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IRISH NATIONAL STUD: The First Lady of Indian racing and breeding

By Leo Powell on 23 April 2021



Ameeta Mehra

Leo Powell caught up this week with one of the most successful graduates of the INS course, Ameeta Mehra

ON a fact-finding mission to India in 2009, one of the highlights of my trip was a visit to Ameeta Mehra's Usha Stud Farm, and later to enjoy her company during an important raceday at Hyderabad. Indeed, she was among the winners that day, her horse Yana taking the local Group 1 The Poonawalla Stud Farms & Breeders Stayers' Cup.

This week I managed to catch up with Ameeta, a very busy lady whose interests lie beyond just horses. She is a very enlightened lady, with a passion for education, spiritual development and the arts.

She is also one of the most successful owners and breeders in the history of Indian racing. Ameeta was thrust into the latter position due to a family tragedy but, like the case of His Highness the Aga Khan, she rose to the challenge.

She said: "That was a huge challenge, because I never wanted to hold the reins of the stud farm, and viewed my roles as supporting and working with my father. It was a terrible blow

when I lost my family [father Pradeep, mother Veena and younger sister Radhika] on January 2nd, 2001 in a helicopter crash.

Divine Grace

"I think it was the Divine Grace that carried me through that ordeal. It was never my plan to follow my father into the business at Usha. My plan was to go deeper into education and spiritual development, dramatics, literature and music. My dream was to start a University of Tomorrow.

"However, there is a saying that 'Man proposes, but God disposes'. It was a combination of my father's attractive proposal, and the Divine's plan, that made me take up horse breeding."

Ameeta's family are remembered, and their spirit lives on, at Usha's yearling farm. There, in a very tranquil setting and perhaps inspired by certain areas at the Irish National Stud, the family is commemorated with a monument erected on the beautifully manicured lawns.

Charismatic

Who is this inspirational father that Ameeta mentions with great love? Major P.K. Mehra was, by all accounts, a most charismatic man. He eschewed the idea of following his own father into medicine, instead joining the army and becoming a polo player of international renown.

The latter fact was recalled recently following the death of Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh. Queen Elizabeth's husband visited India in 1966, and took part in a three-match series, as did Pradeep Mehra. The latter knew Prince Philip very well and had played polo for and against him.

At the time Mehra was a young officer in the 61st Cavalry. When Prince Philip went to Jaipur the officer sent him an invitation for a dinner at his residence. The Prince accepted the invitation and Mehra also invited the Maharaja and Maharani, and his great friend Ved Ahuja. It is an evening that is still remembered, all the more so now.

Strong Irish connections continue to this day

ACCORDING to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term 'baker's dozen' originated in the late 16th century and is so called after the former practice among bakers of including a thirteenth loaf when selling a dozen to a retailer, the extra loaf representing the retailer's profit.

The term could also refer now to the number of students from India who have travelled to Tully, Co Kildare to participate in the Irish National Stud Thoroughbred Management Course. The first came in 1980, while the most recent was Anja Shroff in 2017.

Anja's father is the former Indian champion jockey Pesi, and he is now a trainer. He currently handles the career of the brilliant Immortality, the recent Indian Oaks and Derby winner, bred by Ameeta Mehra and owned by her in partnership.

Indian Derby

Pesi Schroff rode the winner of the Indian Derby at Mumbai on eight occasions, the last being in 2004 on the filly Psychic Flame. That daughter of Razeen was bred at Usha, was sired by their phenomenally successful stallion Razeen, and she is the grandam of Immortality.

Ameeta Mehra is a graduate of the INS course in 1991, and it is noteworthy that a scion of another of India's great equine families, Simone Poonawalla, won the gold medal on the 1998 course. Ameeta was also honoured during her year, her award-winning project on 'How to select a stallion' being praised and referred to by the then CEO John Clarke, coinciding as it did with the stud's purchase of Ahonoora.

Grassick link

Ameeta's route to the course came via a recommendation from the late Brian Grassick to Major Mehra. The Grassick family then and today are close friends of Ameeta. She explained: "I have had a long associations with the Grassick family. Brian was a friend of my father and he helped to buy Razeen and Steinbeck.

"I bought Multidimensional through Brian, and then Speaking Of Which through Cathy. I have stayed at their home during my Irish National Stud time and later, and have fond memories of Sheila, Cathy, Sally Ann and the family. We go back a long way."

Fellow classmates of Ameeta on the course included Bill Dwan of The Castlebridge Consignment, Niamh O'Sullivan, and Grade 1-winning US trainer Brendan Walsh. Asked about memories of her time at Tully, she smiles and said: "My fondest memories were going to the bar in Kildare with my fellow students and having Guinness, farrier classes with Martin Leahy, and the night foalings with the nurse in charge Mags, who is still a good friend and keeps in touch."

Give a filly a great name

IMMORTALITY. What a name to give a special filly.

The name also neatly sums up a lifetime of work by Ameeta Mehra at Usha Stud Farm, the brainchild of her late father.

The filly has won four of her five career starts, including the Indian Oaks and Derby at Mumbai and the Golconda Oaks at Hyderabad. She is a daughter of Multidimensional, out of a mare by China Visit, and the grandam Psychic Flame, also winner of the Indian Oaks, is by Razeen. All three stallions mentioned have enjoyed immense success and stood at Usha.

Usha is home currently to the 18-year-old Multidimensional and the 12-year-old Speaking Of Which, a son of the Irish National Stud's flagbearer Invincible Spirit. Multidimensional, a son of Danehill, was trained by Sir Henry Cecil for the Niarchos Family. A Group 2 winner in France, he was beaten a neck in the Hardwicke Stakes at Royal Ascot.

At stud in India he has sired 34 individual classic winners who have won 59 of their classics. A multi-champion stallion, Immortality is his second Indian Derby winner.

Speaking Of Which

Bred and raced by Moyglare Stud, Speaking Of Which was a runaway winner of the Group 3 Gallinule Stakes before moving to the USA where he became a Grade 2 winner. His first crop are this year's classic runners and what a start he has made, with three such winners already. Gift Of Grace won the Indian 1000 Guineas, Rosina captured the Calcutta Oaks, while Sir Supremo landed the South India Derby.

Standing alongside Multidimensional is his 25-time winning son Multitude, successful four times in the Calcutta Champions' Sprint Trophy and classic-placed, and the former Aidan O'Brien-trained Grade 1 Belmont Derby Invitational Stakes winner Deauville, a son of Galileo and out of a Danehill mare.

It would literally take a book to write about or do justice to the success of Usha Stud Farm and the Mehra family. One of just a tiny number of women at the top of the racing and breeding tree in her native country, Ameeta Mehra's journey continues with great aplomb. Her post-Tully achievements would certainly entitle her to a Summa Cum Laude distinction.

See: www.ushastud.com and www.gnostic.in

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