

THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE'S LEADING STUD FARMS



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THE VIEW DOWNUNDER ~ HAROLD HOWE

A GIFT From Downunder

Sundons Gift will be the Southern Hemisphere's great hope in this year's Elitlopp and while he is a virtual unknown in this part of the world he has plenty of credentials to earn the trip halfway around the world.

People love horses that seem to know how to make money. Sundons Gift is one of those special equines and for that alone is much admired in the Southern Hemisphere.

That, along with his win in the Inter Dominion Trotting Championship, has resulted in an invitation to meet many of the best trotters in the world the end of May at Solvalla Racetrack in the Elitlopp. No downunder trotter has ever seriously challenged Europe's best and it will be a tall order for Sundons Gift. His Australian connections have made the trip with no illusions.

Chris Lang (profiled in the Novem-

ber 2008 edition of *The Harness Edge*) is the architect behind the six-year-old New Zealand-bred's quest. At 48 he is considered Australia's foremost trainer of trotters. He operates a team of 25 horses at his 330 acre farm some 150 kilometres from Melbourne.

Sundons Gift has fashioned a remarkable story on his way to winning \$550,000 in purses despite not having started to race until he was five.

"I received a call from this gentleman in Perth whom I had never heard of and to this day still have not met in person. He said he had a horse in New Zealand he wanted to send to me. I hadn't heard

of the horse either and truthfully was not expecting much," recalls Lang.

"He had made seven starts in New Zealand but had not placed once and had a history of breaking stride. The owner had bought out some partners and wanted to bring him to Australia.

"When he climbed off the horse float after arriving in Australia all I knew about him was that he was wearing a rug with the name Bernie on it. I was not expecting the best."

Lang was more than pleasantly surprised and in fact somewhat incredulous by the way the horse progressed.

"As I started to work with him I

thought right from the start that he was just too nice a horse not to have had success before he came to me. I trialed (qualified) him five times before I entered him for a race and he won them all but I still feared that when he did start racing the wheels would fall off."

But that was not the case. The horse won eight of his first nine starts and from there never looked back.

"When people ask me about him I say he's a horse that knows how to make money. He stands about 15.2 hands with good conformation although may be a bit heavy-boned.

"He sold for \$28,000 as a yearling in New Zealand which is very good money for a trotting yearling in this part of the world and says he was well thought of as a youngster," notes Lang.

"He is long barreled which is so important for a trotter because it gives him a clean stride and good balance. He is very kind to be around and we think he has a nice head.

"Physically he's quite strong and obviously very tough as he's shown in his races. I just love him but he has been a bit of a roller coaster at times."

Lang did run into some instances where the horse miscued but he attributes that to lack of confidence. He points out that he can be a bit of a nervous horse and for a period did not like racing in close quarters.

"He has never had any soundness issues. We did run into some breathing problems around the time of last year's Inter Dominion which led him to being scratched but as long as we treat him he is fine. It's odd that he won 18 races before this problem arose."

Clearly there was no issue in this year's \$250,000 Inter Dominion as he easily handled the competition over a distance of 2,575 metres at Moonee Valley Racetrack. Then as a final tune-up before heading overseas he won a \$20,000 race at the same track again with ease.

"He's a horse that is well known in this part of the world for his ability over distance. His strength is in that 2,500 to 2,600 metre distance. Over time he has matured and just gotten better and better."

The undertaking of sending the horse



One of the reasons Sundons Gift earned an invitation to compete in this year's Elitlopp was on the strength of his very impressive victory earlier this year in the \$250,000 Inter Dominion Trotting Final at Moonee Valley. In the lower photo his trainer and driver Chris Lang salutes the large crowd on hand at the track that evening.

to Sweden was not taken lightly. It is a 48 hour junket from Melbourne through Copenhagen, Denmark and then a 500 kilometre drive to the farm of Torben Jansson where he is now based. Lang's wife Sharon, an accomplished equestrian, traveled with the horse earlier this month.

"The Swedish officials have been tremendous and the media attention is unbelievable. They even arranged for a film crew to come to my farm to get footage before he left," says Lang.

Lang himself is a bit of a story. While he hails from one of the premier racing families in the Southern Hemisphere it appeared for some time that Chris's future would lie in the culinary world as a chef. But after a brief time in that field he realized his life was with the horses.

His first big horse was a trotter named National Interest who banked nearly \$500,000 before hitting with an Australasian Breeders Crown winner named Kyvalley Road. Most recently he emerged with the Australasian Breeders Crown winning Muscles Yankee son Skyvalley.

"The Scandinavians are great trotting people and I hope to learn from them. This is the first time I've left Australia so it will be an experience. I have confidence in Sundons Gift and believe he'll give a good account of himself." - Chris Lang

What makes his story more amazing is that several years ago Lang was nearly confined to a wheelchair. He was living in a world of pain and was finally diagnosed with Viral Reactive Rheumatoid Arthritis. A regimented diet and vitamin supplements were ordered and he was able to return to his day to day activities.

Lang is under no illusions about the competition he will face in Solvalla but it is an experience he relishes, after all, he's no stranger to challenges.

"All in all it will be three months by the time we get the horse back which is

a long time away from an operation like ours. It looks like he may race April 29 and then again May 13 before the Elitlopp and then there are a number of other races he may start in during the six weeks after the Solvalla race. We'll monitor his progress and see how he goes but I am just going to take it all in." says Lang.

"The Scandinavians are great trotting people and I hope to learn from them. This is the first time I've left Australia so it will be an experience. I have confidence in Sundons Gift and believe he'll give a good account of himself."



Ray Bednarz



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