



ROCK SAMUELS PHOTO

Scientific Breeder

BY LENNY SHULMAN

It would be a good idea to bring along a dictionary when you talk breeding theory with John Liviakis. The energetic California native loves to toss off terms like genealogy and physiology and genotype and phenotype while explaining how his love for horses led him to breed three participants in the recent Breeders' Cup World Championships from a broodmare band of 20. A quick reading of "Breeding for Dummies" won't get it done if you're looking to keep up to speed with the successful executive who owns Liviakis Financial Communications, the leading financial public relations firm in the world that handles investor relations for publicly traded companies.

While his day job keeps the 55-year-old Liviakis quite busy, his horse avocation fills up a good chunk of the remaining time. At 5 a.m. he is in his Bay Area office making calls and checking on his stock—as in livestock, not the stock market. His reading list runs to volumes on nutrition and proper feeding, pedigree analyses, and gene theory. He spends additional hours studying videos and photos of stallions, mares, and racing prospects, immersing himself in a virtual tour of Thoroughbreds in other regions of the country he can't always get to because of business demands.

Liviakis is equal parts passionate and smart, a winning combination that led to his breeding and selling Handsome Mike, Reneesgotzip, and Renee's Queen, stakes winners and Breeders' Cup runners all. But beyond that, what becomes obvious after a few minutes in his presence is the pure joy and love Liviakis has for horses and for being able to participate in a meaningful way in furthering the breed.

Liviakis got his first taste of horse racing as a teen, attending the races at Cal Expo in his hometown of Sacramento. He was taken by the animals, the competition, and the wagering, and soon broadened his interests to nutrition and sports medicine before deciding to become a Standardbred trainer.

"I would jog the horses and watch every single move," he said. "I also read stacks of veterinary materials and conformation analyses, and eventually

John Liviakis breeds three 2012 Breeders' Cup runners

Renee's Queen



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Reneesgotzip



CHAD HARMON

Handsome Mike

began seeing correlations. With Standardbreds I got to look at the horses from behind and see how poor conformation manifests itself in various problems the horses would have.”

Liviakis owned 2010 champion 2-year-old filly Pretty Katherine, a Standardbred world record holder.

“I was very green and knew a lot less than I thought I did, but I tried to learn the ropes as a trainer and did all right.”

In his non-horse life, Liviakis moved from Sacramento to San Francisco to work for E.F. Hutton and then Merrill Lynch, eventually becoming an analyst and then starting Liviakis Financial Communications at the tender age of 26. Today he lives in Marin Valley north of the city and works in idyllic Mill Valley. The success of his firm allowed Liviakis to switch from Standardbreds to Thoroughbreds and from training to breeding. A decade ago he had 125 horses, but the reversal of the stock market along with wanting a more boutique operation led Liviakis to major changes. He began buying Thoroughbreds privately and at sales and claimed fillies he hoped to turn into viable broodmares.

“I started off with a real fascination of genealogy,” said Liviakis. “I bought all the stud books and developed correlations while studying the productivity of families. I could recite pedigrees back to the 1800s and I’d fantasize about these genes and the matings and what the offspring might look like. It became an obsession.”

Liviakis, though, was smart enough to leave room for evolution of his gene theories, change that has been crucial to his current success.

“I learned it’s not all about genes,” he

said. “There are a lot of horses with great genes that are bad individuals; you learn the hard way that even with amazing parents and family members, they can turn out awful. So you have to look at phenotypes and understanding the individual, the manifestation of the genes, because that’s the way nature works. It’s like shuffling a deck of cards.

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“Phenotype is a real test of skill. You have to know how to look at a horse and then drill down. First you look at the whole horse in terms of balance and their walk and their eye and charisma. But then you get to the details: the knee, the angle of the shoulder, length of the forearm, muscle of the stifle, how squared up the hock is, height of the withers, depth of the girth, length of the hip and neck, flatness of the back.

“Then you analyze movement at the walk and gallop; fluidity and efficiency. There is a strong correlation of phenotype and a horse’s predisposition to soundness and talent in terms of endurance and speed. A horse with a straight shoulder and pastern is likely to have a short, choppy stride and ankle problems. Poorly conformed hocks will lead to an inability to push off correctly. I might select only one or two from all the sales in an entire year that meet the criteria as far as genetics, conformation, and gait. I’m real picky.”

Until six years ago Liviakis dabbled at

the edges of purchasing Thoroughbreds. In 2006 at the Ocala Breeders’ Sales Co.’s March auction, he found a filly that checked all his boxes—good genes, solid conformation, keen eye, and a pretty head. Mighty Renee, Liviakis estimated, was going to cost about \$500,000, except she was found to have a chip in her knee and troubled shins following her work at the

sale, and she was taken out of the auction. Liviakis purchased the daughter of Maria’s Mon for a nickel on the dollar, had the chip removed, gave her time, and brought her to the races only to have her twice fracture tibias. He decided to breed her.

Liviakis sent Mighty Renee to Stormy Atlantic, hoping the son of Storm Cat could “wake up the dead on what was a cold family.” Sure enough, he got Mighty Caroline, a tall, precocious filly who won the 2011 Sorrento Stakes (gr. III) at Del Mar. However, she injured a suspensory ligament, was retired, and is in foal to Lonhro, the legendary Australian stallion now standing the North American season at Darley near Lexington. Mighty Renee wasn’t finished, however. Sent to After Market (another son of Storm Cat), she produced Renee’s Queen for Liviakis.

“She was so classy,” Liviakis said of the foal. Because of stock market downturns Liviakis decided to sell Renee’s Queen after receiving an offer from Mike Moreno’s Southern Equine. As a maiden, Re-



John Liviakis, far right, owned and trained Standardbreds in the 1980s

PHOTO BY T. ABRAHAMZ/COURTESY JOHN LIVIAKIS

nee's Queen won the Oak Tree Juvenile Fillies Turf Stakes in September before finishing off the board in the Grey Goose Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies (gr. I).

In 2008 Liviakis parted with \$70,000 at the Keeneland November sale for Classic Strike because he likes Smart Strike as a broodmare sire. In foal to Scat Daddy at the time of her purchase, Classic Strike produced Handsome Mike for Liviakis. Although he was a plain youngster, Liviakis decided to keep the dark bay or brown colt and put him in training. He broke his maiden at second asking and then led the Generous Stakes (gr. IIIT) before finishing a solid second. Handsome Mike caught the eye of California owner Paul Reddam, who wanted Handsome Mike to run in the CashCall Futurity (gr. I). Liviakis relented, and Handsome Mike has gone on to win this year's Pennsylvania Derby (gr. II) before running unplaced in the Breeders' Cup Classic (gr. I).

Liviakis said he has mixed emotions about selling horses he breeds.

"One factor is if I still own family members," he noted. "Another is the person who buys them. Mr. Reddam, for instance, I'm happy for because he's great for the sport, he seems like a nice man, and he treated me well in the transaction. Sure, if the horse wins a \$5 million race, you want to kick yourself, but you can't keep them all, especially when the stock market isn't friendly. And you can't sell the bad ones; you have to sell the ones that people want."

Further complicating potential sales is the fact Liviakis names many horses after his wife (Renee) and daughters (Katherine and Caroline), and they can become attached to their equine namesakes. Liviakis couldn't wait to see Handsome Mike at the Breeders' Cup, a reunion of old friends.

"I used to love pulling on his mane when he'd go to the training track and I'd call his name and he'd bow his neck and we became friends. I felt terrible about selling him. But that's pro sports. You have a general manager who gets to know a player and his whole family and then they have to pack and move to another city. Sometimes you have to do it."

Liviakis bought the Distorted Humor mare No Dress Code privately and bred her to City Zip, at the time an unproven sire who Liviakis correctly surmised would hit big. He bred Reneesgotzip from that mat-



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Liviakis with trainer Melody Conlon

ing. She was unusually small, but Liviakis still had second thoughts about selling her. He finally did and has watched the filly earn more than \$400,000 for the Lanni Family Trust, winning the grade II Santa Ynez Stakes and running a solid third in the Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint (gr. IT) before taking the Dec. 1 Skillful Joy Stakes.

Team Liviakis includes bloodstock agents Brian Kahn and Donato Lanni, California trainer Melody Conlon, and Dana Aschinger, owner of War Horse Place near Lexington. Liviakis splits his mares between War Horse Place and Hill 'n' Dale Farms.

"John is a farm owner's dream client because he cares so deeply and honestly about his horses and wants the very best for them when it comes to their feed and nutrition," said Aschinger. "There is never a question about whether you should do the right thing. He's the one West Coast guy I can call at 5 a.m. his time. He's extremely passionate about his horses and knows bloodlines better than any owner I've met."

Conlon, who trained Mighty Caroline to win the Sorrento, is based at Betfair Hollywood Park and gets to work with the Liviakis runners when they turn 2. She lauds the feeding program that Liviakis has developed for his horses and also appreciates

the level of involvement Liviakis maintains with his runners.

"It's nice having an owner that cares enough to participate like John does," she said. "We work out the level of races each horse should go in, and we talk about it daily. We're realistic where we run them and try to give them the best shot to win. We've had a good win percentage over the years. And for him to have three Breeders' Cup starters after being in Thoroughbreds for seven years, that's amazing."

Liviakis, who doesn't mind putting the occasional pile of greenbacks through the mutual windows, is also willing to gamble on picking out young sires, although their risk factor is considerably higher. Besides Lonhro, he expressed interest in incoming sires Bodemeister and Shackleford, and also likes Trappe Shot, Scat Daddy, and the hot Speightstown.

"I find it's better to breed to a proven sire," he stated. "Unproven sires are very risky. I breed with the intent of keeping the horse, so in general I'm not breeding for commerciality. Of course, you have to consider that because you may end up selling.

But I am most concerned with what kind of individual I am going to be creating. Look, there's always risk. If Secretariat couldn't make it, how do you trust any sire? I'll go to an unproven sire trying to get that needle in a haystack and hope that they hit."

Outside of horses and his business, Liviakis is involved in music. He is currently producing a project wherein top musicians will be brought together to remake old instrumental classics.

But the horses remain his great passion. Liviakis, sitting outside the Santa Anita Park paddock on the morning of the first Breeders' Cup day, is fairly beaming with pride that three of his babies will be competing in the World Championships programs.

"I'm really fortunate to have these wonderful horses in my life," he said. "They are super-expensive and it's an elitist hobby for kings and queens, so I have my ebbs and flows in being able to do it. But when I do it, I do it right. First class. The horses are going to get the greatest care in the world. I have such a personal love for them as individuals. Connecting with them, kissing them, hugging them, walking them. Just being around them. I get a thrill from all of it."

That may not be scientific, but man doesn't live by genealogy books alone. 