



A breed apart



Charlie Gordon-Watson studies the Tattersalls yearling sale catalogue



Charlie Gordon-Watson is one of the world's leading bloodstock agents. He talks to Julian Muscat about meeting triumph and disaster and coming out on top

THERE is no stereotype for bloodstock agents. Some resemble pinstriped asset managers with their portfolio of thoroughbreds; others look like they have been dragged through a blackthorn hedge.

Charlie Gordon-Watson is comfortable in either guise. As adept at City-speak as he is in the company of an Irish horse rustler, he has surfed the rollers like few others in his colourful profession.

Through it all, however, one trait sets him apart. Just when you think he has sustained a professionally mortal blow, he returns with remarkable vigour.

Gordon-Watson, 52, has rebounded from his latest setback with customary brio. So much so

that in 2011 he spent more of other people's money at auctions around the world than any other agent for the second consecutive year.

His coup de grace came at Europe's most glamorous yearling sale. Late in proceedings at Book One of Tattersalls' October sale he bid 1.7million guineas for a Galileo filly for his latest client, the Kazakhstani Nurlan Bizakov. It was twice the sum realised by the second most expensive yearling at the sale.

Gordon-Watson could have been forgiven a sense of foreboding as bidding progressed relentlessly beyond the million-guinea mark. It is a landmark that draws audible gasps of astonishment, as it did when Gordon-Watson entered that rare domain in 2007. He would pay dearly for the repercussions over the next 18 months.

The story of how he was duped by Michael Baker has entered racing folklore (see sidebar). A penniless fantasist, Baker was subsequently jailed for conning numerous people into spending millions on his behalf.

At Baker's behest, Gordon-Watson spent 2.7m guineas on four choice lots at Tattersalls in 2007. And having paid the vendors, Tattersalls demanded settlement in full from the agent. Gordon-Watson's predicament looked bleak, yet those who envisaged him dwelling under cardboard outside the bankruptcy courts were wide of the mark. Not for the first time.

A cut-throat world

GORDON-WATSON opened for business in 1985, since when he has overcome the sort of adversity that goes hand in hand with the territory.

Bloodstock agents operate within an insular, cut-throat orbit, where everyone knows everybody else's business. Rumour is rife; even stories committed to print can have little basis in reality.

His early years were punctuated by faint rises and falls. He would make an impact, only to cool off for a couple of years. But his big



At the ringside with trainer Jamie Osborne

breakthrough came when he started buying for the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Maktoum Al Maktoum, in the 1990s.

The non-conformist who had come from nowhere had suddenly elbowed his way into contention and was picking up other clients. Pickings were lean immediately after the sheikh died in 2006, when Gordon-Watson worked hard to replace him, yet he soon came to the fore once more.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of his latest reincarnation is that Gordon-Watson was obliged to see things from his clients' perspective. The money he routinely signed over on their behalf was now his own and locked into bloodstock. Even then, however, he wasn't overtly daunted.

"It was character-building, to say the least, but I have to say that I actually bought some good stuff at that [2007] sale," he reflects.

Of the four mares, Silverskaya and Mora Bai were subsequently sold on to clients of Coolmore. The foal Silverskaya was carrying at the time turned out to be Seville, who went into last year's Derby at Epsom with high hopes.

Mora Bai, for her part, is dam of this year's Derby candidate, the Beresford Stakes winner David Livingstone.

Only Leto has proved disappointing. One of the two mares Gordon-Watson was obliged to keep — and in Leto's case it was a halfshare — she was sold on at a loss in 2009. But the other, Sweet Stream, is bringing sweet redemption.

The Monsun foal she was carrying when

Gordon-Watson paid 1.1m guineas for her was sold as a foal for 440,000gns in 2008. He is expecting another healthy dividend in May, when Sweet Stream's next progeny is offered at the breeze-up sales in France, and she is due to foal to Oasis Dream.

"In 12 months' time I could be in profit with Sweet Stream," Gordon-Watson reflects, "but I had to hold my nerve."

It's fair to say that, with greater vigilance, he might have avoided the predicament, but that is not his way.

"I am a risk-taker," he says. "I need motivation in my life and living a little on the edge motivates me. There have been some minuses but without them there would have been no pluses. I usually come out on the right side in the end." »



Charlie (right) in the Epsom winner's enclosure after Kris Kin, whom he bought as a yearling, won the Derby

“It's like being a footballer: everyone wants to be one”

Charlie Gordon-Watson on being a bloodstock agent



'Eventually the s*** hit the fan and I had to clear it up'

THOSE unfortunate enough to have crossed Michael Baker's path will never forget the Walter Mitty character who lived in suburban obscurity with his parents in Lenham, Kent.

Baker was jailed for three years in 2008 — later reduced to two on appeal — for orchestrating the purchase of a £45m yacht, a £14m London property and £5.2m worth of bloodstock, most of which Charlie Gordon-Watson signed for in his own name.

The agent was one in a long line of people duped by the part-time delivery driver of no financial means.

"What he got up to was unbelievable," Gordon-Watson recalls, "but he was certainly clever. He spoke to many others in the business, all of whom found him totally plausible. But eventually the s*** hit the fan and I had to clear it up."

The saving grace was that Gordon-Watson had not bought any horses at Keeneland, as Baker had originally instructed.

"They show you no mercy at all at Keeneland, whereas Tattersalls helped me to work through the position," he reflects. "OK, I made a big mistake in not checking him out, but I wasn't alone. The guy had already conned others, one of which was Sir Henry Cecil."

The only way out was for Gordon-Watson to front up the cash and trust to his judgement. Even after two of the four mares were sold privately, he was obliged to raise £1.7m — "I had access to it, found it somehow, juggled things around" — and hope to recoup his outlay from the other two.

If the financial implications were immense, the personal stress was traumatic.

"I developed a huge fear of answering the phone," he says. "Every time it rang it was bad news. It took me a good year and a half before I could put it behind me."

"In the past 15 years, I have been Tattersalls' best client after Sheikh Mohammed, but it was bound to put a strain on our relationship. I have done my best to rectify it. I've had quite a few financial knocks before, but nothing that reached the public domain."

"It is all over the internet that I was sued for £2.7m by Tattersalls, which I wasn't. That was never going to happen."

He does not accept that alarm bells should have sounded when Baker kept postponing appointments to see his new purchases.

"You are never surprised by anything when you deal with rich people," he maintains. "They are a law unto themselves — but then, so are trainers. Many of the people in this business are a breed apart."



Field mastering the Cottesmore in 2006



Playing in the high-goal Warwickshire Cup for his Felix team



Despite being a lifelong Chelsea fan, Charlie shares a joke on the gallops with Manchester United manager Sir Alex Ferguson (left) and trainer Ed Dunlop (centre)

A racing and eventing family

GORDON-WATSON was to horses born. His older sister Mary needs little introduction as an eventing Olympic gold medallist and world and European champion in a golden four-year spell from 1969. But there are stronger thoroughbred bonds.

From his mother's side, Gordon-Watson is first cousin to the late trainer David Morley and to another bloodstock agent in James Wigan. Their grandfather Charles Gordon bred racehorses and was responsible for establishing the Pelting dynasty that has served the Wigans' West Bladgon Stud, in Dorset, so well.

"We're a racing family, even though we all have different surnames," he says. "By coincidence, my mother's maiden name was

Gordon and she married a Gordon-Watson."

While at school he spent holidays working at Ryan Price's stables, after which he rode winners under Rules and in point-to-points.

"I'm a firm believer that to be a bloodstock agent you must have an affinity with horses," he says. "It amazes me that so many don't."

Although he spent eight seasons as master of the Cottesmore, Gordon-Watson eschews hunting for polo these days.

"Having been at the sharp end, organising it and being totally involved, I don't get the same buzz from hunting now," he says.

"Polo is very expensive, which makes me work hard to afford it, and it keeps me very fit. I can also ride in summer and it takes me to Argentina, which I love."

'You must be thick-skinned'

FOR all the adrenalin rushes and privilege that goes with being well remunerated for doing something he loves, Gordon-Watson would not like to be starting out as an aspiring agent in today's environment.

"I fear for young people, because the market is so tight that it's hard to succeed," he says.

"Having said that, I get more than 100 applications a year from people who want to come and work with me. It makes me realise how lucky I am. It's a bit like being a footballer: everyone wants to be one. It's a dream job."

What, then, are the qualities that have served his career so well?

"There are a lot of things at play," he ventures.

"You must be very thick-skinned, very resilient, have good people skills, be sociable, energetic and hard-working. You're dealing with big money, people with big egos, so you need to be diplomatic."

"You can be a victim of your own success when clients start to ask why you bought a particular horse for someone else and not them. But above all, you need to be lucky."

And the first question he asks of a prospective client?

"That's easy," he says. "I always ask if they can afford to burn cheques." **H&H**