

spurring the Usha stud farm into a world-class breeding centre, a starting point from where she hopes her horses will carry her farm's reputation into the glittering arena of international thoroughbred racing. Though she adds, "In this business you are only as good as your last race!"



Jockeying hard to win the first position in horse breeding

And what a track record it has been! A glance at the 'Usha breds' who have won major Indian championships is telling. Over the last 25 years the farm has bred over 150 classic winners all over India, including eight Indian

She breeds some of India's best race horses. Confidently poised in the saddle, Ameeta Mehra is spurring her 450 acres farm into a world-class breeding centre. She has bred over 150 high-pedigreed horses including eight Indian Derby champions, six Indian Turf Invitation cup winners and the filly, Revelation...

A winner all the way

Wandering star, Native dancer, Forest fantasy, Lady angela, Arabian rose...

No, these are not cover titles of pulpy romance novels, but the dainty names of some of India's most prized, power-packed thoroughbred horses, destined to pound dirt on the finest national and international racing circuits in the coming years.

They also happen to be the pride of their owner, Ameeta Mehra, executive director of the Usha stud farm. Ameeta has not only overseen the 'match-mating' of their pedigreed parents, but was an anxious witness to their shivering births on cold winter mornings. She has observed them grow from young skittish foals prancing around on alfalfa strewn paddocks strapping to young mighty-muscled horses with glistening coats and glorious futures!

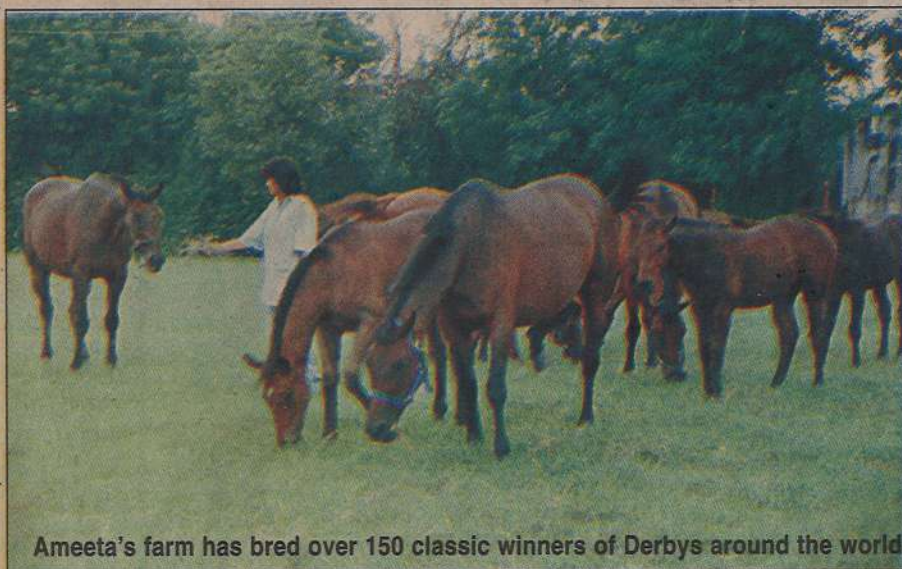
But what's a young woman doing in the testosterone laden, cut-throat world of thoroughbred breeding? After all, the only ostensible connection between women and horses are glamorous racing events where both groups vie for attention by flaunting their shapes, sheens and styles.

For one, Ameeta is jockeying hard to win the first position in this business. Confidently poised in the saddle, she is

Derby champions, six winners of the Indian Turf invitation cup and the only filly, Revelation to have bagged the highly prestigious Indian Derby invitation cup double.

Her blue chip clientele includes some of the most high profile movers and shakers of the racing world, such as Vijay Mallya, Deepak Khaitan and Mysore's legendary horseman, MM Ramaswami.

An IIM (Ahmedabad) graduate in corporate management, a diploma holder in equine management from the prestigious Irish National Stud, founder member of The gnostic centre, (a holistic healing and mediation centre), author of four books on meditation and consciousness and above all else, a horse lover with an eye for winners, Ameeta Mehra packs quite an eclectic punch as one of India's most successful thoroughbred breeders.



Ameeta's farm has bred over 150 classic winners of Derbys around the world

The Usha stud farm is spread over 450 acres, and situated at both Bijwasan and Pataudi, on the outskirts of Delhi.

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A winner all the way

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Peacocks dart ahead and snakes slither across the potholed, rutted paths as one drives into the vast, eerily quiet, green and entirely self-contained world of around 120 thoroughbreds, their grooms, concrete stables, paddocks, equine specialists, birth stations, quarantine cells and fodder godowns.

Pungent odours of dung and horse sweat assail the senses as one reaches the iron gates of headhoncho - Ameeta's beautiful bungalow where she lives all alone save for the bustling company of quiet servants and the belligerent barking of a pair of lean and mean, trained labradors.

The outfit runs with almost clockwork precision. There are over 90 workers at the Bijwasan farm with a ratio of one groom per two horses (apart from additional stable hands and feeders) each stable houses ten horses in separate cells and comes with its own stretch of green paddock where the horses are exercised and left to graze. Most of the grooms and stable hands are Rajputs. "These people have an uncanny ability of understanding horses better than most others," says Ameeta.

Two highly restricted areas enclose the prized possessions of the Usha stud farm, upon whose progeny the fortunes and future rests. Razeen and Steinbeck are the two blue-blooded stud stallions with their own air-conditioned stables, exclusive paddocks and highly trained and trusted grooms. As Ameeta explains, "This is competitive business and one has to be very careful of people who may try and sabotage our success."

The stakes in this game are high...Razeen for example has broken all existing Indian racing records by siring a brood of winners. In Razeen's first crop there were 28 foals with 27 winners claiming over Rs 3 crore in stake money. His offspring Forest Fantasy is the highest earning race-

horse ever in India winning over Rs 1 crore in stake money and the fastest Indian horse having run 1.5 miles in a blistering 2 min 30 seconds.

Ameeta gives a tantalising peek into this money-driven business, which is more like a gamble because of the cash flows, the wagers and the brute horsepower which fuels it along. "We at Usha, spend an average of around 2 lakhs on a horse per year, which includes the price of top quality fodder, hiring equine specialists, medical care and grooming. A year old thoroughbred can command a price upwards of Rs 5 lakh. "Multiply that with 100 horses and you will get the mind-boggling monetary dimensions of this trade.

Her love and familiarity with horses began as an army kid where she learnt to saddle-ride her pet Shetland pony before she could even walk. Her father Major Pradeep Mehra was part of the 61st cavalry and an international polo player.

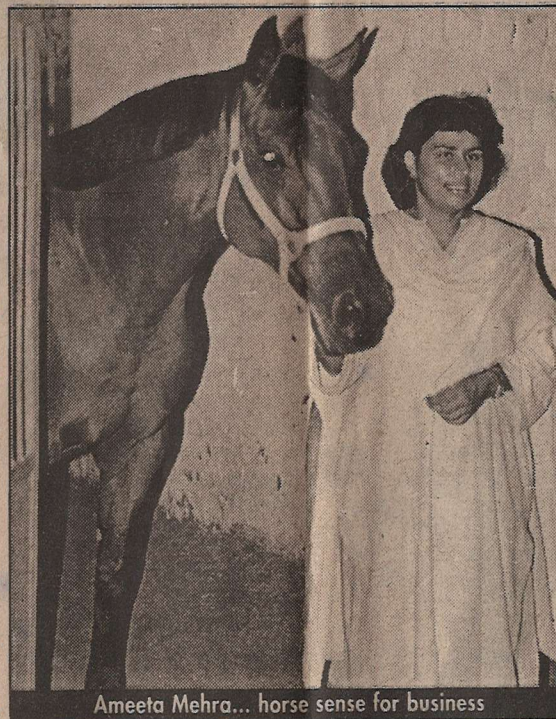
She remembers his foray into the world of professional breeding, "In 1971 my father left the army to start the Usha stud farm. He began on a little piece of land measuring five acres with a small stock of imported mares and one stallion - Grey Gaston. At that time we could not even hire grooms to take care of the horses." Grey Gaston's first sired foal, Manitou went onto win the Indian Derby in 1978 and ever since there has been no looking back for this family of horse lovers.

Ameeta spent her formative years in Delhi where after she graduated from Lady Shri Ram College and

then taught at Mirambika school, which promotes alternative approaches to school education.

So how did she jump into the equine arena after the esoteric world of alternative education? By zipping off to Ireland in 1990. As a diploma student of equine management at the Irish National Stud, she was one of the lucky 12 chosen for the prestigious course, from around the world.

The only Indian there, her stint in Ireland opened her eyes to the back-



Ameeta Mehra... horse sense for business

breaking reality behind the supposedly glamorous world of thoroughbred breeding, "It was a culture shock because we had to get our hands dirty unlike India where we have people doing these chores. We had to clean stables, sweep roads, mix the feed and attend lectures on how to shoe a horse and other such things.

When she came back, Usha stud farm had grown to a significant size in terms of acres, horses and employ-

ees. It was then that Ameeta realised that she needed a disciplined approach in managing a growing organisation. She appeared for the entrance test of no less than the bastion of corporate learning - the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, and qualified.

After passing out from IIM (A) armed with a specialisation in corporate management, Ameeta quickly bridled down to the task of professionalising the farm's operations. "I had to build our brand to make it synonymous with superior stock. We are today one of the leading players in the Indian thoroughbred market, neck to neck with only the Poonawalla group."

Today Ameeta seems to be racing against time as she draws up strategies and plans to promote her thoroughbreds internationally. She divides her days between the active world of horses and the restful world of meditation and private contemplation. She also conducts personal development workshops for teachers, students and corporates at her gnostic centre, which she set up in the tranquil, green, pollution free environs of her farm.

But how does she manage to reconcile the business part of her brain (read 'cut throat competition, high stakes, survival of the fittest and the fastest') and the contemplative side (read 'Shri Aurobindo's teachings, meditation techniques, spiritual detachment'). An unusual blend but as Ameeta says "I am different from other people. I believe in the principle of Kriya Yoga, which says to do your best at every moment and leave the result to God."

Does she ever get scared or lonely living here all alone, cut off from the ebb and flow of urban life?

"My family settled abroad, but my father comes down to India every six months. And living alone is not something that scares me either as a professional or as a woman. Most of my employees are people who have been with us for the last thirty years.

And as for feeling lonely there is hardly any time, as I am so busy with my centre and my horses."

Does she miss the rush and glitter of the bright city lights where her generation is both living it up and settling down to raise families and the value of their stocks? "Not really," says Ameeta, "I was never a city person in the first place. And as for marriage, it is really not necessary. I know so many people who have got married for all the wrong reasons and are leading miserable lives."

Radical all right! But then she can afford to be, as she is living a full life on her own terms and on her own turf! Early mornings when her horses are pounding the paddocks Ameeta hotfoots it to her private tennis court for her other love - tennis. Her hobbies include reading, taking long walks, classical music, meditation and teaching. And whenever she gets the time she dashes over to her yearling farm at Pataudi where her horse Life Divine awaits her.

But life is not just long contemplative walks and tennis for this breeder brooder, who does jet down to the major racing events every year. "It's important to network in this business. And especially when you know that an 'Usha bred' is participating in a particular race. "And true to the dual parts of her personality she also make yearly trips down to Pondicherry, to stay at the Aurobindo ashram.

The setting sun signals the end of yet another day at the Usha stud farm, as Ameeta casts a long look at a pasture where some horses are cantering around. "People often ask where do old horses go after they have outlived their racing careers. At Usha, they come home after a glorious innings."

For Ameeta home is where her heart and her horses are. "There are no bad horses, only bad people' is one of her favourite sayings. And as she beds down after a long, tiring day, her dreams gallop away into the not so distant future where she and her brood of winners will lead the race of endurance and excellence by leaving the rest of the herd behind!