



op/ed

by rob whiteley

OLDER CAN BE BETTER...

Riddle: What do Sea the Stars and my sister, Sherry, have in common?

On the surface, not much, although both have demonstrated precocity and great talent, and both are achievers at the highest level.

Sea the Stars is the top-rated horse in the world with four Group 1 wins this year. He is the first horse since Nashwan in 1989 to accomplish the 2000 Guineas--Epsom Derby--Eclipse S. triple. And his recent win in the Juddmonte International adds to his candidacy as one of the great racehorses of the modern era.

Sherry Whiteley is senior vice president of human resources for Intuit Corporation, which brings us financial software such as QuickBooks and TurboTax. Intuit receives high marks each year as one of the best companies in the nation to work for, and Sherry's ministrations to approximately 8000 employees has a lot to do with the high quality corporate culture and overall employee satisfaction and well-being.

So, here's the answer to the riddle. *Both are out of older mares.* Sea the Stars' dam, Urban Sea, was 17 when she delivered the top horse in the world. My mother was 48 when she delivered Sherry, the star of our family. Worlds apart, they each provide hard evidence that *older can be better.*

Nonetheless, the puzzling stigma against offspring of older mares persists on the Thoroughbred sales scene without any rational basis. Some buyers quickly dismiss an individual simply because it is "out of an older mare." Some buyers won't even look at foals or yearlings out of older mares. *This attitude or belief is simply wrong.*

It is a result of misinformation, perpetuated by the offhand mouthing of a baseless perception, from one poorly informed person to the next.

Let's examine the facts, starting with my personal experience. In the mid '90s, I purchased Blush With Pride and Rokeby Rose as older mares for Foxfield with the intention of breeding them to Deputy Minister and Silver Deputy, respectively. Those matings produced Better Than Honour when Blush With Pride was 17, and Silverbulletday when Rokeby Rose was 19. Better Than Honour became a graded stakes winner, produced consecutive Belmont winners (Jazil and Rags To Riches), and sold recently for a world-record \$14 million. Two-time champion Silverbulletday won 13 graded stakes, bankrolled over \$3 million in earnings, and was inducted into racing's Hall of Fame this year.

Although these fabulous horses are the *creme de la creme* of my adventures with aging broodmares, they are exceptional only in their superiority. Many other stakes winners have been produced by other older ladies I have been blessed to own over the years.

My experience is not unique. High-level success from older mares is commonplace. Grade I winners produced by other breeders from older mares reads like a Who's Who of the American turf. Buyers who dismiss foals out of older mares would have walked past Secretariat, 15 Breeders' Cup champions (including Go for Wand, Capote, Ouija Board, Miss Alleged, Royal Academy, Artie Schiller, etc.), and a very long line of major stakes winners. (For a more detailed accounting, please read the CBA booklet *Buying Sales Yearlings: Plain and Simple* at www.consignorsandbreeders.com or www.liberationfarm.com).

Nor is consistent high-level success by foals out of older mares merely a North American occurrence. Andrew Caulfield recently authored an article titled, "Breeders dismiss elderly mares at their peril." (*Thoroughbred Owner and Breeder/Pacemaker*, August 2009). Andrew's feature could also be titled, "Buyers dismiss foals out of elderly mares at their peril." The subtitle reads: "*Oaks and other Group 1 races recently are evidence that mares who produce in their 20s are still capable of delivering top-class winners.*"

The subtitle turns out to be an understatement when we digest the stunning fact that six of the last 12 winners of Epsom Downs' historic Oaks have been fillies out of older mares. Ramruna's dam was 21. Eswarah, Ouija Board and Shoutoush all had mothers who were 19. Imagine's and Light Shift's dams were 17 and 16, respectively. In addition, Dar Re Mi automatically qualified for this year's Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf with a decisive victory for John Gosden in the recent Yorkshire Oaks. Dar Re Mi's dam, Darara, was 22 when Dar Re Mi was foaled.

Evidence is overwhelming that the stigma against foals out of older mares is without merit. My guess is that the mistaken belief is somehow a result of confusion caused by the fact that pregnancy and foaling rates are lower for older mares. (Broodmares as a group will be empty or otherwise unproductive approximately 30 percent of the time over their careers, and more "missing" years occur in later years). Therefore, because mares' reproductive reliability generally declines with age, some people may incorrectly assume that the viability of the resulting foals will be automatically diminished. This is simply not the case. Just as with humans, mares age at different rates according to a mix of genetic and environmental factors, and wide-ranging individual differences exist. Some mares will develop compromised reproductive environments relatively early, while others will remain normally functional and productive well into their 20s.

Evaluation of an older mare's status as a producer of quality stock is relatively simple. Older mares will tell you when they are no longer getting it done. True horsemen can see it when they look at the foal.

In short, if an older mare is “over the hill,” the resulting foal will show it. Therefore, *if the foal (or yearling) in front of you looks the part, remember that a horse's genetic make-up does not change over time, and rest assured that its potential has not been compromised.*

I am continually and recently reminded of this fact whenever I think of my mare Topsy Girl (now co-owned with Chris Elia of Oratis Thoroughbreds), who has produced six stakes horses, including two who have won or placed in the last two weeks. Greeley's Conquest won the Remington Park Sprint Cup Aug. 22, and two-year-old filly Never Quicker placed in Monmouth Park's Junior Champion S. in her very first start Aug. 29. Topsy Girl, now 23, was a stakes performer until the age of six, has amazingly given me 16 foals, including a sharp '09 Stormy Atlantic filly, and is back in-foal to sprint champion Midnight Lute. Her athletic yearling colt by Grand Slam will be at Keeneland in September as further proof for all to see that Topsy Girl is still getting it done, despite being in her 20s.

In spite of the overwhelming evidence, however, some people will still argue “studies show that younger mares produce a higher percentage of stakes winners than older mares.” This is true in general; however, please look more closely at what it actually means. David Dink performed the most comprehensive multi-year study of stakes winners from foals by age of mares and found that younger mares do in fact produce a slightly higher percentage of stakes winners. Dink's large group of subject mares produced 137,184 foals and 4,804 stakes winners, or 3.5 percent. Mares aged four through 10 produced 3.87 percent stakes winners. Mares aged 11-15 produced 3.32 percent stakes winners (although it is interesting to note that the 15 year olds, at 3.66 percent, came in higher than the average for all mares and higher than those aged 11 to 14). Mares 16-20 produced 2.33 percent stakes winners. The overall trend is obvious, but the conclusion is not.

In order to accurately interpret Dink's data, three important observations must be made: (1) The small percentage differences between age groups may be statistically significant in a technical sense, but *the differences are so negligible (less than a percentage point) that they are not useful for decision making*; (2) group statistics have nothing useful to say about evaluating a specific yearling; *group data cannot describe the quality, athleticism, heart, or potential of any individual horse*; and (3) the trivial group performance *differences between younger and older mares can be easily explained by differences in opportunity*. For example, if a thorough study were performed relating average stud fee and age of mare, it would clearly show that younger mares are generally bred to higher-class stallions (as measured by stud fee), and therefore would be expected to have better results simply based on an “opportunity” advantage related to which stallions they were bred to.

False beliefs die slowly in our business. Yet, in the current marketplace, savvy horsemen have an edge because they realize that *a well made, athletic looking yearling out of an older mare has virtually the same success as one out of a younger mare*. The challenge for us, therefore, is to discard the baseless hearsay and bogus baggage that floats around the sales year after year and, instead, develop the confidence to look clearly at the individual before us and see it for what it is. Sherlock Holmes said, “I have trained myself to notice what I see.” We need to do the same.

Rob Whiteley owns the commercial breeding operation known as Liberation Farm. He may be contacted through his website: www.liberationfarm.com.