

'If you're looking for a filly or mare to breed from long-term, she's got to have the pedigree and conformation'

Martin Stevens talks to leading agent Charlie Gordon-Watson about his success at pinpointing future stars of the paddocks



CHARLIE GORDON-WATSON may be best known as a shrewd judge of yearlings – and Kingston Hill and Red Cadeaux have recently done sterling work in advertising his talent in that department – but he also does a fine line in pinpointing future star broodmares.

The agent, based near Watership Down Stud in Berkshire, bought the dams of this year's juvenile Group 1 winners Cursory Glance and Charming Thought for their breeder Craig Bennett, and has

his name feature among the purchase history of Sanwa, the dam of brilliant German Derby hero Sea The Moon. They are the latest additions to a long roll of honour headed by Watership Down Stud's exceptional producer Darara and the dams of Magical Romance, Yeats and Zoffany.

Gordon-Watson was entrusted with the task of sourcing potential blue hens for Bennett, a former finance director of Phones4U, when he wanted to lay down roots as a boutique breeder around eight years ago.

Among the well-bred fillies he bought as yearlings were Cursory Glance's dam Time Control, a daughter of Sadler's Wells from the brilliant Barnett family of Time Charter, for 1,200,000gns, and Charming Thought's dam Annabelle's Charm, a daughter of Indian Ridge out of a sister to Aristotle and Ballingarry, for 425,000gms.

The agent and his client also hit the headlines when they

paid a then-record price for a yearling filly of 2,500,000gns for Liffey Dancer, who never raced but whose two-year-old Street Cry filly Melbourne Shuffle was beaten just a head in a mile maiden at Kempton this month.

"From a crop of around six foals Craig has bred two Group 1 winners and Melbourne Shuffle. That's pretty remarkable," says Gordon-Watson, who adds he feels the young operation "has a feel of Meon Valley Stud in the early days".

"Craig's fantastic. You can't fault him for his patience, tolerance and durability. He's got a very good temperament, always glass-half-full, and although he had some setbacks in the early days he's held his nerve and deserves every bit of success.

"He put his money down and people may have thought he was a bit crazy but far from it; he knew what he wanted to do – buy the best pedigrees with the best conformation."

The Oasis Dream colt Charming Thought was sold to Godolphin for 625,000gns at Tattersalls Book 1 last year but Cursory Glance, a daughter of Distorted Humor, was retained by Bennett to race under his Merry Fox Stud banner.

Sanwa, meanwhile, is an unraced Monsun sister to German Classic winners Salve Regina, Samum and Schiaparelli who was bought by Gordon-Watson in foal to Dansili on behalf of Breeding Capital in 2008 and resold privately carrying Sea The Moon to that colt's breeders Gestüt Görlsdorf two years later.

"She was a tiny thing, barely 15 hands, but really well-made and neat" Gordon-Watson remembers. "But she was full of quality and related to all those good horses. Look at what Sea The Moon has done – it obviously comes through."

So what are the secrets to finding producers of the

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calibre of Darara or Sanwa at the breeding-stock sales, or another Annabelle's Charm or Time Control as a yearling?

"If you're looking for a filly or mare to breed from long-term, she's got to have the pedigree and conformation," says Gordon-Watson. "For [Watership Down Stud general manager] Simon Marsh and I, conformation has always been number one – it's conformation, conformation, conformation."

AND what in the physique is he looking for in particular? "I like good bone – and a short cannonbone – a good hind leg, good shoulder and obviously they have to have a good walk, whether they're a mare or yearling," he says. "Slap bang correct. Because they do reproduce it."

"Sometimes people get away with it; you see mares who are terribly crooked and then produce correct foals, but that is the exception rather than the rule."

"That said, you can have all the pedigree and conformation in the world, but if you don't make that filly or the mare's progeny by racing them correctly it won't happen. You have to look after the horses by sending them to the right trainers, boarding them as mares at the right places and so on."

As Sanwa's size – or lack of it – suggests, Gordon-Watson is also in favour of smaller mares. "I'm not very keen on these big, tall, rangy mares," he says. "There is less [of the smaller mare] to go wrong."

"Also, some of the great broodmare sires, such as Mill Reef and Shirley Heights and others from that line, are all relatively small but all quality."

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Three of Charlie Gordon-Watson's greatest hits at the breeding-stock sales

THE agent gives the lowdown on some of the best producers he has bought

Blue Symphony

Darshaan-Blue Duster (Danzig)

Bought for 250,000gns at Tattersalls, December 2004

She's very small but very well put together. She's by Darshaan out of Blue Duster from that speedy family of Blue Note and Zieten. Blue Duster won the Cheveley Park Stakes and I've always followed mares who have had anything to do with the Cheveley Park – if you study previous races, the winners or placed fillies have always made very good broodmares.

In the early days what got my whole career started was a filly called Pass The Peace, who I bought as a yearling in 1987. She won the Cheveley Park and was bought halfway through her three-year-old season by Sheikh Mohammed, who bred from her another winner of the race in Embassy.

I remember Robert Sangster was always very keen on the race and it was he who first pointed out they make very good broodmares – he had done well with the likes of Durtal and Sookera.

She was a particularly satisfying purchase as she was bought for

250,000gns, had five yearlings sell for at least 400,000gns and was sold on for 1,000,000gns two years ago. And what the records don't show is how much her daughter Fantasia was sold for privately – that was a lot of money.

Darara

Top Ville-Delys (Abdos)

Bought for 1r470,000gns at Goffs, November 1994

She was also tiny – when Simon Marsh and I first saw her at Goffs that day she looked like a Dartmoor



pony and she was quite old at 11. But she was from a brilliant Aga Khan family and was a sister to Darshaan. The underbidders were David Nagle and John Magnier, and the rest, as they say, is history – she produced Diaghilev, Dar Re Mi, Rewilding and so on for Watership Down Stud.

She died two years ago but Watership Down has Dar Re Mi (left) and her first foal, [two-year-old colt] De Treville, is a

winner and Group-placed this year. She has a lovely Dubawi yearling filly and a Frankel colt foal. She's in foal to Dubawi again.

Another of our early purchases for Watership Down was Crystal Spray [for 500,000gns at Tattersalls December in 1995], who hailed from a strong Jim Joel family and produced the stud's Fillies' Mile winner Crystal Music, whose Dubawi yearling colt sold for 1,600,000gns last month.



It's interesting that at the start we went for an Aga Khan family and a Jim Joel family.

Another successful mare for the stud was Sumoto, from a Hascombe family, another of the great breeders. At the time she was a lot of money [920,000gns in 2000] but she had already bred Compton Admiral and then Summoner came out and won the Queen Elizabeth II Stakes and Twyla

Tharp was just beaten in the Ribblesdale. She went on to breed The Fugue (left) for the Lloyd-Webbers.

Shouk

Shirley Heights-Souk (Ahonoora)

Bought for 80,000gns at Tattersalls, December 2001

Shouk was one of my cheaper successes. I had an open order from an American client to buy some mares at the December sales and they said, basically, we'll leave you to it: this is the budget, one might cost more, another might cost less, whatever.

I found Shouk, a winning daughter

of Shirley Heights from Fittocks Stud, which is another fantastic operation, and started bidding early because I thought she'd make too much.

I was bidding for her from where I don't normally stand at Tattersalls – down in the gates. I think I'd gone up to 70,000gns when I got a tap on the shoulder from someone asking who I was bidding for. I said I was hoping to buy her but that I was now out. They said, in that case, buy her for me, and it was Timmy Hyde.

He went on to breed from her Alexandrova and Magical Romance among others – it's now one of the great families.