

Highcliff Still High on New York Breeding

By Mike Kane



Suzie O' Cain



Congaree



Stonesider

During the week of the second phase of the Flying Zee Stable dispersal in early December, Highcliff Farm ran a simple but eye-catching advertisement topped by a no-nonsense headline in capital letters:

IT'S BUSINESS AS USUAL

While the death of prominent owner and breeder Carl Lizza on July 8 led to the dispersal of his racing and breeding stock, the nationally ranked farm he co-owned in Delanson, NY continues on. With the 2012 breeding season approaching, Highcliff's management team of Dr. C. Lynwood "Doc" O' Cain and his wife Suzie hoped the ads would answer any questions about the status of the farm they have run for 23 years. Dr. O' Cain is Highcliff's general manager and resident veterinarian, and Suzie handles stallion promotion and development for the 600-acre farm in rural western Schenectady County about an hour's drive from Saratoga Race Course.

"We're progressing with this breeding season just like any other breeding season we ever had," Suzie O' Cain said. "The stallions and the staff are here. Not a lot is changing. Doc and I have been around a long time and a lot of good horses have come off this place and we're hoping that people notice it and come here and enter into the program and have New York-breds next year."

In fact, it's not exactly business as usual for the O' Cains or anyone else in the breeding business in New York. And that's a good thing.

The Flying Z dispersal that has opened space at Highcliff for new clients comes at an opportune time when there is heightened interest in New York's breeding and racing industries and high-quality mares are being sent to the state. Revenue from Genting's Resort World New York Casino at Aqueduct Racetrack, which opened in late October, will produce a major increase in purse money at the New York Racing Association tracks in 2012 and restore the full awards program administered by the New York State Thoroughbred Breeding and Development Fund.

Since early this fall, the Fund has been vigorously promoting the benefits of participating in New York's program and making foals of 2012 eligible to become registered NY-breds. Suzie O'Connell says the campaign is having an impact.

"We get calls all the time from out of state," Mrs. O'Connell said. "In the last week, I have booked mares from Michigan, the state of Washington and Florida. It's amazing where they are coming from. It's all new. People are calling because they know what's happening and what is going to happen here in New York."

"This is infusing a whole new era of clients, money and farms. Every positive thing you could say about the program is being played out. Everything. The sky is the limit."

"I do believe the message is getting out there."

The goal of the Fund's campaign was to alert owners of mares based outside the state prior to the 2012 breeding season that breeder awards have been hiked by 50 percent across the board and that higher caps are in place.

"The money for the awards began flowing to us as soon as the racino opened at Aqueduct, and it looks like the Fund made a very good decision to help attract in-foal mares," said Tracy Egan, the Fund's Executive Director. "We want to turn around the foal crop decline right away. Our ads drive home the message that you can add value to your foal of 2012 by bringing your mare to one of the fine farms in the state and meeting residency requirements so the foal can become a registered New York-bred."

Starting January 1, the breeder awards for New York-breds by New York stallions will be increased to 30 percent of first-place purse money and 15 percent each for second and third. The cap on that award will be raised to \$40,000. The awards for New York-breds by out-of-state sires will be increased to 15 percent for first place and 7.5 percent for second- and third-place finishes. Those awards will be capped at \$20,000. The awards come on top of the added purse money available at NYRA tracks in 2012.

"With those kinds of incentives," Egan said, "I believe that empty stalls at Highcliff and other facilities will soon be occupied."

The Flying Z dispersal began on October 26, when 39 of Lizza's yearlings were offered in Phase I during Fasig-Tipton's Kentucky Fall Yearlings sale. Phase II took place at Fasig-Tipton's Midlantic December Mixed sale in Timonium, MD, with 99 mares, weanlings and horses of racing age going through the ring. The dispersal generated over \$3.5 million.

Some of the mares have been sent back to Highcliff by their new owners in order to maintain the continuity of care they receive and to stay involved in New York's revitalized awards program.

During that second sale, Suzie O'Cain decided she needed to make it clear that Highcliff Farm was open and in full operation. She called the agency she has used for many years, Saybrook Advertising, and explained her plan to Margaret Claus.

"In 20 minutes I had it on the computer," Suzie O'Cain said. "It's perfect."

The final portion of the Flying Zee Stable dispersal will take place on January 21, when about 60 horses will be offered at a sale at the farm. After that, only a few Lizza horses will remain, including the graded stakes-winning mare I Lost My Choo. The O'Cains are prepared to turn the page and move on.

"We've had a big loss, a very big loss. I don't want to downplay how hard it has been to accept losing someone that you have worked for and worked with for 23 years, and that's 26 if you add the years Doc was Carl's vet," Suzie O'Cain said. "This is a person we had a wonderful working relationship with. He didn't hover over us. He kind of let us manage it the way we wanted to. It was a very relaxed relationship and we provided him with a product that he had a lot of fun with. And we never had a lot of misunderstandings and headaches."

"You can't deal with someone for 23 years and he passes away and you say, 'Oh, everything is the same,' because it's not and it never will be. There will always be a big void where Mr. Lizza was in our lives. He gave Doc an amazing opportunity and we know that."

"We also know that nothing lasts forever and we have to be realistic and understand that we've had 23 years to learn the business and now we have to be better at it than we've ever been."

The O'Cains have seen Highcliff evolve through the years into one of the premier farms in the state.

“When we started, Seymour Cohn was our big owner. He shipped in 100 mares,” Mrs. O’Cain said. “Carl had dispersed all but about three mares a few years before that. Then he built back up, bigger and better than ever. Until the past five years, Carl did not have the majority of the horses here. You do generation after generation and they race and retire and pretty soon you’ve got a ton of mares again.”

Even though Lizza was a co-owner and his breeding operation was based there, Highcliff Farm has been home to mares from breeders large and small.

“More than half were outside clients,” Mrs. O’Cain said. “Doc and I have always had a good following of repeat business.”

Experience has taught the O’Cains that change is a constant in the horse-breeding business and that the death of a major owner-breeder, like Lizza or Edward P. Evans, usually leads to a dispersal. Still, the O’Cain approach at Highcliff remains the same.

“We’re actively looking for new clients. Most of the Flying Z horses are gone,” Suzie O’Cain said. “We have a lot of room and I think that bodes well for going forward with building up a clientele. If you could time anything perfectly this would be the best time for us to be in this situation. I think that a lot of people know that Doc gets mares in foal and is pretty good at what he does. People know that and I think we should be able to be OK.”

Congaree, Cosmonaut and Stonesider head the lineup of stallions currently at Highcliff. Congaree picked up another very important victory on December 10 when Killer Graces won the Grade 1 Hollywood Starlet. He also is the sire of multiple graded stakes winner Jeranimo. Cosmonaut, a son of Lemon Drop Kid, was a winner from ages three through seven, earning \$1,397,723. His first crop of foals hit the ground in 2011 and sold well at the dispersal.

With the opening of the oft-delayed casino at Aqueduct, New York racing and breeding is embarking on an exciting new period. Mrs. O’Cain said that takes some of the pressure off breeders, many of whom struggled to survive in recent years, because of the growing demand for New York-breds.

“New York is where you have to be,” she said. “We’ve got a lot here. In my opinion, we are the crown jewel of North American racing with the NYRA tracks, Saratoga, Belmont and Aqueduct. We also have a second-tier track, Finger Lakes, where owners can still get their awards. We have year-round racing and the best racing. We have some of the best trainers and the best jockeys in the world and we’re offering more money than anywhere in North America. What’s not to like?”

“We have a product that people are going to need and we’re right in the thick of it.”