

THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE'S LEADING STUD FARMS



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THE VIEW DOWNUNDER ~ NEALE DONNELLEY

MAKING YOUR OWN PATH

Eight years ago Chris Lang was told to prepare for life in a wheelchair, instead he's followed in his father's footsteps to become one of Australia's finest horsemen.

The World Of Sport is an uncompromising place, particularly if you're the son of a legend.

These sons invariably attempt to make their own way, and often succeed. More often than not, they are, rightly or wrongly, compared to "the old man."

So, how do you tackle a situation when your father is a Hall Of Fame trainer and driver, and your older brother is considered the greatest driver the southern hemisphere has produced?

This very scenario has been the reality for Chris Lang most of his life. And it's a life anything but ordinary or mundane or without drama for that matter.

Unquestionably Chris Lang is the exception to the rule. These days, the rather youthful 47 year-old is Australia's leading trainer of trotters.

He's the master of all things that trot, the go-to man if you want to make it with a trotter.

Chris's father is Graeme Lang, who even now at 73 is still highly competitive and affectionately known in this part of the world as 'Daddy' Lang.

Five years ago Graeme was inducted into the Hall Of Fame and is considered a true legend of the harness racing industry

in this part of the world.

He is best known in the northern hemisphere as the man who brought a trotter called Scotch Notch to the US in 1985.

Scotch Notch was the champion trotting mare of her era in Australia, and Lang accepted an invitation to take on the world's best trotters in a one-off series in the US, called the Statue Of Liberty Trot.

Staged at The Meadowlands, the Statue Of Liberty series was conducted over two races, one over a mile, the other a mile and a half.

In the early '80s, when the actual Statue Of Liberty was decaying and apparently falling down, the sporting bodies and clubs in and around New York were asked to raise money to help restore the old girl.

Thus, the people at The Meadowlands invited the best trotters from around the world to contest this series, and raised money by donating all race-course entrance fees to the Statue Of Liberty Restoration Fund.

It doesn't really matter that Scotch Notch finished fourth and sixth in her two races (behind a star called Meadow Road), then stayed in New York for two



Neale Donnelley

more years, eventually winning the Aged Trotting Mare of the Year Award in the 1986/87 season.

What does matter is that Graeme Lang is a master horseman, and has been at the forefront of his game for more than 40 years.

Chris's older brother Gavin, is the John Campbell of the southern hemisphere.

During the season just finished, Gavin, about to turn 50, sailed past the 4,000 winners mark, racking up drivers' premierships and several awards along the way.

His fame as a driver is to the point that people simply call him "Gavin." Everyone knows who you mean when you say "it was a Gavin drive."

In the season just finished, Gavin Lang drove 218 winners for \$2.6 million in stakes. On Breeders Crown day at the end of last month, Gavin drove three BC winners.

Ironically, one of those Breeders Crown champions was for his little brother Chris. Surprise-surprise, it was in the three-

year-old trotters division.

Yet, it hasn't always been this way for Chris Lang.

Twenty-five years ago, while his father and brother were forging great careers, Chris went to work as a chef.

He says now there was a lot of pressure being a 'Lang.' He guesses he was always going to finish up working with horses, but wanted to try something else.

He quickly realized he didn't want to be a full time chef, so he started a cleaning business, again he quickly worked out that wasn't for him either.

And so, inevitable as it may seem now, Chris went to work for his father, and did so for quite a few years, before eventually breaking out on his own.

Marrying Sharon, an equestrian rider of some note, Chris 'went bush,' to a 330 acre property at a place called Nagambie, 120 miles from Melbourne.

He started establishing himself as a horseman of the highest calibre, producing particularly good results with trotters.

He found his first Grand Circuit class trotter with a horse called National Interest, who won almost \$500,000 in stakes, twice winning at Group 1 level.

"He was a very special horse to me, my first at the elite level. He probably wasn't as good as the best trotters of his era, but he raced them every week and won every now and then; his attitude was



Photo by Gary Wild

Chris's brother Gavin, considered Australia's John Campbell, guided his brother's Skyvalley to victory in the Australasian Breeders Crown for three-year-old trotters. Chris finished second with the filly Aldebaron Maori to give his stable a one-two finish.

remarkable," Lang recalls.

Not long after National Interest was retired, along came a trotter called Kyvalley Road, who became the best of his age at two and three, before injury plagued and eventually ruined his career.

He won everything, including Breeders Crowns and Derbies, and is still the most talented trotter Lang has had anything to do with.

"He was sensationally bred, by Lindy Lane out of Sanchiola (a top-class New

Zealand trotter), and he had class and charisma and stunning ability," Lang says.

The improvement in the overall ability of the trotter in Australia has been nothing short of incredible over the past five to eight years.

"Since we have been able to access the best trotting sires in the world, the improvement has been extraordinary.

"Our best young trotters were (mile-) rating 2:05 for 2,400 metres five years ago, now they go in two minutes and it's all because of the bloodlines we have been able to introduce," Lang notes.

"Muscles Yankee for example, has been a revelation, and the fact he produced first, second and third finishers in the two-year-old Breeders Crown Final, and the winner in the three-year-old Final, is proof in itself," he adds.

Lang trained Skyvalley, an imposing three-year-old colt by Muscles Yankee to win this year's Breeders Crown, and he trained and drove the second horse, Aldebaron Maori, a daughter of Dream Vacation (out of a Lindy Lane mare).

His brother Gavin drove the winner (yes, it was a Gavin drive). He sat back off a frantic pace and descended on the leaders over the last 400 metres, while Chris did his best to keep up with Skyvalley.



Chris Lang holds the Redwood trophy after a victory with Jauriol at Maryborough.



"I was doing everything I could just to hang on to Gav. I know how good that horse is and to be second with the filly (Aldebaron Maori) was a real thrill. She is probably the fastest three-year-old trotting filly we've ever had," Lang says.

On the same program, Chris trained and drove Australia's best trotter, Sundons Gift, to a remarkable win in the Breeders Crown Open Trot.

You could say it's all happening for him. Chris Lang is a recognized star in his own right.

And yet, eight years ago, Chris Lang was preparing for life in a wheelchair; at least that's what his doctors told him to do.

"I thought I had the flu. Felt really crook, but it just got worse and worse. In the end I couldn't get out of bed. I went from doctor to doctor, sent to more specialists and so on. In the end it was totally debilitating.

It was destroying our lives, the stable was down to four horses and we were going broke," Lang says now able to describe what he and his family went through during those horrible times.

"It was all I could do to dress myself, before having to have a sleep, and that was a trick, because I was in so much pain I couldn't lie down, so I had to try and sleep in an armchair."

Lang remembers he was on so much medication that it controlled his very existence.



It was Chris's wife Sharon who convinced him to see a naturopath who was able to turn the horseman's life around.

Anti-inflammatories, painkillers and sleeping pills were the normal way of getting through every day. He had to have the sleeping pills because the other drugs kept him awake.

In complete desperation, his wife Sharon took him to a guy called Luke Clarke, who worked at a naturopath clinic called Life Source, in Melbourne.

Lang remembers now that he had just about lost all faith in medical experts.

"It took a lot of pushing from Sharon to get me to even go and see Luke, but you know you hear people say this day, or that day, was the day that changed their life? Well, that day was the day that changed mine."

Not long before going to see Luke, Chris was diagnosed with Viral Reactive Rheumatoid Arthritis, and was literally told to prepare for life in a wheelchair.

Within four weeks of seeing Luke and being put on a strict diet, he was back sleeping in his own bed and weaning himself off a cabinet full of drugs.

Apart from a regimented diet, supplements including vitamins and minerals were added. Toxins contained in things like shampoo and soap were considered detrimental, so they were removed from his life. The difference was extraordinary.

"The whole thing was designed to rejuvenate my immune system and it

worked. The changes in my body were amazing; it's something I will never forget," he says.

To suggest Chris Lang's life has turned full circle would be extreme, but accurate.

He joined his father and brother this year as an Inter Dominion winner.

High quality New Zealand trotter Galleons Sunset was sent to Lang to prepare for the rich Grand Circuit season in Australia earlier this year.

Although he won the Group 1 Bill Collins Trotters Mile a month before the Inter Dominion series, he went into the Inter Dominion Final a 30-1 shot.

It didn't matter, pinging straight to the lead off the front he was never in danger and went on to record a comfortable win in the \$250,000 Final.

Dad Graeme won two Inters with Scotch Notch, Gavin has won four as a driver, and now Chris Lang is an Inter Dominion champion.

Yes, Chris Lang is a champion horseman, a champion guy, and a living rarity in the tough and uncompromising world of the elite sportsman. 🐎

Neale Donnelley is a long time racing journalist who covered the sport for 20 years for the Melbourne Sun. He now hosts a daily radio program dedicated to racing.