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THE VIEW DOWNUNDER ~ HAROLD HOWE

FEELING GOOD Downunder

The 2006 Little Brown Jug winner Mr Feelgood is quickly making his presence felt in Australia.

When Mr Feelgood won the \$400,000 Hunter Cup in Australia last month it marked a significant milestone that probably escaped most North Americans.

It was the first time a horse from this part of the world has stepped into the southern hemisphere arena and excelled. It had never happened before and can only bode well for all of us in the future.

Canadians and Americans are fond of declaring that the New Zealand and Australian horses are not the equal of ours. However, that's not quite the case. The truth is we have never seen their best horses when they are at their peak. Generally when they are sold to North American interests they are on the downward slide of their careers although they do have some name recognition for us.

The Downunder people love racing their open class horses probably more

than we do. There is a tremendous pride of ownership in having an animal that is one of the best in that part of the world. Of course money matters but it isn't everything which is why they don't sell their best horses at the drop of a hat as we are prone to do here in North America.

In recent years the prize money for their open races has risen significantly with this month's Inter Dominion Pacing Championship set for \$1.5 million (AUS). That and the possibility of a \$1 million World Cup was what prompted two Australian owners to go after a North American horse for these races.

The brother partnership of Tim and Anthony Butt of New Zealand were the ones assigned to find the horse and prepare him for the battles ahead. The task was anything but simple.

First of all there was the purchase of Mr Feelgood. While no one wants

to declare a price the rumour mill has it set at \$600,000 (US) which sounds reasonable. Then there was the matter of getting the horse through the stringent quarantine protocols which have been further enhanced because of the equine influenza issue in Australia a year ago. Essentially it meant taking the horse out of his training routine for five weeks.

Australian medication rules are far more stringent than in North America. That includes no Lasix which Mr Feelgood had raced with since January 1 of last year.

Like most North American horses, Mr Feelgood had never raced at a distance other than a mile. The Butts had to prepare him for much longer distances like the Hunter Cup which at 3,065 metres is just slightly less than two miles.

Another major hurdle was the fact that the Hunter Cup is a standing start



Photo by Gary Wild

Mr Feelgood has managed to overcome several obstacles including a lengthy quarantine, new distances, standing starts and handicaps to quickly become a force in Australia's free for all ranks for Tim and Anthony Butt, Kevin Seymour and Peter O'Shea.

event. How many North American horses have ever had to deal with that? Can anyone imagine our big guns lining up behind a barrier and standing until it's time to race?

If that all wasn't enough, given his racing credentials Mr Feelgood was handicapped 10 metres behind the bulk of the field. There is no belief that everyone should have their nose on the gate in that part of the world.

Truthfully, it was a Herculean task that the Butts faced but they and their new horse came through with flying colours. The Hunter Cup was the fourth start for the horse in Australia and the fourth in 20 days which is no small feat on its own.

Here in North America Mr Feelgood was never regarded in the same light as a Mister Big for example. Yes he won \$1.3 million and the Little Brown Jug but going into his four-year-old campaign he was viewed as a bit of a one hit wonder.

The Jug has become a race where not necessarily the best horse wins but the best horse on the day does. That was very much the case in 2006 with Mr Feelgood who raced out of his skin that day in Delaware but did not win another race the rest of the year.

He went to stud but the enthusiasm

for the horse was far less than hoped for. The record shows that he has just 20 foals (now yearlings) registered so the thought was to put him back into work and let him pay his way on the racetrack.

Through the first half of 2008 the son of Grinfromeartoear was a money making machine winning the Presidential, Isle of

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Capri and Graduate Series finals before Mister Big began to take over in mid-summer. Then the negotiating began to take place and it was not long afterwards that a deal was reached.

Mr Feelgood was a quality horse but not many would say he was our very best. At least at that time.

"What he has done so far is amazing. The way he is improving he should be a better horse by the Inter-Doms," said trainer Tim Butt after the Hunter Cup win.

"I think he will learn to sprint better and get sharper. At the moment he might just be a bit one dimensional in his racing style, but we know the speed is there. The bottom line is he is a horse no different from our horses.

"One thing I've learned from having trained US horses before is that you can't try and train them any differently because of what they have done in the past. Just keep it simple. Train them the same as any other good horse and hope they are good enough to do the job."

The success of Mr Feelgood in Australia only strengthens the appreciation that Australian breeders have for his sire. Grinfromeartoear served a book of 280 mares this past breeding season at Alabar Bloodstock. That is interesting because it was deemed that the horse had lost his commercial appeal in Ontario and was not a viable prospect to bring back for the



Photo by Gary Wild

Well known New Zealand horsemen Anthony and Tim Butt were largely responsible for obtaining Mr Feelgood to race downunder.

northern hemisphere season.

For reasons unknown the North American racing industry seems to largely ignore the goings on Downunder. There is much more of an appreciation for the events in Europe perhaps because the Europeans spend copious amounts of

money on North American yearlings and broodmares. The Kiwis and Aussies do not but they do invest in stallions and, from time to time, racehorses.

The success of Mr Feelgood can only bode well for the North American industry. In the ideal world the perfect transaction has both buyer and seller satisfied but that often does not happen. But it did in this case and proved to those future downunder buyers that North American horses can be brought into their domain and perform well.

And that leads to an interesting comment that Tim Butt offered to New Zealand racing journalist Michael Guerin for a recent column.

"North America would have more good horses than us because they simply have more horses. But our best ones, the Christian Cullens, Elsus and Auckland Reactors of the last 10 years would be up to their best."

Some would dispute that but difference of opinion is what drives racing. Mr Feelgood has now fueled more discussion and an Inter Dominion victory this month in Brisbane would only add more to the fire. 

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