

Steel magnolias

Unconventional women show us how easy it is to turn a page and start anew. And change the rules of engagement and perception. All it needs is a little passion. We pick four trailblazers. By DEVI SINGH and RUPINDER KAUR

HORSE WHISPERER

AMEETA MEHRA

[India's only woman stud farm owner]

PROPELLED by destiny, she got into

something a lot of women would have little or no interest in. But that is not the moot point. Admirable is her perseverance and grit to carry on that has taken her to heights which even she didn't envisage. Ameeta Mehra, daughter of PK Mehra, the brainchild behind Usha Stud farms, has created several benchmarks in her long journey.

She entered the arena after she lost her parents in 2001 in a chopper crash. Many people, including her well wishers, thought that she would sell the stud farm as there was no male heir in the family to take care of the same. There were many apprehensions cast upon her capabilities in a male bastion which she overcame eventually.

Challenges were many as equine sports in India is majorly male-dominated with only one per cent of women in the fray. "Running and managing a leading stud farm was quite an anomaly as there were and are only a handful of women who are engaged in this profession. They either have very small establishments or are not a threat to the male domain of the large breeding and racing families that run stud farms, such as Shapoorji Palonji of Manjri Stud farms, Cyrus Poonawala of the Serum Institute of India, Vijay Mallya of Kunigal Stud Farm, not to mention the mega rich high profile owners who buy and own horses," says Mehra.

Even though she began winning several races, including the Derby, breaking records, she realised that she had to be twice as successful as her male counterparts to prove that she really was on top. And it was not just a fluke. "I have bred 13 Indian Derby winners besides breaking a host of other records. Still people are ready to cry hoarse if my results go down a notch one season," she tells us. Even today she gets to hear things like, "Oh her success is due to her manager who happens to be a man, or the stallion her father chose." However 15 years later, after managers have come and gone, stallions are dead and gone, the same people have started admitting that perhaps the merit lies with the woman who is running the farm.

In her own words, "I have broken the glass wall in this industry in more than one way." She consciously maintains



a tough, no nonsense demeanour, which might be an aberration considering the position she holds and the kind of industry she belongs to. Her decision of not socialising and wasting time in networking might stem due to an in-born reserve. She maintains a certain distance from everybody, not for any particular reason, but because she likes being on her own. She is definitely a spiritual person who seeks and enjoys her personal self and space. She devotes her leisure time composing music on piano, playing tennis, going for walks in the oak forests in the Himalayas, meditating, playing with her beloved dog Monk and spending time with her horses.

"Strangely, now no one expects me to show up anywhere. After a time, people realise, accept and respect you for the way you are but I can assure you the struggle would have been far easier had I been a man," she admits.

Having said that she would not change being a woman for anything in the world, saying, "I believe

my life can serve as an inspiration for other women and give them the belief that it doesn't matter who you are, man or woman, married or single. What matters is your undiluted focus on excellence and striving for perfection in whatever you do." Certainly she has broken ground in a male-dominated profession, proved her competitors and rivals wrong, preferred to remain single, all of which is a manifestation of what all a woman is capable of doing only if she wants to.

Her love for horses was intrinsic and not simply instilled in her. Growing up as a three-year-old, she had a Shetland pony as a pet in the family backyard. Despite all her passion for horses, she wanted to do nothing with her father's stud farm when she grew up. Instead she went to volunteer at Mirambika, Sri Aurobindo Ashram. But then she eventually returned home and decided to join her father in her late twenties. "My father systematically gave his knowledge to me. In fact, he had a quick temper and no patience to



teach anyone. But he told me that he was going to make an exception and teach me what he knew," she reminisces.

Having done an equine management course at the premier Irish National Stud with a gold medal for the best project on "How to select a stallion", her educational credentials did come in handy when the onus of handling the farm eventually fell on her.

Maybe it was his belief in her that catapulted her to these heights. "My father would often say to me that he has never met someone so strong which was really big as it was coming from one of the strongest and charismatic men I knew and know of," she adds.

The one important technique her father taught her about horse-breeding, which she hasn't forgotten even today is, "Nothing fattens a horse more than the master's eye." This means that it's not how much feed and fodder you give to a horse that makes it thrive and excel, but the amount of time, attention and loving care that you give that really helps it develop to its fullest potential.

Breeding of horses is both an art and a science. "The difference between a lot of breeders and top class horse-breeders like Aga Khan is that we create lineages and families that go on from generation to generation to make a big difference

to the breed of thoroughbreds. My aim is to bring a sense of pride in our Indian thoroughbred horse-breeding operations. The Indian racing and breeding industry is still niche, and if the government supports it even by 10 per cent, we can begin to export our Indian thoroughbreds for good prices abroad and compete internationally."

Even during her days as the first woman Stipendiary Steward of Delhi Race Club in 2002, she was both feared and respected for her independent views and ethical stand. "I'm not too bothered or conscious about my gender or the gender of those I am working with. Though I guess for a lot of people who are not used to dealing with a woman, it must be awkward."

On the dearth of women in equine sports in the country, she says, "The entry is based either through a relative or friend and without a relentless pursuit for excellence it is difficult to get to the top. I have to add one thing though, if I had to choose a career it would not be horse-breeding. Destiny has brought it to me and I took it up as a duty towards my parents. However, in my personal experience I have found that the Divine knows better what is best for you and boy I am lucky to have a father who saw no difference between a boy and girl."