

Damon Gabbedy

CHOOSING A YEARLING

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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. “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.

You know some families are on the small side so if the yearling presented in front of you is small you won't worry about it as it has thrown to the family.

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." I also like an attractive head, particularly with fillies, you like to see some quality in the head. Another thing I look for is a bit of length, the yearling doesn't have to be big but length is important.

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, slopey 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."

It is sometimes good to listen to a yearling walk and if they are light on their feet, I think that is a good sign. Often you will hear a heavy walker like a plodder, and that is usually how they will gallop.

Pedigree is important but not the ultimate decider. I think sometimes we are influenced a bit too much by pedigree and not enough by the yearling in front of you and whether or not it looks like an athlete.



I believe a lot of buyers like purchasing from running mares but personally I steer clear of yearlings out of unplaced mares as more often than not that indicates that they were slow or limited in ability. They don't all have to be stakeswinners, but lightly raced handy city winners often make the best broodmares.

The yearling sales are getting more competitive and breeders have to continue to try and improve their standards of presentation.

The professional buyers inspect a lot of yearlings in a day and there is nothing worse than long waits between the yearlings being presented in front of you and disorganisation such as

a yearling being brought out twice. If it is a busy time, buyers are happy to come back rather than stand around waiting for too long.

The sales are the grand final for many breeders and they should be ready for it. Yearlings should get to the sales complex in plenty of time to acclimatise to their surroundings, practice walking where they are going to be paraded and give buyers ample time for inspections.

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 so it is important to have a second look," he said.

Western Australia has a great reputation in breeding outstanding gallopers but breeders must keep reinvesting in new stock to upgrade their broodmare bands. Buyers like variety. ■