



THE MIRACLE OF USHA

PRADEEP MEHRA'S
SUCCESS STORY

BY BOLD RULER



TREASURE LEAF

COMMON LAND



On sheer performance Major Pradeep Mehra, Grey Gaston and the Usha Stud must qualify for mention in the Guinness Book of records. No stud farm in the world not Caliborne or Gainesway or Coolmoore, has attained the sort of results achieved by Pradeep Mehra and the Usha Stud six derby winners (Indian) within ten years of its existence and Grey Gaston as his computer handout says, is the only stallion in the world to sire five national Derby winners.

Major Pradeep Mehra was associated with horses way before he went to breeding. But his success can be put down to phenomenal luck in his early days and exceptional organisation ability once things began to move for him, with, of course, a sound background of horses. Pradeep's horse sense came from the army, where he was an officer in the elite 61st Cavalry, known for its abundance of horsemen. Like a number of his colleagues, Mehra was also a polo player and a good one at that. For in his best years he commanded an international five handicap and played polo on the best grounds of the world.

Pradeep entered the field in 1969 in a very small way when breeding was not the multi-million rupee industry that it is today. With the help of his father, who was a UNICEF doctor based in London, Mehra imported three English mares in foal—Dusty Marta, Traxana and Nut. Since he did not have his own farm, the mares were liveried on some stud in Rajasthan. The first horses to have been bred by Major Mehra were Rare Earth, Track Star and Nectar king all of whom did well on the track.

After having learnt a little about breeding Pradeep decided to get

more venturesome. Some time in '73 he convinced his father to loan him £ 10,000 a pittance to buy horses in Europe undeterred. Knowing that most of the market was beyond his reach, Mehra cast his eye on a very cheap grey, which he purchased for £ 2,750 and expected to use him as a stallion. Grey Gaston was dry-coated and many senior Indian breeders expressed surprise that he was being imported into the country.

Pradeep disregarded their opinion and bought him because he says, "I just liked his looks". Pradeep's selection of Grey Gaston as a stallion was a pure gamble at long odds and it was just his luck that the horse clicked.

In retrospect, his firmness in turning a deaf ear to opinions on Grey Gaston must be the best decision he has taken in all his life for Grey Gaston was a foundation of Usha Stud and

amassed a king's ransom for Pradeep Mehra. With the rest of his money he imported six mares in foal C. Major Subtle Star, Lassoie, Queen Go Go, Auriolita and Orcharine.

While his new stock was being imported to India Major Mehra was now based in Delhi with the President's Bodyguard. Grey Gaston and his band of mares were stabled on the grounds of Rashtrapati Bhavan where Pradeep had established a backyard stud. Grey Gaston had his first covering season at Rashtrapati Bhavan and his first crop, which included Manitou, was born on the same premises.

It is at this time when the backyard stud began to bulge at its seams, today Pradeep did think seriously about establishing his own stud some where in the outskirts of Delhi. As before he had financial limitations and the various banks he visited did not think breeding was a safe investment. Not surprisingly the banks warned because around that time Ranjit Bhat, who later became a very famous owner, had agreed to go into partnership with Major Mehra. But he backed out at the last moment because Ranjit felt there was no future in breeding.

But Providence played its part for Major Mehra. One day after a polo game he chanced his arm with an Italian gentleman who was the manager of City Bank in Delhi. Being a polo fan, the Italian was very receptive to Mehra's ideas and agreed to get him a loan provided he gave the bank some securities against the loan Pradeep Mehra had no securities and while discussing how to circumvent the problem he happened to mention the name of the Italian ambassador in India, a polo fan and a personal friend of Major Mehra.

The manager, on hearing the Italian ambassador's name, told Pradeep if he could get him to sign as a guarantor then the loan was through. The rest was a formality and Pradeep Mehra received his cheque book. The very next day. The horses were shifted to the Usha Stud in the outskirts of Delhi some time in 1974 and a few months later Pradeep Mehra left the Army. The rest is history. From an unknown breeder Major Mehra spiralled to the top of the ladder. So much so that money never posed a problem for him again. As he says, the loan of Rs. 5,00,000 from the City Bank was the only time I had to borrow money for this stud.



L to R EMENINCE, TICK TOCK, SNOW, SELF RELIANCE, C MINOR, CAMINETTO

Mare Celendine with her foal by Common Land, the foal is half brother to CAMINO, CAMINETTO and CORRENTE-de-OURO



Pradeep Mehra did face a few teething problems when he was breaking into the breeding industry. As he recounts it, his first experience in 1972 when he brought Track Star for the sales at Mahalaxmi. Apparently nobody ventured into the ring for three to four days and Pradeep was a very worried man. Towards the end, Sham Ruia and Radha Sigtia showed interest in Track Star. They liked the colt and agreed to buy him on the condition that Soli Captain vetted the horse.

Later Captain duly examined the horse and to the dismay of Mehra pronounced him unsound. Now even more dejected Pradeep sheepishly enquired of Captain, the reasons for his judgement. Soli in characteristic style, is supposed to have told Mehra: "Young man if you do not know why then you have no business to be a breeder".

As it turned out Captain's veto was a blessing in disguise. In sheer desperation, Pradeep walked into Rashid Byramji's stable without knowing him and asked him to train Track Star till he could be sold with the condition that Pradeep would not pay the basic training fee for the interim period till the sale. He recalls Byramni started laughing. But, as luck was on his side, Rashid gave his assent and Pradeep got an entry right from the start of his breeding career with the best trainer in India.

Once Gray Gaston's progeny started coming into the auction sales it was also smooth sailing for Major Mehra success was instantaneous, as he proudly says, "Grey Gaston's first foal, was Manitou.

Since then I have only known Derby winners. At the height of this proverbs Pradeep likes to compare the demand for Grey Gaston's Stock with that of Northern Dancer. All though he had absolutely no illusions regarding the quality of their respective progeny as he rightly says, "No stud in Europe or in North America would want to feed Grey Gaston or his stock even for one day".

To understand Major Mehra's claim you have to look into Grey Gaston's performance. Since he was retired to stud in 1973 until his death he had sired 11 crops of 89 foals of 81 runners and 54 winners who have won a total stakes of over Rs.1.68 crores (this does not include his last two crops). His progeny include five

Indian Derby winners in Manitou, Track Lightning, Nelson, Enterprising and Revelation. With such performers the demand for Grey Gaston stock was feverish and he even made Every Day II to look ordinary. Majority of the stock sold privately with the biggest owners in India, without exception, trying to beat each other to get first pick. It is reasonable to believe that what prices the Usha Stud got for their Grey Gaston stock, no stud in

Indian breeding history has ever received and it is highly unlikely that any stud will come close to getting such dream prices.

Although, without a doubt, the Usha Stud products, has a stamp of quality, Major Mehra's salesmanship has got a lot to do with the high prices he has received for years. Pradeep Mehra has a very open selling policy. The gates of Usha Stud welcomes



Treasure Leaf weanlings in the Paddock.

Automatic Pop up Sprinklers with complete underground pipes



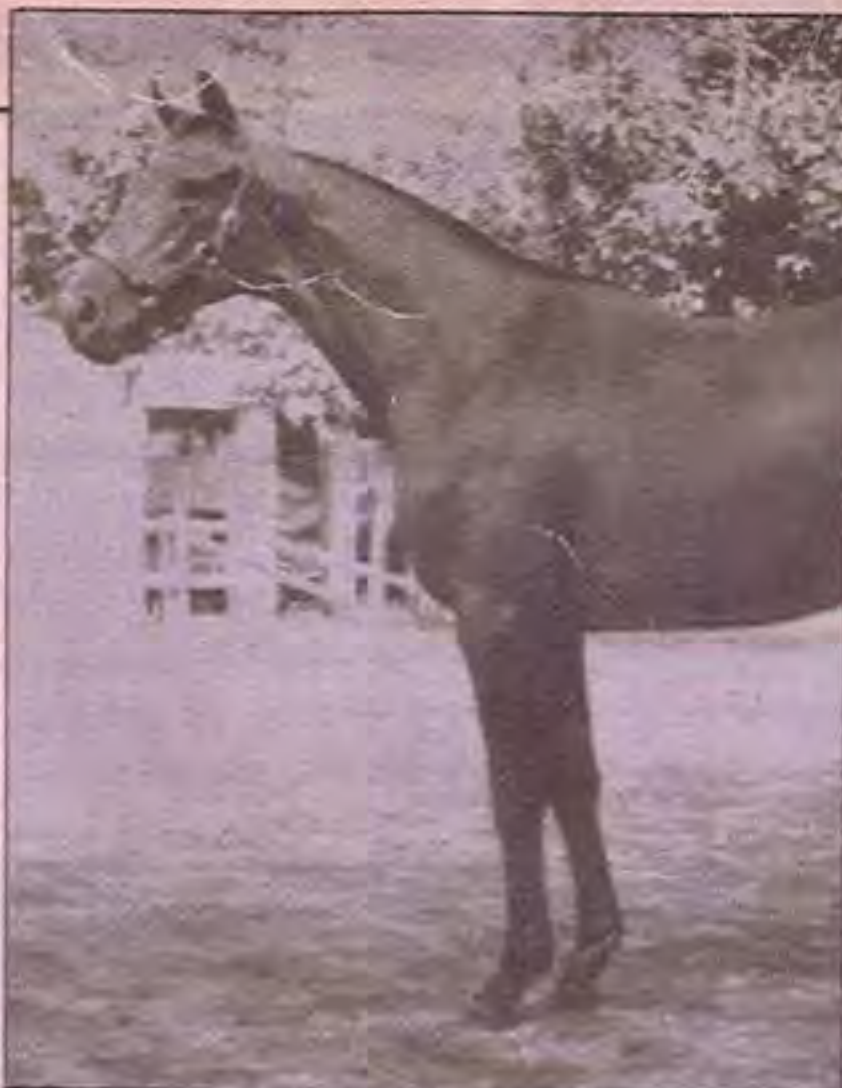
anybody who can afford to pay his price as Pradeep explains, "Anybody's money is good for me provided he agrees on my price". Even though

Dr. M. A. M. Ramaswamy, the late N. M. Irani, and a number of Rashid Byramji's owners were regular buyers of Usha Stud stock, none of them got any preference. It was all on a first come first served basis. At various times this policy may have annoyed some of them, but it has not made Pradeep change, for he basically feels that any buyer with money power can walkout of the Usha Stud with a top class yearling.

Mehra is also credited a quick mind and the ability to gauge the financial resources of different buyers and thus flex his pricing from buyers to buyer. Breeders also vouch for his shrewdness and admire the way he has managed to get fancy prices every year apart from being called shrewd and having an open selling policy. Major Mehra has also shown himself to be a man with a lot of guts. Specially the year when Dr. Ramaswamy showed open dissatisfaction over the purchase of four Usha youngsters, which included Track Lightning. After keeping the horses for nearly a year, MAM is supposed to have expressed his dissatisfaction over the lot.

According to Pradeep, he left insulted at being told that the stock that he regarded highly was not rated by his buyer and that is why he agreed to buy them back provided Rashid Byramji, his trainer and by that time a good friend, pronounced them sound. Rashid passed three of them, which included Track Lightning. If Major Mehra is to be believed, he gave back M. A. M. the original sale amount a profit of each of three horses. This act of bravado, which no breeder would have agreed to go through, enhanced Pradeep's credibility and did him a world of good in his future sales.

Another brilliant fact of his telling is that Pradeep Mehra has managed to get back all his well performed mares for breeding. It is evident if you go through his book of Brood Mares. Classic winners like Blue Ice, Camineto, Snow and Eminence are all back in the farm to breed. This is because Mehra rarely sells a filly bred at the Usha Stud, in most cases they are leased out for their racing career and returned back to the Usha Stud once they are retired from racing. By this policy all the well per-



Bay Colt by Grey Gaston out of Fin'st.

formed Grey Gaston or Common Land mares have all retired to Usha Stud and they have enhanced the quality of his breeding stock for free.

With all his high power selling, Mehra does provide a few novelties, like if a client wishes, he can inspect yearlings even at night because their well appointed lawn where they display their youngsters has got floodlights installed all around. Pradeep is a lavish and excellent host. This must be true because the style should have rubbed off on him after mixing for years with the cream of European society during his polo playing days.

The basis of all Pradeep Mehra's big talk and confidence is the expertise of the Usha Stud and the quality of his end-products. With all the success he has enjoyed it is evident that Pradeep has poured in a lot of money into the stud and organised the farm brilliantly. There are 75 mares on the farm. There are English mares as well as well performed Indian mares. To service the lot they have three stallions—Treasure Leaf whose produce has yet to come into the auction ring, Common Land and Track Lightning.

The stables at the Usha Stud are well designed. They are spacious and have excellent ventilation. In case the heat gets overbearing in the summer, they are provided with fans and the three stallions have air conditioners. The maintenance staff is largely drawn from the army, all experienced hands at handling horses. Also there is an abundance of man power. As Pradeep says, "there is one man for every horse".

The stud has 28 large paddocks spread over 140 acres. The three stal-

lions have a separate paddock each and the remainder is used by the yearlings and mares. Pradeep has taken a lot of trouble and spent a fair amount of money on developing his paddocks because he is a firm believer in grazing. To ensure that his horses have grazing all round the year he has an excellent watering system, thanks to the extensive underground pipelines and automatic sprinklers.

Pradeep Mehra has an experienced management staff, which is quite capable of looking after the farm in his absence. His general manager col. Ajit Singh who live on the farm and was Mehra's boss in the Army, is an experienced horseman. So much so that Indian breeding circles credit a fair part of Usha Stud success to his acumen. At Ajit Singh's beck and call are two resident vets, both with army backgrounds Captain Paugat, who has been a breeding overseer for over 50 years, and Captain Kaushal, who in his long career has worked at the famed Renala Stud, now in Pakistan. To assist both these vets, there is a small laboratory on the farm, which is not very advanced but basic jobs like swab and blood tests can be carried out.

There is another man on the Usha Stud though on the supervisory staff whose reputation has spread down South. He is Pradeep's oldest employee and has grown with the stud. The one eyed jamadar Devi Singh the man who is said to know the ins and outs of the breeding operation at the stud.

Whatever the quality of breeding stock and expertise, the upbringing is very important. Pradeep's formula is Nature his horses must be bred close to Nature. Like most North Indian studs, the Usha Stud also believes in leaving the youngsters out and letting them grow in the paddocks. Two months after birth the yearlings are put out to roam the paddocks and except for the monsoon period, when they are brought in, they spend most of their lives in open space.

The weanlings are weighed immediately after birth then they are weighed at monthly intervals. As far as feeding goes, each horse has a separate menu. This is changed every week. Pradeep likes his horses to grow up though he does not believe in pampering them. The youngsters are encouraged to play around as much as possible in the paddocks even if it means risking injury. At times injuries

Pics. URMILA DONGRE

do occur with considerable financial losses, like a year and half back when he lost Track Sound, a half brother to Track Lightning. As a yearling the horse put his foot into a hole in the paddock and his fetlock became double the normal size. The horse lost his potential and now competed in the Delhi races.

These incidents according to Pradeep are part of the hazards of breeding and it does not deter him from changing his attitude towards the upbringing of through bred. He is also very clear when he says, "I do not like to use artificial means" and he prefers that a weak foal dies instead of having a crippled foal.

By Usha Stud standards, they are having a very clean year. The present crop of three year olds are not up to much, and you can safely go further by saying Grey Gaston's crop has flopped this year. Pradeep agrees with the assessment, but gives his reasons. In 1981 he wanted to promote Common Land so the best mares went to him and Grey Gaston got nothing. Out of the ten Grey Gaston's in training five are outside mares who were only covered by the great sire, so they do not have the Usha upbringing. Out of his five, Usha bred, Allah Rakhka is the best. It is true that Common Land's crop is better and the horses expected to perform cre-

dibility in the Classics are Exciting, Emulation and Oncidium.

Pradeep Mehra is undeterred by his performance this year. In fact he is expecting to bounce back strongly into the Classic picture next year. Pradeep feels the 1983 Grey Gaston crop "is the strongest crop of Grey Gaston ever". He singles out four horses who should do very well for him. A full sister to Camino and Camineto, a Dollar Girl filly, a Hornet's Nest colt and a On The Wind colt. All four are with Bezan Chenoy and two are owned by Vijay Mallaya who is expected to make a big impact next year.

Being a big and top market breeder, Pradeep Mehra has to race a lot of horses under his colours. Sometimes it is more than the normal share, because he does not get the prices he is looking for. Although if he gets the price, Pradeep would prefer to sell all his horses. Mehra even as an owner has had luck. He has picked a number of Classics, including the Indian Derby with Nelson. Ironically, he could not be sold. So Pradeep had to race him and win the Derby. Most of his horses are trained by either Rashid Byramji or Bezan Chenoy and like all his opinion which are clear and firm Byramji is his first choice, or number one

trainer. At times Mehra does indulge himself in the auction ring to enrich his stock. But he is only on the look out for Prince Pradeep and Everyday II blood, as he says, "there is a nick in them"

Breeding has been one big honeymoon for Pradeep Mehra. It has given him large dividends and has made the Usha Stud the fulcrum of the breeding industry. But present signs are that the honeymoon period may just be over. Grey Gaston is dead and his last crop will come into the ring this year. Col. Ajit Singh, who had been with Usha for eight years, has left the stud. Although Common Land has produced a Derby winner in Almanac, he is not rated anywhere near Grey Gaston. Treasure Leaf's first lot will be sold only in 1987. And for his crop to prove will take some time.

For at least some time Pradeep Mehra will have to give up his Numero Uno status. There is a lot of work and praying to be done for Treasure Leaf to click. But whatever, the outcome of Treasure Leaf's progeny even the Usha Stud's biggest detractors are unanimous when they say that Pradeep Mehra will always produce a quality throughbred and remain a top Indian breeder.

TREASURE LEAF

Treasure Leaf by Lyphard out of Noble Treasure by Vaguely Noble is an extremely well bred horse and is the number one stallion of the Usha Stud. He raced entirely in France and ran in the colours of the Greek Shipping Tycoon Stavros Niarchos. In his racing career Treasure Leaf won two races. As a two year old he did not race and ran his first race at three in the Prix Juigne a listed race over 2100 mts. for unraced horses. He led all the way and just when it looked he was going to win Treasure Leaf folded up to finish third.

He next ran in the Prix Flying Fox at ST Cloud over 2100 mts. which he won beating a useful horse by the name of Fabuleux Dancer who currently stands as a stallion at the famed Windfields Farm. Apart this Treasure Leaf ran in the biggest race of his life, the

Group II Prix Hocquart at Long Champ over 2400 mts. He finished a far from disgraced fourth in a field of five. Later in his career he picked up a race in the French Provinces.

Like all Lyphards Treasure Leaf was a late developer and that is why he did not race as a two year old. But as a three year old he showed enough promise to be prepared for the Hocquart. Lyphard had another distinctive trait, in general he preferred soft going. This is born out by the fact that Lyphards performance as a stallion was lopsided. He was brilliant in France where the going is generally soft and was just passable in America where it is firm going. According to Patrick Barbe a French Blood Stock Agent Treasure Leaf is also preferred soft going.

Treasure Leaf is the fifth Lyphard horse to stand as a stallion in India. Mister Dan who stands at Qutab was the first. He has three crops in training of which Vinegar who is in class II and Daniro are the best. Daniro who just won two races in Pune has shown much greater promise this season than what he did during the last Bombay season. Just showing he is a late developer. Hardinvast was next and he has two crops in training who haven't done much. The lots of Hard To Say and Pearl Of Life will be auctioned this year.

So it is too early to pronounce any judgement on Lyphards influence in Indian racing. There is one consolation that the fifth Lyphard Treasure Leaf is standing at one of the Usha Stud and will get the best band of mares to start with.