



👉 *On the record with*

DR. MICHAEL WILSON

Warrawee is an Australian aboriginal word meaning, “come and visit” or “come and stay a while.” It suggests lingering to enjoy the scenery, giving yourself a chance to learn and grow, and being willing to accept help from your friends. It really couldn’t be a better name for a farm founded by a husband-and-wife team who hail from Great Britain and Australia, respectively, put down roots in Ontario and decided to get breed standardbreds as a retirement project. Interviewed by Karen Briggs // Photographed by Matt Waples

Some two decades after they founded

Warrawee Farm in Rockwood, Ontario, Dr. Mike Wilson, the former chair of the Department of Clinical Studies at the Ontario Veterinary College, and his wife Dr. Julie Yager, a veterinary pathologist specializing in skin diseases, are enjoying the fruits of their labours, with their first nomination for an O’Brien Award as Breeder of the Year.

Nowhere was the success of the Warrawee breeding program more evident than at the Ontario Sires Stakes Super Finals at Woodbine this past November. 55 Warrawee-bred horses made starts in the OSS program

throughout the season, and three were starters on Super Finals night. Two-year-old pacing colt, Warrawee Needy, capped off a stellar season by dominating in his division, and three-year-old trotter, Mister Herbie, made short work of his rivals as well, including the well-regarded Daylon Magician. The third, Mystician, got caught at the wire in the dash for three-year-old pacing colts, finishing third, but with \$700,000 in sophomore earnings (and a 3-9-3 record in 20 starts) could hardly be called a disappointment.

Their combined winnings pushed the farm’s 2011 earnings over the \$1 million mark,

surpassing the venerable Winbak Farm, Bob McIntosh Stables, Hanover Shoe, and Seelster Farms. There’s no such thing as an overnight success, and Warrawee would seem to be the proof. From humble beginnings with two broodmares and next to no background in horses, Wilson and Yager have taken great pains to learn from the best, make calculated purchases, and build their business block by block and bale by bale.

In anticipation of the O’Briens, I spoke to Dr. Wilson about his background, his breeding strategies, and his thoughts on the industry writ large.

WHAT BROUGHT YOU FROM THE BUSINESS OF PIGS, TO BREEDING STANDARDBREDS?

I taught at the University of Bristol, but came to Canada for a year in 1966. I really enjoyed it, so when there was an opportunity to return and teach at the Ontario Veterinary College in 1968, I returned and have been here ever since.

I taught in the department of Clinical Studies, and later in Population Medicine, and I was Chair of the Clinical Studies Department for four years.

Along the way, I developed a vaccine to address E. coli diarrhea in piglets – a disease which was killing 5% of the commercial population in North America. I couldn't find a pharmaceutical company willing to manufacture the vaccine, so a colleague and I founded our own company, Langford Laboratories. At the time, (the vaccine) had a big effect. It was the first commercial vaccine

and it really made a dent in piglet mortality.

When Cyanamid took over Langford Laboratories, I founded a similar company in Australia, called Ausvac, which was eventually purchased by pharmaceutical giant, Intervet. I was still working at OVC, and I began to realize that the management of animals was more important in disease control than was medicine. Disease is often the result of health mismanagement.

I took that perspective and founded a pig production company with two partners. It was based in the US. But the operation grew far larger than I wanted, eventually managing 50,000 sows as well as a packing plant. When it got too large, I sold my shares. I've not seen more than two pigs in the last five years. But pigs taught me a great deal about how to manage horse health. There's much more science available on pigs because it's more practical and less expensive to do research with them.

Huy Llewellyn first got me into horses around 1983, when he persuaded me to buy shares in a trotter. When I retired from OVC in 1995, I acquired two broodmares, thinking that it would make a nice retirement project. Over the years, it has become a broodmare band of 17 – 10 pacers and seven trotters.

TELL ME ABOUT THAT FIRST MARE.

Cloverleaf Kosmos, who foaled Warrawee Kirra (by Dream Of Glory), was the first mare I bought, but I wasn't listed as the breeder because I purchased her in foal. Kirra won an O'Brien Award as the three-year-old trotting filly of the year in 1991, and I remember thinking, "This is pretty easy!"

We picked up a second O'Brien trophy when Worthy Countessa (Worthy Bowl – Anken Countessa) was named three-year-old filly trotter of the year in 1995. But I realized that I still had a lot to learn. I knew next to nothing about horses, and I confess I didn't

really like horsepeople! I needed to understand horses better. One of my mentors was Ted Smith. I learned a lot from him, and from Carl Jamieson, even if I didn't always agree with either of them.

I've also learned a great deal from my farm managers, who have both been very knowledgeable – first Glen Monture, who hailed from the Armstrong operation, and currently Dwayne Avery, who worked at Glengate Farms.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO YOU WHEN YOU'RE SELECTING A BROODMARE?

The most successful mares I've had have all been Canadian-breds by Canadian sires: Independent Lassie (dam of Mister Herbie), Armbró Wisdom (a full sister to Armbró Romance, and the dam of Warrawee Kay, who raced in the Breeders Crown, Fan Hanover, and Juliette), and so on.

I have tended to frequent the Canadian sales, and I am almost exclusively interested in breeding to Ontario sires.

It's amusing that most of my recent success has been with pacers, because one of my early goals – and needless to say, one I haven't yet fulfilled – is to breed a Hambletonian winner. I had more trotters than pacers for a long while, and Ted Smith kept telling me I should be concentrating on pacers!

I find you can buy good mares for a reasonable price if you understand the principles of genetics and epigenetics. (Epigenetics is the study of how other factors – such as the environment and nutrition of a broodmare while she is in foal – can influence the expression of genes in her offspring.)

Primarily, I produce yearlings to sell. Buyers like big yearlings, so many people tend to avoid using small mares. But I don't mind buying a small mare if I know she has larger siblings.

I also have no fear of mares passing on crooked legs. Most don't. Armbró Wisdom, for example, has a knee that points outward quite dramatically, but she seems to pace quite well, and none of her babies have inherited that crookedness.

Flaws like that usually happen in utero.

They're more environmental than genetic, which means they aren't passed on. Most of my mares have flaws that would have stopped other people buying them as yearlings. Many were reject racehorses – Great Memories (dam of Warrawee Needy), for example. But they are usually sisters to good racehorses.

I have paid a lot for some mares, and I'm not afraid to do so if the mare merits it... but a number of my mares were relative bargains.

HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHEN IT'S TIME TO SELL A MARE?

I don't mind giving a mare a year off when necessary. I probably have more barren mares than most [breeders], but it doesn't bother me. Did you know that 40% of mares only have one foal? I think far too many people cull on the basis of a single foal. I try to give them a chance, and I have the luxury of patience.

That said, the toughest decision on a breeding farm is when to get rid of a mare. You really don't know if they're producing good babies for at least three to four years. My Gal Hall, the dam of Warrawee Koine, is one mare I regretted selling. But then everyone knows the best way to prove a mare is to sell her.

CARE TO SHARE YOUR STRATEGIES FOR MATCHING YOUR MARES WITH STALLIONS?

I have a strong preference for Ontario-based sires, and in particular to those in which I own shares – which is a good number of them. But it still has to be an appropriate match.

We don't have all that many proven sires in Ontario. On the trotting side, there's Kadabra and Angus Hall, and on the pacing side it's just Camluck and Mach Three, really. A lot of people say you should breed a proven sire to an unproven mare, and vice versa... but we do it the other way. Our proven mares go to proven sires, and our younger mares tend to go to younger stallions. Everyone wants those first-crop babies. So we mix it up.

This year we're breeding two mares to Big Jim, one to Muscle Mass, two to Sportswrit-

A DISAPPOINTING REACTION

"That was one of the most frustrating experiences I've ever had in the horse industry," says Dr. Mike Wilson. The source of the frustration? Auckland Reactor, the living legend from New Zealand who turned into an Epic Fail when he arrived to take on North American racing in 2010.

Wilson was one of six Canadians who purchased a share of Auckland Reactor, quite reasonably expecting the ride of his life. Instead, the Kiwi superstar did nothing but disappoint. "My wife Julie and I saw him race in New Zealand, and that was the first race he lost!" says Wilson. "So maybe we were a jinx... but you have to remember that a lot of races in New Zealand are still done from a standing start and that this horse was hopeless at that. The race we saw, he was turned the wrong way at the start, and he still managed to make up enough ground to just miss winning by the finish. He was impressive.

"I really don't know what the reason was for his failure to perform in the US. Management might have had something to do with it. The trainer said he behaved as if he didn't even want to step on track."

Wilson, along with Peter Heffering (who put together the syndicate) and some of the other shareholders, got out when Auckland Reactor returned to the southern hemisphere. "Fortunately, we've had Mystician and Warrawee Needy and Mister Herbie, and they've made up for him. And we have some beautiful babies in the field that we have high hopes for."





er, one to Credit Winner, one to Major In Art, two to Kadabra, and two to Mach Three... and we're also using Federal Flex, Shadow Play, and Windsong Espoir.

Mystic Mistress (dam of Mystician) has produced her best babies with Camluck, so she'll go back to him again this year. Her last two yearlings by Camluck went for \$180,000 (the sale-topping Occult Master) and \$105,000 (Dreamfair Eclipse). Although I would love to breed her next year to Warrawee Needy!

Great Memories is probably going to Bet-tors Delight this year, and the only mare who is being bred to a US-based stallion is a trotting mare who is out of a sister to the dam of Mister Herbie (Independent Lassie, who died last year). She's going to Muscle Hill.

WHAT'S YOUR IDEAL MARE?

My ideal mare is relatively inbred. I believe

in the concept of hybrid vigour: the ideal outcome where the offspring is better than both parents. But to do that, you need to have relatively pure parents. Inbreeding on the mare side gives you a great opportunity to outcross with something quite different, and achieve that hybrid vigour.

YOUR FOCUS HAS ALWAYS BEEN ON BREEDING, BUT LATELY YOU'VE BECOME MORE INVOLVED IN RACING. HOW DID THAT EVOLVE?

Well, Warrawee Koine was one who failed to sell at Forest City as a yearling, thanks to a freshly stitched-up cut on her knee. She came home and we ended up racing her. Warrawee Limelight and Warrawee Kes were also yearlings who didn't sell because they had bad timing in hurting themselves. For a long time that was the only way I ended up with a racehorse!

About three years ago, I decided I quite like racing. So now I try to buy a piece back if I like the horse. That was what I did with Warrawee Needy. Most people thought he was way too big as a yearling, but we liked him a lot. When we filmed his yearling video you could tell he was very light on his feet. I tried to buy a piece of Mystician as well, but that didn't work out, unfortunately.

YOU'VE BEEN ENJOYING REMARKABLE SUCCESS IN THE PAST FEW YEARS PARTICULARLY. WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE, GOING INTO THE O'BRIEN AWARDS?

It's our first time up for an O'Brien as breeder of the year, so we're quite excited.

I believe you have to live as if you're going to make it to 100. Our past few years have been our best ever, so we're not planning to slow down anytime soon. **T**