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Diving into opportunity

Highcliff Farm attracts young Kentucky stallions, thanks to New York's lucrative breeding program **by Bill Heller**

SUZIE AND DOC O'CAIN'S reason to smile for the next two years arrived at 4:25 p.m. on November 30. That is when the van carrying Highcliff Farm's new stallion, Millennium Wind, arrived from Lexington, perpetuating a pipeline from the heart of the Bluegrass to the tiny village of Delanson in upstate New York, 45 miles southwest of Saratoga Springs.

The connection started three years ago when Ken and Sarah Ramsey decided their Kentucky stallion, Catienus, needed a fresh start in his fourth season at stud, typically a difficult one for any stallion as buyers wait to see how his first crop of two-year-olds perform on the track. Catienus, a son of Storm Cat, did so well at Highcliff in 2004 and '05—before returning to Kentucky for '06—that Rosendo "Ro" Parra decided to send his stallion Millennium Wind to Highcliff for his fourth and fifth seasons in '06 and '07. The son of Cryptoclearance will return to Millennium Farms in Lexington to stand in 2008.

"He's a Grade 1 winner; we didn't want to lose him from our sight," Parra said about Millennium Wind. "But after talking to Ken Ramsey, he gave me a lot of confidence that he would be well taken care of, and, number two, that the farm would be able to get mares to the horse as they did for Catienus. I spent a lot of time on the phone with Ken, and he had nothing but good things to say."

Suzie O'Cain was not surprised that Ramsey appreciated Catienus's two-year stay at Highcliff.

"He is one of the most appreciative people in the world," she said. "I gave him a doormat to wipe his feet off, and you would have thought I gave him a Bentley. To some people, continued success becomes a routine. People lose their excitement. Not him. He makes it fun for everyone."

She does, too, managing Highcliff's sales, marketing, and business office. An effervescent dynamo with a dazzling smile, Suzie O'Cain is a perfect complement to her soft-spoken husband, C. Lynwood "Doc" O'Cain, D.V.M., the general manager and veterinarian of Highcliff. The farm is owned principally by Carl Lizza, a Long Island and New Jersey real estate developer who races his horses as Flying Zee Stable. Lizza, the leading owner in New York in 2004 with 40 victories, owns Highcliff with Joe Bartone, a longtime friend and partner.

O'Cain connection

Suzie O'Cain, born in Jackson, Mississippi, was going to be a teacher. Doc O'Cain, a native of Orangeburg, South Carolina, who graduated from Clemson University, was a mechanical engineer working for Chevron's offshore division in New Orleans, taking care of offshore rigs and pipelines.

"I don't regret doing it, but it wasn't really what I wanted to do," Doc said. "I had heard that [Louisiana State University (LSU)] was going to open a vet school. I was lucky enough to get in their first class."

Suzie, who was living in New Orleans, had horses with a stable that routinely used the LSU veterinarian. "One of my horses had a big gash on his head one day," she said. "I called the vet and [Doc] was on duty. It was great because we had this mutual interest, the horses. It was all about the horses. It's what I love most in life and, obviously, what he likes the most."

Suzie's interest in her veterinarian was heightened one morning when she saw him fishing shirtless in a nearby lake. "I said, 'Wow, is that Doc O'Cain?'" she said with a laugh.

It was. They married and have been a team ever since. "We work great as a partnership," Doc said. "If it wasn't for her, I couldn't do what I do, and vice versa. I take care of the horses. She takes care of the office work. It's a good combination."

But they were not doing well in New Orleans. "In the early 1980s, Louisiana went through a terrible depression because the price of oil went up," Suzie said. "We made some inquiries in 1983-'84."

They narrowed their options to moving to Kentucky or New York. "We decided on New York and have never regretted it for one minute," Suzie said. "We love everything about it."

The O'Cains settled in Cocksackie, a small city 40 miles south of Saratoga Springs, where Doc started a private practice in 1985. Then a coin flip changed their lives.

On to Highcliff

In 1981, Lizza had enormous success with Wayward Lass, who became the year's champion three-year-old filly, and with multiple Grade 1 winner Noble Nashua. He purchased Wayward Lass as a two-year-old for \$30,000 and sold her in foal to Noble Nashua, a \$49,000 yearling purchase, for \$2.35-million at the 1983 Keeneland November breeding stock sale. (The Ramseys owned Wayward Lass from 1994-'99.)

Lizza syndicated Noble Nashua, a son of Nashua, and stood him in New York. "He made this major commitment and there was really a need to have his own farm," Suzie said.

Lizza became interested in the 800-acre Highcliff, a dairy operation converted into a horse farm by Bill Garbarini and Bob Tomiso, who were looking to sell the farm in the late 1980s because of disadvantageous changes in tax laws for horse owners.

Lizza, who used Doc O'Cain as his veterinarian and wanted him to run Highcliff, sat down with Bartone at dinner one night. Bartone wanted to get into the horse business as a breeder. Lizza was more into racing. They flipped a quarter, deciding that if it came up heads, they

would purchase Highcliff. If not, they would pass on it.

The quarter came up heads. Lizza and Bartone bought the farm, and Doc was delighted to leap at the opportunity. There was, however, one overlooked detail.

"At the closing, they said, 'Who's going to run the office?'" Suzie said. "They asked Doc, 'Can Suzie do this?'" Doc goes, "Oh yeah, she can do that."

Suzie did not have a clue. "I walked

looked up one day and said, 'You know what? People have accepted us really well.'"

Even people in Kentucky.

Homework decisive

Catienus in 1999 won the Charles Staats Memorial Stakes at Delaware Park, was second in both the Suburban (G2) and Saratoga Breeders' Cup (G2) Handicaps, and ran third in the Whitney Handicap (G1). He stood in New York for the same \$3,500 fee he did at the Ramseys' farm in Kentucky.

"I think Ken figured out that if he sent him to New York as the new guy in town, he could keep his numbers up," Suzie said.

Ramsey scouted out six different farms in New York before settling on Highcliff. "I looked at the size of the operations and the paddocks and the facilities," Ramsey said. "After doing all my research, I decided Doc O'Cain's Highcliff was the best place to go. Doctor O'Cain and his lovely wife are first-class people, super nice people. They did a good job of advertising the horse."

Catienus, who bred only 16 outside mares in 2003—the rest were owned by the Ramseys—bred 84 mares in his first year at Highcliff. His fee was hiked to \$6,500 in 2005, and he bred 110 mares. He will stand in Kentucky in 2006 for \$10,000, and the Ramseys will enjoy all the benefits of having sent more than 55 of their mares to New York to be bred to him the past two years. The resulting foals will be New York-breds, eligible for the lucrative awards offered.

"That worked out great," Suzie said. "He's going to get all those stallion awards and owner and breeder awards with his mares."

Ramsey is counting the days to reap the benefits of breeding and owning New York-breds. "They generate money for you, and you don't have to feed them," Ramsey said. "It's gratis."

New Millennium

Catienus's success in New York resonated in Kentucky. "I was impressed with what happened with Catienus at Highcliff," said Bill Hardin, manager of Millennium Farms. "We talked to a lot of people about this. It's a good move. We're excited."

So is Parra, a 46-year-old native of Ecuador who relocated his family in Maryland in 1974, and is presently the senior vice president of Dell Computers's Public Americas and International Group in Austin, Texas, a company he has worked for since 1993.

Parra's interest in racing came from accompanying his father to tracks in South America and in Maryland. He claimed his first horse in 1999 for \$5,000 at Retama

Park near San Antonio, Texas. Millennium Wind was a bit more expensive. The half brother to 1999 Kentucky Derby (G1) and Preakness Stakes (G1) winner and Horse of the Year Charismatic was purchased by David and Jill Heerensperger for \$1.2-million at the 1999 Keeneland September yearling sale. Trained by David Hofmans, Millennium Wind finished second in the 2000 Hollywood Futurity (G1) to Point Given, who became Horse of the Year in '01.

At three, Millennium Wind won the Blue Grass (G1) and Santa Catalina (G2) Stakes before an injury ended his career. He won three of seven starts and earned \$769,920.

Millennium Wind stood for \$8,500 initially before his stud fee was lowered to \$7,500. After breeding 101 mares in his first season in 2003 and 123 mares in '04, he bred just 62 mares last year. To revive interest in Millennium Wind, Parra and Hardin chose to send him to New York.

"We're moving to New York because there's a lot of interest in New York for this horse," Hardin said. "We sold a lot of seasons to people in the New York area and in the Northeast. It's a great program to be affiliated with. It's an exciting program."

Millennium Wind's stud fee will be lowered to \$5,000 in 2006, but that has not tempered Parra's enthusiasm for his stallion. "I have about 20 Millennium Wind yearlings turning two [in training] with Cash Asmussen in Laredo [Texas]," Parra said. "We're pretty excited to see our babies on the track."

Parra, whose Super Frolic was fourth in this year's Breeders' Cup Classic (G1) as the 69.25-to-1 longshot, now has more than 40 horses in training, owns more than 150 broodmares, and stands 11 stallions in Kentucky, Louisiana, Texas and, now, New York. Millennium Farms also will send several mares to New York to breed to Millennium Wind.

"When you look at the New York program, and when you think that Millennium Wind was going into his fourth year, which is very difficult for a stallion, we thought it a good idea," Parra said. "It just made sense."

At Highcliff, now home to more than 140 broodmares, Millennium Wind will be given every opportunity to match Catienus's success in New York. "We feel very honored," Suzie said. "Maybe we're doing something right in the 20 years we've been in New York. I'm not from here. This program is ungodly. It's phenomenal."

"If you're going to play ball, you play for the Yankees. If you're in racing, you race in New York. When I was a little kid, I loved horses. I told my mom, I want to live on a horse farm. How lucky am I? Sometimes I take it for granted. We all do. I don't want to lose sight of the horse himself. Whatever we do, the horse comes first." ■



Team Highcliff: Suzie and Doc O'Cain, transplanted Southerners who have been in New York for 20 years, run Highcliff for Carl Lizza and partner Joe Bartone. Suzie manages the farm's sales, marketing, and business office, and Doc is general manager and veterinarian

Mark Wyville photo

into the office, February 17, 1989, and it was void of any papers whatsoever," she said. "I didn't know who Northern Dancer was. I always had Quarter Horses. I remember saying, 'Now what do I do?'"

She figured it out. Her endless energy helped. She says she gets that from her mother, Norma. "My mother is phenomenal," Suzie said. "She still plays bridge four nights a week, she travels, and she drinks margaritas. She loves life. Why wouldn't I?"

Suzie started reading everything she could about the industry. "It became very easy for me," she said. "I got into stallion patterns and figured out nicking patterns. The best part of it was that a week after we closed on the farm, Seymour Cohn sent up mares. At one time, he had 100 mares up here."

Cohn died two years ago, but his daughter, Paula Ann Cohn Hallman, stands two stallions, Daygata and Stanislavsky at Highcliff. They join other Highcliff stallions Best of Luck, Kelly Kip, Key Contender, Tank's Number, and Western Expression.

In the farm's early days, trainers Warren Pascuma and Stanley Shapoff sent mares, too, as did Racing Hall of Fame trainer H. Allen Jerkens's wife, Elisabeth. "We have a long history with a lot of our clientele," Suzie said. "We're kind of out here in the middle of the boondocks, and we worked as hard as we could. And we