

THE SLIPPER MAKER

On the eve of the long-awaited return to racing of Golden Slipper-winning filly **Overreach**, **Peter Mullen** caught up with Corumbene Stud owner and breeder **George Altomonte** to discuss the special affinity the Dunedoo-based nursery has established with the world's richest juvenile race.

For George Altomonte, the love affair with thoroughbreds began about forty years ago when the trained motor mechanic and successful businessman decided to try his hand at breeding racehorses after a commercially rewarding stint rearing stock horses at his property at Branxton in the New South Wales Hunter region.

"I had a horse called Cecil Bruce who was the first stock horse ever registered in Australia," Altomonte explained. "But then I stopped breeding stock horses and changed to thoroughbreds because I thought that would be more challenging." Altomonte was adamant that if he was going to venture into the inherently risky world of thoroughbred breeding then he would have to find a suitable property that was conducive to producing strong and healthy bloodstock, and so in 1978 he sold Branxton and moved to Dunedoo where he established Corumbene Stud.

Corumbene, which is Aboriginal for "a pretty place", is a large 12,000-acre property situated adjacent to the township of Dunedoo in the upper Hunter Valley and, according to Altomonte, provides a salubrious environment for horses. The stud itself comprises 700 acres of prime agricultural land which Altomonte describes quite charmingly as a "soft, chocolate loam", perfect for raising young stock. "Corumbene, which I built from scratch, is a consolidation of about five properties, because they were all very small holdings when I bought them," reveals Altomonte. "It's a good area, free of disease and the topography suits horses too." Indeed it is the land itself that Altomonte believes holds the secret to Corumbene's standing as a thoroughbred breeder par excellence.

"I think the country has a lot to do with the health of our horses," Altomonte says. "One thing we discovered early on is that we don't get a lot of shin soreness with our

horses, which I put down to the minerals in the ground. The type of soil that we have probably makes them a bit stronger in the bone." He continues, "We grow most of our own feed, other than supplements of course. The oats, the barley, the lucerne and all of that, we grow on the farm. I think that contributes to the overall wellbeing of the horses. I've spoken to our vets about it and they agree that the soil composition probably does help produce healthy, strong-boned horses."

Altomonte adds, "Well, it has to be something." And he's probably right. How else does one explain the tremendous success that Corumbene has enjoyed over the years, particularly its remarkable propensity for breeding Golden Slipper winners. In fact, of

the last seven renewals of the multi-million dollar two-year-old feature, Corumbene has bred two winners, namely **Overreach** and **Sebring**, and a third placegetter, **Hasna**, to reinforce its reputation as one of Australia's most prolific producers of top-class juvenile talent.

For a boutique farm that lacks the resources of the bigger studs, it is some achievement. **Sebring** (More Than Ready-Purespeed, by Flying Spur), whose only loss in six career outings was to **Samantha Miss** in the Gr1 AJC Champagne Stakes, has established himself as the most exciting young stallion in the country with ten individual stakes winners hitherto, including Gr1 winners **Dissident** and **Criterion**, while **Overreach** (Exceed and Excel-Bahia,

by Snippets), one of the most dominant Slipper winners in recent memory, is poised for a triumphant return to the track after a hiatus of nearly 17 months. The prodigiously talented mare is back in training with **Gai Waterhouse** and being prepared for a belated spring appearance in Sydney.

"After the Slipper we took her to Melbourne and she pulled a hamstring. She was quite lame and pretty bad there for a while. The vets' advice was three months off with treatment," Altomonte explained. "She's been in pre-training for the last six weeks with **Gary Frazer** and is going back to **Gai's** on Monday, the 1st September." Whether **Exceed And Excel's** gifted daughter can return to her brilliant best, only time will tell, but Altomonte, ever the optimist, is confident that she can. "She's grown a lot in the period she's had off. She was never a really big mare, but she has definitely thickened up and she looks pretty good. I'm pretty confident she'll come back and be all right."

He continued, "I don't want to move her out of Sydney. I'd rather leave her in Sydney so we'll race her here. **Gai** will pick out suitable races for her. The main thing is that she



Top: Entrance to Corumbene stud
Above: Altomonte almost kept Sebring



Corumbene's Slipper queen Overreach

stays together in one piece, and I think she will. I'm fairly confident that she can get back to her best because we've given her a good break, we've treated her, we've done everything that needed to be done and she's stronger in herself and I think because of that she'll be okay."

Apart from his two Slipper champions, Altomonte has reared a host of other top-flight performers, such as Blue Diamond Stakes winner True Jewels, a half-sister to his Gr2 winner Wager, and also Gr1 Metropolitan Handicap winner Heart Ruler. Which begs the inevitable question: what is his breeding secret?

Altomonte puts the stud's success down to good old-fashioned hard work, and rejects any suggestion that it is simply a case of good luck. "People say to me 'you've been pretty lucky', but I don't think so," says Altomonte. "I put a lot of effort into planning our matings and I like to believe that that diligence and hard work is the foundation of our success." Altomonte elucidates: "Basically I plan all the matings for the mares myself. I do have input from Toby Frazer, my Stud Manager, regarding the choice of stallion because he inspects the stallions to see what types they are."

Corumbene's broodmare band comprises of between 35-40 mares at any given time, and Altomonte is circumspect when it comes to selecting suitable mates. "At the moment we have about 36 broodmares but it



Hasna came close to Slipper victory

"Altomonte is not averse to racing a colt in his famous orange and brown spotted silks..."

fluctuates between 35 and 40. I try to keep it to about 35 because once it gets beyond that it becomes too big a task to plan the matings," he says. "I'm not afraid to cull mares that I feel aren't performing. If you send them to a good sire and they are producing bad foals, you're really pushing your luck up hill. So I'll buy 1-2 mares a year, just to mix the bloodlines up a bit."

Altomonte is meticulous and highly disciplined when it comes to choosing the right stallion. "The procedure that I adopt is at the beginning of the year I look at all the available stallions. I conduct a lot of research looking at their progeny's success. I suppose if I had to add up all the time it takes me, it

would probably take about two weeks." He continued, "Statistics I look at include winners to foals by each stallion, the stallion's fertility, and then I come up with a final list of stallions I will consider using that year which usually numbers about twenty," he explains. "And from that list I will try and pick the right stallion that is suited to each mare."

An inspection of Corumbene's bloodlines reveals a preference for proven sirelines, many of which are colonial-bred, that are noted for producing tough, sound and precocious offspring. Names such as Exceed And Excel, Flying Spur, Redoute's Choice, More Than Ready, Marscaj, and Snippets are sires which feature in the pedigrees

of Corumbene's horses, past and present. "I look at the freshman sires each year and will usually consider using three or four, but generally I prefer to use proven stallions," he says. "Another important factor to consider is the size of the progeny that each stallion produces. That way we can mate our mares according to size. We spend a lot of time at the sales looking at the stock that the stallions are producing. That's the sort of information you have to bear in mind."

Although he is very hands-on, Altomonte admits to consulting a trusted coterie of advisers. "Toby [Frazer] and I work very closely together but I also trust Vin Cox's opinion," Altomonte says of the highly

CORUMBENE STUD'S 2014 BROODMARE BAND

BROODMARE	BREEDING	LATEST BREEDING STATUS
ADRIA	More Than Ready-Purespeed, by Flying Spur	Yet to be served
AFRICAINE	Anabaa-Prized Possession, by Canny Lad	Missed
APPLE MARTINI	Encosta de Lago-Heavenly Dreamer, by Fusaichi Pegasus	Foaled Snitzel colt in August
BAHIA	Snippets-Miss Prospect, by Rory's Jester	Due to foal to Exceed And Excel
BOORALEE	Fastnet Rock-Isurava, by General Nediym	Yet to be served
BRIGHTEST	Galileo-Wasimah, by Danehill	Foaled Snitzel filly in August
BROTHERS DREAM	Redoute's Choice-Sydney's Dream, by Bletchingly	Due to foal to Sepoy
CHEETARA	More Than Ready-Dashing Eagle, by Danehill	Due to foal to Not A Single Doubt
CLAWS	Flying Spur-Frontier Star, by Luskin Star	Not served in 2013
CUT A DASH	Whisky Road-Not Enough, by Baguette	Missed
DIVA'S MAGIC	Redoute's Choice-Trisadiva, by Sir Tristram	Due to foal to Sepoy
DONNA'S APPEAL	Carnegie-Donna Natalia, by Anabaa	Due to foal to Choiris
DONNICA	Flying Spur-Queen Kathleen, by At Talaq	Due to foal to Snitzel
DOUBLE ONE	Flying Spur-Elevenses, by Star Way	Foaled Congrats colt in August
EMISSARY	Dehere-Heart Ruler, by Marscay	Due to foal to Medaglia d'Oro
ESPOUSAL	Flying Spur-Proclaim, by Quest For Fame	Due to foal to Smart Missile
FLIGHTY	Zabeel-Flitter, by Bluebird	Due to foal to Snitzel
FRENCH SCRIPT	Zabeel-Tearunner, by Skywalker	Due to foal to High Chaparral
GAMBLE	Encosta de Lago-Wager, Flying Spur	Due to foal to Hinchinbrook
GOURMET GARAGE	Canny Lad-Fleischer, by Danehill	Foaled Snitzel filly in August
HASNA	Snippets-They Say, by Thirty Six Red	Missed
ICEDGINGER	Tale Of The Cat-Brocaccia, by Brocco	Due to foal to Hinchinbrook
ICHIHARA	General Nediym-Cut A Dash, Whiskey Road	Yet to be served
ISURAVA	General Nediym-Cut A Dash, Whiskey Road	Due to foal to Snitzel
KYLIE	Danehill Dancer-Hula Wonder, by Hula Chief	Due to foal to Denman
LA BOISSELLE	Danehill-Sommes Sound, by Assert	Due to foal to High Chaparral
LA ZUMA	Zabeel-Countess Chloe, by Anabaa	Due to foal to High Chaparral
LONGLEA	Secret Savings-Woodie, by Woodman	Due to foal to Stratum
LOVEDAY	Danzero-Occasional Gain, by Lunchtime	Foaled Snitzel colt in August
MISSHIRAZ	Secret Savings-Viator, by Snaadee	Due to foal to Not A Single Doubt
POSTA	More Than Ready-Wager, by Flying Spur	Due to foal to Encosta de Lago
PURESPEED	Flying Spur-Lady Moulin, by Luskin Star	Slipped
ROMINCKA	More Than Ready-Hasna, by Snippets	Yet to be served
SURPASSING	More Than Ready-Superior Star, by Nothin' Leica Dane	Due to foal to So You Think
TROPICANA GIRL	Redoute's Choice-Get Around, Xaar	Foaled Sepoy filly in August
VENTURE	Elusive Quality-Abbotswood, by Sir Tristram	Due to foal to Stratum
WALKWAY	Exceed And Excel-Boardwalk Bell, by Bellotto	Due to foal to Snitzel
WASIMAH	Danehill-Kapchat, by Centaine	Due to foal to More Than Ready

respected managing director of Magic Millions. "I've had a good relationship with Vin for many years. I've always regarded him as a pretty good horseman so I'll often seek his advice."

When deciding whether or not to retain or sell his horses, Altomonte says he generally adheres to the fundamental rule of racing the fillies and selling the colts; a policy he deems a commercial necessity.

"We race a lot of mares ourselves and of course if they perform well they are added to our broodmare band," he says. "But you have to treat it like a business. If I'm sending 35-40 mares to the better quality stallions then the total service fees that we pay every year is quite high. If you are paying a million plus dollars in service fees, then you have to get that back. If I can recoup that expense by selling the colts, then I'm happy."

However, Altomonte is not averse to

racing a colt in his famous orange and brown spotted silks if it fails to fetch a reasonable market price. "We place a fair reserve on our stock and if they don't make that we keep them and that's why from time to time I may race a colt." This is what makes Altomonte's decision to sell Sebring so interesting. The son of More Than Ready was passed in at auction after failing to reach his reserve of \$150,000 but instead of keeping him, Altomonte sold him to Gai Waterhouse and Denise Martin of Star Thoroughbreds for \$130,000. He would go on to be crowned Champion 2YO Colt of his year amassing over \$2.5 million prize-money and earning connections a reported \$35 million in a lucrative stud deal.

"Sebring was a lovely colt," recalls Altomonte. "After I passed him in I was talking to Gai and I said to her, 'You should go and have a look at that fella, he's a nice

horse.' So Gai and Denise went and had a look at him and came back to me with an offer of 110. In the end I said to Gai, 'Look, 130 and that's it.' In retrospect I would have been better off if I said no," he says with a chuckle, "But good luck to them. The syndicate made a lot of money out of him."

So what is to become of Longreach, Overreach's three-quarter brother by Redoute's Choice who is the most recent foal from prized broodmare Bahia. Will he be put through the sales ring?

"Longreach, who is now a yearling, is a really nice colt. So is Outreach, Overreach's 2YO full-brother. They are both standout colts," Altomonte tells me, the fervour in his voice causing it to rise an octave. "Would I sell him? I could do, but I doubt it," he says. "He is an outstanding colt who I think will develop into a lovely horse. Perhaps even a Slipper horse!"