

# Remembering a master thoroughbred breeder

MAJOR Mehra belonged to a family of doctors and lawyers with a royal ancestry in Lahore. They moved to New Delhi when the British Indian empire was split into Pakistan and India, receiving a meagre compensation for what they had left behind.

Dr R.L. Mehta, Maj Mehra's father, became a leading New Delhi hospital's chief surgeon. He was initially upset when Maj Mehra became the only member of the family to join the army instead of becoming a doctor like himself - but Maj Mehra had been fond of horses and riding since childhood.

He used to clamber on to any donkey or pony that appeared near his house as a boy. Being so passionately involved, he joined the army to be with horses always. After serving in 61 Cavalry, he went on to command the President's Body Guards at New Delhi. During this time he took up polo seriously, playing in various countries at the crucial No.3 position. He was reportedly coached by Colonel Kishen Singh, a stalwart of a bygone era when India dominated world polo. All this went into the making of a man who masterminded certain changes in the way his countrymen raised and sold thoroughbreds.

Maj Mehra began to breed thoroughbreds in 1969 with three mares imported from England in his father's name. They were Nut, Traxana and Dusty Marta and they came in-foal to Psidium, Starry Halo and Espresso respectively.

Maj Mehra boarded them at the Alwar Stud in Rajasthan since he did not have his own premises then. He later established a stud - literally in the backyard of his official quarters at the presidential estate. India's foremost trainer Rashid Byramji became Maj Mehra's first buyer when he went there to see the progeny of the foundation mares. Byramji bought the colt foaled by Nut and trained him with the colt foaled by Traxana.

The relationship that developed between Byramji and Maj Mehra subsequently had far-reaching consequences. The third foal of Dusty Marta, the other foundation mare enhanced the reputation of both these men while heralding the reign of his sire Grey Gaston (GB).

Gautam Kotwal reported in Racing Today that Maj Mehra got his father to loan him £10,000 in 1973. He chose the cheaply available Grey Gaston for a stallion in England knowing that other horses would be unaffordable. After paying £2750 for Grey Gaston, he bought six mares with the rest of the loan.

Grey Gaston was dry-coated and several Indian breeders warned Maj Mehra about buying him for India. Struck by the horse's looks, Maj Mehra ignored the warnings. Grey Gaston was provided with air conditioning and everything that could be conducive to his well being.

During the early years, he was stabled in the backyard establishment and exercised in a nearby polo ground. It was at this establishment that Grey Gaston sired Manitou, the third foal of Dusty Marta, in his first crop. Trained by Byramji, Manitou became the first of Grey Gaston's five Indian Derby winners and three Indian Turf Invitation Cup winners.

Grey Gaston later sired Bangalore summer Derby winners Camino and Caminetto, Indian 1000 Guineas winner Snow, Golconda St. Leger winner C. Minor and several other classic winners.

Pedigree expert B. Vijay explained why Grey Gaston was such a success in book that he published in 1986. Vijay considered Grey Gaston as a prepotent stallion whose success lay in his pedigree. Paternal grandsire Grey Sovereign, sire Fortino II and maternal grandsire Skymaster were exponents of speed. Stallions further up in the pedigree like

*A thoroughbred breeder is remembered by the stock he chooses, what he achieves with them and other skills. When a helicopter carrying Major P.K. Mehra, his wife, a daughter and others crashed on January 2, we could merely report their deaths. We now look at the skills for which Maj Mehra will always be remembered.*

Nasrullah, Golden Cloud and Court Martial were known for imparting brilliant, precocious speed. His pedigree stood out against those of contemporary stallions who had concentrations of stamina in their pedigrees.

Despite the speedy elements in his pedigree, Grey Gaston could sire record-breaking stayers. Vijay said that the progeny of stallions imparting speed in his pedigree could carry the speed over long distances. Fortino II got horses like Caro, winner of the French 2000 Guineas and Prix Ganay.

Another reason for siring stayers successfully lay in stoutly-bred Indian mares. Grey Gaston was able to neutralise excessive stamina in them and impart speed into the offspring. He could therefore blend brilliance and stoutness, enabling his progeny to excel over a variety of distances.

Vijay said in a recent interview that Grey Gaston was lucky to have India's top professionals handling his progeny. They included trainers like Byramji and Bezan Chenoy and jockeys like Vasant Shinde and Pesi Shroff.

The Grey Gaston fillies who returned to the stud were so good, they did well with other stallions there. Among these stallions was Common Land (GB), a great-grandson of Djebel. Three winners of India's premier speed test - the Sprinters' Cup - were by Common Land (GB) out of mares by Grey Gaston. As the Indian Thoroughbred remarked, "The Common Land - Grey Gaston cross is a by-word for speed".

Common Land was the most successful stallion in this race. He sired seven winners and the dams of two winners. His son Klairon Gold won the race at Hyderabad in 1983, survived an injury that practically ripped him open and won the race again in 1984 at Mumbai. In 1988 Time And Place won the race at Hyderabad. She was by Common Land out of Tick Tock by Grey Gaston. In 1997, Time And Place's son Fire Arch emulated her by winning this race at Bangalore. He was by Treasure Leaf (USA), Maj Mehra's third stallion symbolising the confluence of three stallions who shaped the fortunes of the stud.

Treasure Leaf was by Lyphard out of a Vaguely Noble mare. He sired the Bangalore summer Derby winners Treasure Girl and Bold Gesture and stakes winners like Diamantaire, Sentouki and Treasure Hunt. However he was the only stallion in Maj Mehra's studs who did not sire an Indian Turf Invitation Cup winner. Even Steinbeck (USA), the last stallion brought out by Maj Mehra, sired an Invitation Cup winner in Running Flame. He and Razeen (USA), the current rage, have been profiled in this magazine before.

Vijay said in the profile, "Apart from transmitting class, Razeen (USA) has sired winners over distances ranging from 1000m to 3000m".

Razeen (USA) had definitely nicked with Grey Gaston, siring classic winners like Santorini Star and Amazing Grey. As well, seven out of 11 runners for the 1998 Indian Derby were by Razeen; they finished first, second and fourth. In the same year, the first three home in the Invitation Cup were by Razeen - Forest Fantasy, Archimedes and Star Supreme.

Statistics published in the recently released Return of Mares 2000 show that Razeen was first, Placerville (USA) second, and Steinbeck was third in the sires of black type winners' list. Placerville was first, Razeen was second Steinbeck third in the leading sires, number of wins and number of winners' lists.

Dashmesh Stud's "Sunny" Brar had known Maj Mehra ever since he started out. He said Maj Mehra had identified the importance of stallions very early in his career as a breeder. Sunny's son Tegbir particularly said Maj Mehra was "stallion-driven". Trainer S. Padmanabhan said many people thought Maj Mehra did not know pedigrees and that he was purely lucky in being successful. Indicating his choice of stallions, Padmanabhan said, "If somebody did not know pedigrees, he could not have been right so many times."

Tegbir insisted that Maj Mehra's mares benefitted from the excellence of his stallions. He said some of the mares were considered great because Grey Gaston, to whom they were sent, was prepotent. These mares were upgraded by every stallion Maj Mehra used. Maj Mehra

considered old Indian lines to be too stoutly bred and lacking in bone. Paradoxically he was fond of Monica. The door and gate of this mare's stable and paddock were never shut as she liked to enter them and leave on her own. She traced through the Maharaja of Morvi's Indian 1000 Guineas and Oaks winner Nav Ratna to Colonel William Hall-Walker's mare Mindful.

As bloodstock agent Anil Mukhi described Monica's pedigree in Racing Today, stallion-wise it showed a "sequence: Grey Gaston-Prince Pradeep-Rock of Gibraltar-Flower Dust-Short Hand-Sheridan, a fantastic link-up of the very best progenitors ever seen on the Indian turf". Mukhi added, "A similar analysis stud-wise shows the sequence: Usha-Yervada-Greenacres/Jammu-Renala, each named mentioned representing the pinnacle of Indian bloodstock breeding at the time".

Revelation, Monica's daughter by Grey Gaston, won the Indian Derby and the Indian Turf Invitation Cup in 1985.

Apart from Monica, Maj Mehra was well served by mares like Celandine, Clocked, Happy Shrike, C. Major and Amber Forest. He had a policy of getting their daughters back for breeding. Speed meant a lot to him; but, as Sunny Brar and Dr Faroukh Wadia of Yeravada Stud stressed, Maj Mehra's success as a breeder could not be judged simply on the basis of his eight Sprinters' Cup winners.

Sunny said, "The greatness on breeding lies in staying a mile and a half (2400m). No matter how many Guineas (1600m) you win, you will never go down as a great breeder till you breed a mile and a half classic horse."

It is worth noting here that Maj Mehra bred eight Indian Derby winners and six Indian Turf Invitation Cup winners - both races are run over 2400m.

Maj Mehra's studs bred winners of 194 classics all over India with a higher annual rate than any other establishment in the country.

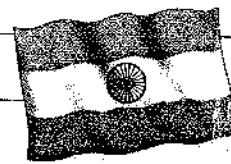
Apart from speed, Maj Mehra's other obsession was conformation. Dr Wadia recollected that Maj Mehra bought several fillies at a Newmarket December sale purely on their make, shape and substance and not their pedigrees. Byramji felt that he and Maj Mehra got along well because of the importance they attached to conformation.

Maj Mehra's success raised the standards for other breeders. They had to



MAJOR P.K. Mehra (extreme left), joint owners Mr. & Mrs S.C. Khatau and trainer Zareer Darashah leading in Time And Place (Warren Singh up) after winning the Sprinters' Cup at Hyderabad in 1988.

Photograph courtesy of Mukundan S. Chettyappa



change their laid-back ways and buy quality stock while improving their upkeep and marketing skills - or else they had to succumb.

Maj Mehra's own quest for success was not easy. He needed money to move when his backyard stud grew. The manufacturer of ceiling fans under the "Usha" brand name initially joined Maj Mehra as a partner. He insisted on using the same name for the stud, but he pulled out quickly when he saw the risks involved in breeding.

Maj Mehra carried on, naming his new establishment Usha stud and Agricultural Farm. Years later when people asked him about choosing this name, he told them it was the name of the girlfriend he never had!

Money for his venture arrived in another form. No bank was willing to lend it in the beginning and Maj Mehra had to rely on his friendship with the Italian ambassador to India to influence an Italian bank manager's decision to lend him the money. The ambassador played polo and practised show jumping, and Maj Mehra knew no one else would help in this matter except another horseman.

This was the last time he ever had to take a loan. He gave up his army career and established the stud on 32 acres of land near New Delhi in 1972. His wife Veena and former colleague Colonel Ajith Singh joined him in those early days. Veena accompanied him to the farm from their home in New Delhi. She handled the accounts and finances, helping him to decide on pricing. When the family started a yearling station at Pataudi she oversaw the construction of buildings. Many visitors remember her and Maj Mehra as being lavish hosts.

Col Singh and Maj Mehra lunged yearlings and worked out other activities together when the stud was being set up. Gradually Col Singh took over the day to day management of the stud while Maj Mehra concentrated on buying and other

operations. They established a highly disciplined, army-like management system, creating what a visitor called a "mini cantonment" in the 200-odd acres the stud had grown into. Grooms never knew when Maj Mehra would turn up to check their work. Pleased with a particular groom's work, Maj Mehra rewarded him with cash on the spot. This inspired others. Maj Mehra believed in handling horses differently.

He kept telling his eldest daughter Ameeta that horses needed TLC - Tender Loving Care - but this did not involve hugging and petting or showing any other form of emotion. It involved the creation of an environment in which horses could grow up naturally. Every horse had to be treated as an individual.

Many people insisted that Maj Mehra's horsemanship counted more than anything else in his achieving success. Maj Mehra was inspecting the stud on a hot day with trainer Padmanabhan. They went into a paddock where yearlings were being paired off and led into a barn because of the weather. One filly was going crazy at that time.

The veterinarian in charge told Maj Mehra that this filly was mad. Replying that it was the people who handled weanlings who made them mad, Maj Mehra asked if the filly had been paired with the right companion. Everyone insisted that it was so, but Maj Mehra ordered all the weanlings to be released back into the paddock and paired them off himself. The filly calmed down immediately with her new companion.

Said Padmanabhan, "Anybody can own a farm. Anybody can read up pedigrees. Anybody can hire consultants. However the understanding... that makes the difference."

Byramji called Maj Mehra a gifted, natural horseman. When trainers visited studs to buy yearlings, they hid their impressions or feigned indifference to keep the prices down; but Maj Mehra

knew his best yearlings and their individual value. Said Byramji, "You couldn't easily trick him!"

Before Maj Mehra turned up, selling thoroughbreds in India was a low key affair largely confined to the auction sales. No one really marketed horses; but Maj Mehra altered that.



MAJOR P.K. Mehra.

Byramji said Maj Mehra was ready to display any horse at any time to a buyer at the stud. The champion trainer used to visit Maj Mehra's stud several times a year to see how the yearlings were developing.

One horse that Byramji could not see as a colt late in the 1970s came into his care in a peculiar way. This colt was by Grey Gaston out of Traxana, one of the foundation mares. Byramji tried three times to see him at the stud but always failed.

On the last occasion Byramji's plane took off from Mumbai and turned back

when an engine sucked in a bird. Unable to keep the colt any longer for Byramji, Maj Mehra sold him and a few other future classic winners to leading owner M.A.M. Ramaswamy. Whenever Byramji saw the colt being exercised at Bangalore, Byramji used to jocularly chide Maj Mehra for allowing someone else to train him.

One day Maj Mehra urgently telephoned Byramji in Bangalore from New Delhi while he was having lunch. Maj Mehra told Byramji to leave his lunch and immediately rush to the stables to examine the colt and the others he had sold to Ramaswamy. One reason cited for the urgency is that Maj Mehra had offered to buy the youngsters back the moment Ramaswamy told him that he was not satisfied with them. Another reason is that Maj Mehra had himself offered to pay double the sale price for them, and Ramaswamy was eager to finish to deal.

Either way, Byramji examined the youngsters and the colt he had been eyeing so far moved into his stables. Named Track Lightning, this colt won Bangalore's summer Derby, Indian Derby and the Indian Turf Invitation Cup under Byramji's tutelage.

Padmanabhan spoke highly of an attribute that Maj Mehra had. Certain breeders would openly discriminate with buyers. They kept some youngsters for the big spenders and bluntly told other buyers that these youngsters were beyond their means. Not Maj Mehra! He received all buyers with equal courtesy, spent time with them and showed them all the yearlings that were for sale.

Ramaswamy, who asserted that Maj Mehra produced "solid horses with good bone", spent four to six hours on each visit, looking over the stock, discussing them and having a beer or two.

Maj Mehra could demand high prices from such owners and get them since his stock did so well. Even then, a buyer with a budget, or a newcomer, could visit his farm without being over-awed by the landscaped selling area or the success of Maj Mehra himself. However there was more to Maj Mehra's personal charisma or gift of the gab.

Ameeta Mehra said he brought professionalism into selling thoroughbreds in India. He tried to understand a buyer's mentality.

Convinced that Indian breeders undervalued their stock, he did his pricing methodically. Borrowing methods from other fields, he kept improving his own selling techniques. Maj Mehra collected a pile of books on salesmanship and marketing. Every time Ameeta walked into his room, she used to find one of these books lying around. He always reiterated his policy, "Don't put yourself before the buyer".

Sometime in 1990 Maj Mehra got Ameeta involved in his profession. She was keen on education as a career and was teaching at a non-conventional school. Once she agreed to the switch, she took up courses at the Irish National Stud and the Indian Institute of Management. She also studied equine nutrition at Kentucky and spent a week at the Indian Stud Book Department.

Given her formal education and personal involvement in the last few years, everyone is confident that she can manage the stud. Devika, Ameeta's surviving sister, is studying creative writing in the USA.

Ameeta is set to open a school for the children of the stud's staff in April. She said, "Breeding is similar to education. This is because both lay foundations. One is for a good horse and the other is for a good human being."

She has today adopted a favourite saying of her father's as her own philosophy. She quoted him as saying, "Nothing fattens a horse more than his master's eye. That epitomises my father. He was really a master", she said. ■

- Mukundan S.Chettiyappa

## Storm Again's Derby win no surprise

NO one complained when Allaire failed as a favourite and Storm Again (pictured right) beat her by three and a quarter-lengths in the Indian Derby at Mumbai on February 4. Storm Again had impressed while finishing third behind Simply Noble and Allaire in the 1600m Indian 2000 Guineas.

Pedigree Pundit B.Vijay reckoned that the grandson of Sadler's Wells simply needed the extra 800m in the Derby to excel. Storm Again's sire Alnasr Alwasheek (GB) won the Homeowner's Dante Stakes-Gr.2 and three more races in England and the USA. He is by Sadler's Wells out of Someone Special, a Habitat mare.

Storm Again's dam Perchance to Dream (USA) won the Hollywood Oaks Gr.1, and three other races. She unfortunately died a month after foaling Storm Again.

Pesi Shroff positioned Storm Again in the middle of the field as Stone Ridge set the pace. Mosaic and Endorsement began to fight it out on entering the home stretch. Shroff moved Storm Again off the rails in the meanwhile, with a clear way ahead. As Shroff got busy, Aslam Kader sent Allaire in pursuit. Storm Again took the lead easily and Allaire followed him in vain. Perceived Value overcame some hindrance to finish third two and three-quarter lengths back, and Mosaic galloped on to be fourth.

Before the winter season began last year, there were three runners who could handle 2000m and more. They were Allaire, winner of Bangalore's summer Derby; Perceived Value, winner of Hyderabad's Deccan Derby, and Chevalier, winner of the Mysore Derby.

Chevalier's credentials as a 'classic' horse became doubtful when he performed dismally during the winter.

Allaire and Perceived Value tried to enhance their reputations at Mumbai. Storm Again beat them in the race that mattered most - the Indian Derby.

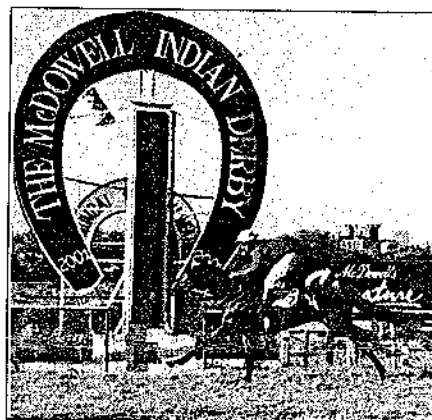
Both the fillies were expected to take him on again, this time in the Indian Turf Invitation Cup at Chennai on March 4; but Allaire pulled out, reportedly due to an injured tendon, leaving Perceived Value to do the job.

On January 21, Allaire was able to justify the public's support for her in the Indian Oaks at Mumbai. Aslam Kader made her produce a characteristic late run to win by five and a half-lengths from Star Shine. Six Speed, who probably found 2400m beyond her scope, finished third however on December 24, 2000.

Aslam Kader asked Allaire too early for her effort and she lost to Simply Noble in the Indian 2000 Guineas. Simply Noble tried to lead all the way, Allaire overtook him in the home stretch but he fought back to prevail over her by a neck. Storm Again, as mentioned earlier, caught the eye while finishing two and three-quarter lengths behind Allaire.

With Allaire and Six Speed moving to Mumbai from Bangalore, the winter Derby at this city was at Chevalier's mercy on January 20. The gelding was expected to make amends for his failure in the 2000 Guineas there. Fantastic Belle, the Bangalore Oaks Winner, was fancied to be his main rival. Altenburg turned up for this classic with a six-length victory over 1600m behind him. Il Diablo hit the front along the rails on entering the home stretch. Chevalier and Hello Brother were beginning to move up on the outside when Aslam Kader brought Altenburg into the fray.

Chevalier veered out towards Hello Brother and hampered his chances in the final stages. Aslam Kader earned praise for



displaying his old mastery in getting Altenburg to head off Il Diablo. Pesi Shroff was fined for causing interference to Hello Brother astride Chevalier. Altenburg is by the well known Razeen (USA) out of Try Kola (IRE). His half-sister by Treasure Leaf (USA), Amberetta, won the Golconda Oaks at Hyderabad in 1992.

Native Quest won this year's Golconda Oaks at Hyderabad on January 6. She brushed aside Mumbai challenger Storm Dancer by one and three-quarter lengths. The filly is by the Danzig stallion Broto out of Au Panache, a winner of the Indian 1000 Guineas. She made an unsuccessful bid for the Golconda Derby on January 28.

Appeaser, the favourite, looked likely to be beaten as he was stuck behind other runners in the final stages of the event but Soviet Ace shifted out with about 100m to go and Appeaser was able to snatch victory from The Proletarian by half a length.

Aslam Kader, who rode Appeaser, had little difficulty in riding Altimara to victory in the Calcutta Derby. Soviet Ace followed six and three-quarter lengths behind. ■