horse at the second look, especially when you are fresher,” he said. ➤



THE AGENT: Belmont Bloodstock’s Damon Gabbedy buys yearlings for some of Australia’s leading breeders.

PHOTO BY MARTIN KING SPORTSPIX

Robbie Griffiths Former Jockey, Trainer

Trainer Robbie Griffiths, a former jockey, comes from a racing family. His father, John, is a trainer, while his brother, Rodney, was one of Melbourne's top riders in the 1990s until weight forced him out of the saddle.

Griffiths, who retired from riding in 1990, is like most of the "second-tier" trainers in Australia. If he waited for orders from prospective owners to buy yearlings, his stables would be empty.

For Griffiths and his ilk, the yearling sales are a gamble. A time when bank managers are on speed dial, and the accounts department from the sales companies have more conversations with him than he does with his wife.

Griffiths buys "on spec". In other words he puts his own down on the table. Borrowed money that he plans to repay when the horses are syndicated to clients. It's a worrying time. Griffiths switches from horse trainer to used car salesman.

For that reason, Griffiths needs to be frugal and diligent at the sales. He scours for good buying, and he buys horses that suit the Melbourne market. VOBIS qualification is a pre-requisite. He buys on type – the best quality individual he can lay his hands on within his budget.

An example of his process is the Toboug–Alzarino (by Wallenda) filly from the 2007 Melbourne Autumn Sale. The filly was by a sire few people knew anything about out of a four-time provincial winning mare Alzarino. The filly was late in the sale; the auditorium was almost empty, except for those patient buyers who were lurking to snaffle this extremely athletic filly. For Griffiths, she was the star of the sale. In his words: "She was a great type, a well-grown and proportioned filly with a strong shoulder, flat knees, an intelligent head, a great length of rein and strong hindquarters."

The filly sold for a hefty \$72,500. "I thought I had found one that nobody else had spotted, but I



SPECULATE Trainer Robbie Griffiths "gambles" on buying yearlings with his own money.

PHOTO BY LACHLAN CUNNINGHAM (GSP IMAGES)

was wrong. I nearly pulled out at \$50,000, but I decided I wanted her and kept bidding."

(A year earlier, Alzarino's Jeune King Prawn colt brought only \$15,000 at Sydney's Classic Sale.)

Griffiths' eye was spot on. Named Tzarina, the Toboug filly brilliantly won her debut at Bendigo (1000m) on November 14, and then charged home for a luckless second to Marveen in the Listed Merson Cooper Stakes (1200m) at Sandown on November 24.

Griffiths started his buying career with a bang. The first two yearlings he bought at Melbourne in 2002 were outstanding pre-Christmas juveniles – Ra Sun (Chc 2000, General Nediym – Red Sundae, by Sovereign Red) cost \$135,000, and Arena Star (Br f 2000, Spartacus – Centrullah, by Century) bought for only \$40,000.

Philosophy

"I look for an athlete first. While I am on selling, the difference between me and most others is that

there is a strong possibility I am selling to myself. In other words, if I can't sell the yearling, then I own it. I can't sell an idea, but I can sell a product, which is why I buy first and sell later.

"I don't have orders. If I miscue it affects my future. I buy 10 to 12 yearlings a year. I try to buy a variety of pedigrees, but with a preference to successful sires. Most successful sires have about eight per cent Stakes winners, which numerically adds up to about 20 a year.

"I try to buy the best-looking yearling out of a proven mare with athleticism, and there is a higher than normal chance I will land in that 20.

"I am forgiving of faults. Faults pull them up in the ring, but not on a racetrack."

Likes

"I like an intelligent head, well-balanced body, athleticism, good walker and good genetics, and there is a fair chance you will come up trumps.

"I like horses light on their feet, and they must walk well, with an overstep. The horse needs to have a big barrel. I don't care if the horse is only 15 hands tall, as long there is plenty of room for a big heart and lungs. I remember my time as a jockey that all the good horses I rode were like Harley Davidsons, you could hardly get your legs around them. Small horses like Mahogany and Brawny Spirit had that big barrel."

Dislikes

"I don't like big yearlings because I find that big yearlings have a habit of keeping on growing and get too big. Also I won't buy a narrow horse that lacks heart room. "My biggest dislike is a heavy walker, like a plodder. Generally they are heavy plodders at the gallop."

Advice

"Revisit the horses you like, sometimes four or five times. Put a value on the horse but don't be caught rigidly to that price, allow for extra if you really like the horse." **U**