

Mehra's good years

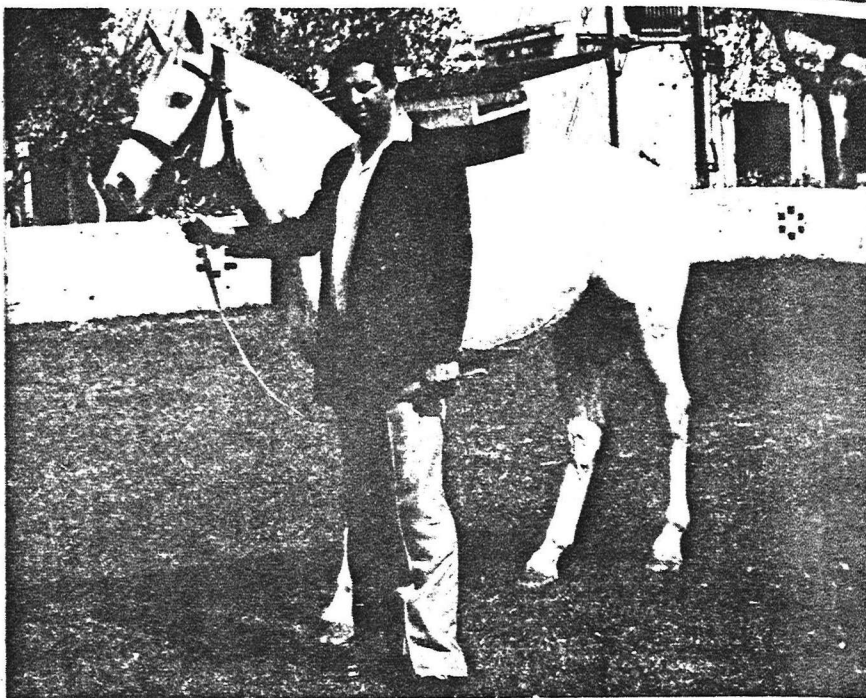
When Nelston came romping home to win this year's Indian Derby held at Bombay which is one of the most coveted races in India, he became the third consecutive Derby winner bred at the Usha Stud and Agricultural Farm Private Ltd., a feat that has no parallel in the breeding industry throughout the world.

The owner, Major Pradeep Mehra (43), the man with the winning touch, today dominates the country's fledgling horse breeding industry like a colossus. He owns Grey Gaston and Common Land, two stallions which have made the greatest impact on the Indian horse racing scene. Between them they have sired four Indian Derby winners in the short span of six years and four Breeder's Cup winners in the last three years. In fact, according to Mehra, every third foal produced at Usha Stud has been a classic winner and every second foal produced by the farm has been accorded class I status.

Luck & vibrations. Mehra attributes his success to his great expertise in horses, good management of the farm, having the number one trainer Rashid Byramji to train his top horses and of course, an element of luck. Instinct obviously counts for a lot too and Mehra says, "I get vibrations about horses. When Nelston ran, I had foot vibrations and sure enough he won though he was least expected to. In the first place, I couldn't even sell Nelston because he had an *asudha* a whirl below the level of the eyes which is considered unlucky for anyone who buys the horse. For hundreds of years, people have strongly believed in this superstition. But, for me, even an *asudha* has brought luck," he beams, somewhat modestly since his success cannot be attributed wholly to luck.

Interested in horses before he even learnt to walk, Mehra has been close to horseflesh all his life. For sixteen years in the army, which he joined in 1959, he was in the 61st Cavalry in charge of about 400 horses and from 1971-75 was commandant of the President's bodyguard. One of the top polo players of the world, Mehra has played polo all over the globe, has won several trophies and even captained the English team in England in 1968, 1969 and 1970. And of course he has been breeding horses since 1963.

Mehra made his entry into the breed-



Mehra with Grey Gaston: the man with the winning touch

ing industry while still in the army. In 1963 he bought two carefully selected broodmares for Rs 2,500 each, which turned out to be real bargains. With these two mares as his stock in trade, he made a start as a backyard breeder in a garage of his army quarters in Jaipur, where he was then posted. Slowly he spread his wings and by 1972, he had acquired 50 acres of land in Delhi on installment with a loan from a bank—and Usha Stud was launched.

With the stallion Grey Gaston, which he bought in 1974 for only \$2,750 (Rs. 27,500) he struck gold. Grey Gaston's first foal, Manitou, won the Indian Derby in 1978, has won the Indian Turf Invitation Cup and a host of other classics and has earned stake money of approximately Rs. 10.48 lakhs. Grey Gaston has also sired Track Lightning, winner of the Indian Derby 1981, the Indian Turf Invitation Cup and other classics, which earned him stake money of Rs 12.67 lakhs and Nelston, winner of Indian Derby 1983, Deccan Derby and the Hyderabad Colts Trial Stakes. Grey Gaston is the only stallion in the country to have sired three Indian Derby winners and he has produced 30 foals for Mehra in the last seven years and commands a very high price by way of covering charges.

Hardy northerners. Now a successful and

full time breeder with 200 acres of land, 60 broodmares and top quality produce every year, Mehra observes: "The good horses are now all coming from the north and even a mediocre North Indian horse is better than one bred in Poona and Bangalore as is evidenced by the fact that the north, with about 20% of the total breeding bloodstock, is able to capture 80% of the wins in Indian racing." Driving this point home, Mehra says: "The extreme climate, the dry heat and the rich soil of north India make horses hardy—they thrive in it."

Mehra claims his horses are sturdy because he leaves them out in the open as close to nature as possible in large paddocks of 8 to 10 acres. The soil is good, there's grass to nibble all the time, there is a dairy for horses and Mehra looks after their diet himself.

Currently very much in demand because of his winning streak, Mehra explains: "In horse racing only the winner is remembered and racing memories being very short, you are as good as your last race. Winning the Derby is of course the ultimate and is the ambition of every stud farm owner. A horse breeder who wins the Indian Derby has it good for at least a few years."

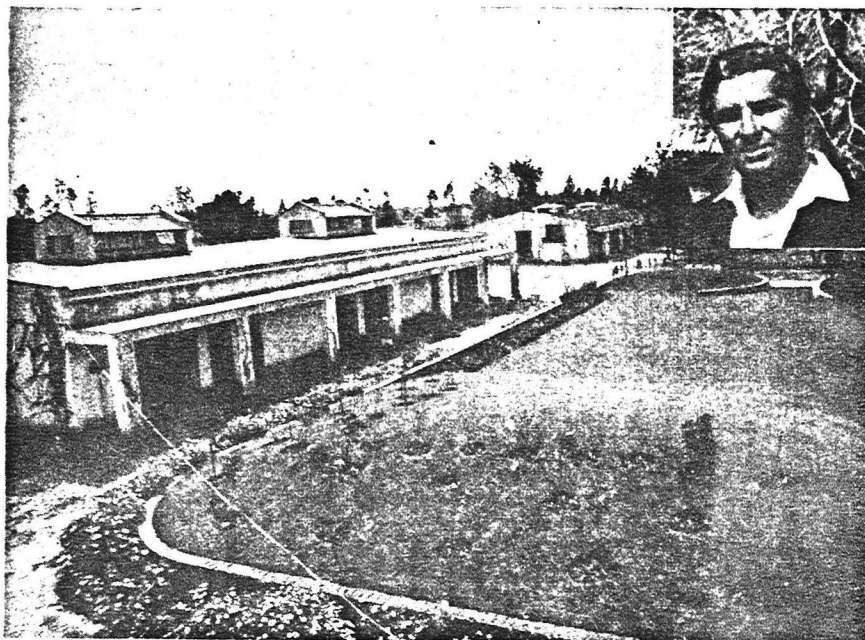
And right now, these are Mehra's good years.

nevertheless feel that they are involved in a race liberally sprinkled with obstacles right from the basic stage of purchasing land for a stud farm, onwards.

The land ceiling legislation operative in most states imposes definite and somewhat low limits on the size a stud farm can ever attain. Comments Anil Mukhi quoted earlier: "For a stud farm with good bloodstock one-and-a-half acres of land per animal is the bare minimum that should be available—ideally it should be much more. In India because of land ceiling legislation even the bigger farms which have more than 100 horses have only 200-300 acres and because of this they can't rear very many more horses even if they want to—the land ceiling acts as a ceiling on expansion as well."

Land is not the only resource that is in short supply. Stud farms in India are currently finding it difficult to meet their requirements of skilled manpower as well. Cyrus Poonawalla (41), owner of Poona Stud, Poonawalla Stud & Agricultural Farm and Greenfield Stud in Pune feels that horsebreeders are faced with a chronic shortage of trained staff who are of paramount importance to the well being of horses and consequently to a stud farm.

"High on the priority list of trained staff needed by a farm is a good veterinary doctor and a good farrier (who looks after the horses' much prized feet). There are only about 25 top-class veterinary doctors in the country. This severe shortage is caused by the fact that most veterinarians are



Usha Stud Farm. Inset: Mehra

trained in bovine and not equine treatment. Because of this many of them don't have a clue about horses and mortality rates at some stud farms are rather high. Farriers are also very scarce and a number of farms often have to share the services of a single farrier even though it is vitally important that each farm has its own farrier as a racehorse's most important asset are its feet."

And the reason for this shortage is the depressed level of wages according to Mahmood Ali (54), former top comedian, producer and director of Hindi films and owner of the 180-acre Ali Estate Agricultural Stud Farm near Bangalore. "In India, a veterinary doctor gets around Rs. 1,000-Rs. 2,000 a month, with the exceptional one getting about Rs. 2,000-Rs. 2,500 and the syces on an average get about Rs 150-Rs. 175 a month. No wonder the industry is not attracting trained staff," says Ali who comments that staff are paid much higher wages in the US, for instance. But even for relatively well paid functions such as that of trainer, there is a shortage. Even worse, as Rajendra Singh of Idar says, "Agreed, there are about 200 trainers in the country, but of these only a few count. Far from developing indifferent horses, most trainers destroy good horses and 40% of our horses break down during training."

According to people in the industry, the short-sighted government policies only aggravate the problems inherent in the business. According to Rajendra Singh, "One of the biggest stumbling

blocks is the lack of bank finance, which has starved the industry of funds. Sadly enough, the government looks at it from what is after all a one-sided viewpoint, of the industry being a non-essential one which not only does not serve any social purpose but also promotes gambling."

ADDITIONAL DISCREPANCY

And insurance companies are not proving helpful either. "Not only is the insurance premium rate of 5.5% *ad valorem* for a horse very high, but an additional discrepancy is that insurance companies don't insure horses for more than Rs. 5 lakhs when many stallions are actually worth six times that amount," says Mukhi quoted earlier.

And it is not only the dyed-in-the-wool policies of the nationalised banking sector that those in the industry feel strongly about. The widespread feeling is that while the government collects its dues by way of stiff taxes, not even a small percentage of taxes collected come back to the industry. Comments Madhavrao Scindia: "Till five years ago, horsebreeding was totally tax-free like agriculture. Now 80% of our profits are taxed and only 20% is tax-free, which does not even cover depreciation." Scindia feels that the disastrous effects of this new taxation policy have begun to be felt only recently. "Government must realise that our capital machinery is the highly vulnerable broodmare. Secondly the business has a built in high risk factor, so there should be at least a 75% tax concession."

Mehmood Ali (right): depressed wage levels

