

Joined up thinking

Photography by Trevor Jones

Although SackvilleDonald is a bloodstock agency less than three years in existence the team has already purchased a Classic-winning filly as well as a Champion in Hong Kong

Background

Ed Sackville (ES): “My father always had shares in horses and I was brought up as a child watching Channel 4 Racing. I was very keen to make horseracing my career.

“After leaving school my first job was as a runner for John Warren at Keeneland. All went well and for the next nine years I worked for John, completing university and the Darley Flying Start in between.

“I also worked for Hughie Morrison for six months – I would recommend that anyone in racing spends time with a trainer as ultimately that is what this whole industry is all about, producing horses to win races.

“I went to work at Kern Lillingston, sharing an office with Alastair for three years. It was a natural progression to set up together.

“I had a lot of catching up to do when we set up – working for John had been the training and then I had three years with Luke doing deals and establishing myself. SackvilleDonald wouldn't have worked if I had gone straight from working for John to doing this. I'm very grateful to Luke for all he taught me.”

Alastair Donald (AD): “Dad was an armchair punter and owned a few bits and pieces of horses. From seven I always wanted to work in racing, but didn't start practically until I was a teenager.

“I left school and went to New Zealand for six months where I worked on studs, for trainers and on sheep stations.

“I did the Equine degree at the Royal Agricultural College as well as the six-month Darley Student Stud course, also working in the Darley office in the holidays. I also had a short stint at the Racing Post.

“After college I spent a year at Fasig-Tipton learning all about bloodstock marketing and sales; Terence Collier was very good at showing you the ropes and letting you learn.

It was then that I thought I would become a bloodstock agent.

“I then had six months with Mark Johnston as his bloodstock assistant, annotating his catalogue and selling his yearlings to owners when Luke [Lillingston] offered me a job specialising in the horses in training business as he felt he was busy elsewhere and opportunities were being missed.

“It was a great time – Luke was very keen that I got out and about and got my face noticed so I travelled the world, seeing lots of horses and learning from vets. When Luke moved back to Ireland, although I had a boss, I had a free rein too.”

SackvilleDonald

AD: “What is nice is that we are not competing against each other as agents as we have such separate areas of the business that we concentrate on, and in fact they can be complimentary.

“We are two agents working under the same banner, but we eat our own pie, and don't share commission unless we are sharing a deal.”

ES: “We do quite often share deals, but we can share costs – secretarial charges, office

costs, those are all split 50-50 and it makes the overheads so much lower.

AD: “And it makes the whole thing so much more enjoyable; it can get stale if stuck in the office alone, this makes it much more fun as well as acting as an incentive.”

ES: “While it also means that we can share each other's problems, but also being able to share each other's success is important also. When I meet a potential client or an owner, I don't just talk about Sky Lantern there is Military Attack and Viva Pataca too.”

AD: “We can go days without seeing each other, we are not in the office a huge amount, I don't think we've yet had the chance to have an argument about anything...”

ES: “We are both very accessible though, we ring and get hold of each other as needed.”

AD: “And our different personalities makes it work well; Ed can be quite particular about things, which is good as I am not always that meticulous, however, on the flip side, he can be a bit 'over careful' spending and I'll say 'No, we do need to spend some money on this!'”

Getting started as a bloodstock agent

AD: “It is really hard getting that first break in this business. When I was starting out in the US, I was cold calling trainers and thinking 'why the hell am I doing this? They are never going to use me to buy them a horse!'”

“Then I got a lucky and bought Golden Apples – the next year when I went to talk to the trainers, when I got 30 seconds of their time, I'd drop in Golden Apples and it got their attention straight away.”

ES: “Having nine years with someone as well respected as John, constantly by his side, helped to let people to know who I am. When I rang to speak to anyone at least they knew

“**We are two agents working under the same banner, but we eat our own pie, and don't share commission unless we are sharing a deal**”



Ed Sackville and Alastair Donald: it was a “natural progression” for the two agents to join forces

“Pedigree is an indication of what you may have to pay, the most important thing is the piece of horseflesh in front of you”

me as Ed Sackville, the kid who worked with John Warren!”

AD: “Initially, I was constantly shouted at by trainers when I used to ring them about buying a horse... I guess I am known by many now, and I hope gaining some respect. I am still shouted at, but now not quite so regularly! And, yes, some are relieved now when I call.

“But it’s all about avoiding mistakes as much as the success – if you avoid making too many mistakes then the success will come.”

ES: “For my career, Tom Dascombe has been hugely important – he gave me that first break, and I wouldn’t be where I am today without his support. In my first year I wrote

down a list of names of those who might give me a yearling order and I came up with one, my father! And he was morally obliged to...!

“I went to Deauville that year and was very sulky about it. Luke said I’d got to go and I didn’t want to – I had nothing to do, the Deauville hotels and living costs are very expensive and I didn’t want to go and just look like a lemon pulling out horses without an order.

“But I got a call from Tom, whom I’d met a few times, he was going to be late getting out there and needed a list. In the end I bought him five horses and it has gone from there.

“Buying those early few made all the yearling vendors take me seriously, see that I wasn’t just another tyre-kicker, that I was there with something to do.”

Yearlings, sales, buying and selling

ES: “So far this year, I’ve bought 14 yearlings for a variety of clients. I luckily have more to buy... and I have an order for The Pheasant syndicate, hence why we are meeting with you here today. I am going to talk about their order once we have finished this interview...”

AD: “I help Ed through Book 2, but

Sky Lantern, bought by Sackville as a yearling



I’m finding that I am doing more yearling business, the Hong Kong guys are buying a few now. They may buy three or four yearlings with the hope that one might be good enough to take back to Hong Kong.

“They might be owners who spend their summers in Europe and enjoy the racing here anyway. The proven horse is now very expensive – the Hong Kong ownership permits are so difficult to get that they need to get it right when they buy a horse so it is worthwhile spending good money to get the return from the very strong prize-money.

“Horses have got to give a return – look 95 per cent of the time, when I make an offer, if it is not taken, it is regretted, maybe not next time out, but long term it will be because often that value will never be the same again. There is always a right time to sell, however good a horse is.”

ES: “One of the first things that John taught me when I bought a yearling was to think how that horse could be sold in future, its resale value down the road.

“That’s why if you buy a correct yearling and one who vets well, it could be suitable for Hong Kong if it turns out to be good enough. If it is a bit slow, but of a good size and is correct, it might be attractive to the jumping boys: the day you buy is the day you sell.

“Ahead of a yearling sale, I’ll obviously go through the catalogue, get rid of certain pedigrees, those by bad stallions – sires who have not got good stats and don’t get many top class horses or produce stock with bad temperaments – or those lots who are out of old mares, or mares who have, for example, had only had one winner from six runners.

“Of course, if a vendor loves their horse, and he is not on the list, they will come and find me anyway to take a look at their horse.

“Book 2 is tricky, just due to the sheer numbers and Alastair will work with me just to get round everything. At a select sale I will look at most...”

AD: “...And then stick a pin in...!”

ES: “Ha ha... knock off the bad walkers, smaller horses, offset knees and then re-look at the ones I like.”

AD: “But it is all budget dependent, which of the lots on your list can be afforded. And, yes, if there is a small budget you have to forgive faults, you get to know what your trainers will forgive and what they won’t. Sometimes you have to tell a trainer not to buy one, that it’s too incorrect to have any resale value.

ES: “Sky Lantern was a very specific order –

Ben [Keswick] wanted to buy a likely sprinter by a champion sprinter as a long-term breeding prospect.

“Alastair had bought her half-brother Arctic, it is a very speedy family and she ticked all the boxes. Pedigree is an indication of what you may have to pay, the most important thing is the piece of horseflesh in front of you.

“She fitted the budget and was bought to be a sprinter. On her second start, after she won the Listed Sprint Stakes, I rang and said to Ben: ‘Job done! She’s won a black-type race and it’s called the Sprint Stakes. Anything else she does now is a bonus!’

“Winning the Moyglare, the 1000 Guineas and the Coronation Stakes has been quite a bonus.

“As you can imagine there has been plenty of interest in her, however it has been very satisfying to see her win those Group 1 and Classic races in Ben’s colours. The Sun Chariot is the next target...”

AD: “...And then I am gonna kick her arse with Military Attack in Hong Kong...!”

ES: “...Then she is going to run in Hong Kong where she is gonna smash Military Attack, all he’ll manage to do is be her lead horse! She’ll get conditions there to suit – they will go quick, it will be fast ground and it will be in Ben’s back yard. You own horses to have fun, and it will be wonderful for him to have his horse run in Hong Kong where he lives.”

Supporting those who support you

AD: “It used to be that the horses I bought for Hong Kong and Australia were principally for trainers, they were my clients. Now I am finding that a lot more owners are coming to me direct. It is nice now to be able to reciprocate to trainers – I have the owners now and can give them back.”

ES: “It is very important that if someone gives you support, that you show them support too. You can’t have your cake and eat it. Now that we have some good clients, we can recommend those trainers who have helped us.”

**Military Attack:
the multiple Group 1
winner is Donald’s current
flagbearer and champion
in Hong Kong**

Buying horses in training for abroad

AD: “Things have gone very well. I have bought the odd horse who doesn’t acclimatise, but we have had more good ones than bad ones.

“We’ve been very lucky and have some very loyal clients – John Moore for example.

“I bought him Goggles from Henry Candy and then Vita Pataca came along for him, which cemented Hong Kong for a while.

“The US business has slowed down in the last five years, due to the economy and the state of US racing. They have been buying at a lower level, outbid by those buying for Hong Kong, so the quality has dropped. But there are signs that the US business is coming back, we are getting more orders again.

“Conversely five years ago,

Australian business really picked up, but it is hard to find the right horse for that market as there is such a small pool of horses.

“They can be anything from milers and up – December Draw and My Kingdom Of Fife are really 1m2f horses, but they have the ability which helps them stay that bit further.

“It’s a combination of things – races over



1m2f and more are definitely a little easier there than in Europe and some horses really suit the style of racing; the climate, the fast ground, the style of training, the way that the horses have four quick runs.

“Some high profile horses don’t do well, yet some Listed performers become Group 1 horses.

“But demand is definitely greater than supply. It is hard to buy a ready-made Melbourne Cup horse as many European-based owners are taking them out themselves now, they used to sell those horses. Usually I am looking for improving three-year-olds who want 1m2f plus, and are rated 80 or more.

“I can’t watch all races all the time, so that is where the good British-based racing websites are so good with all the replay action you can watch online.

“The internet and communications have made buying and selling horses so much easier. We used to have to fax pages and pages of results from the *Sporting Life*, FedEx DVDs around the world and the whole process from offering to accepting used to take weeks.

“Now you can send photos instantly, and you have to move on a horse very quickly or else you will be too late.

“It has certainly helped to make it easier to sell horses who otherwise might not have been sold; buyers have greater confidence as they can watch videos or see photos.”

Hong Kong, supporting each other

AD: “For the Hong Kong market, you are looking at sprinter / milers, and then up to 1m2f horses. The big money is paid for potential horses for the Hong Kong Derby, which is run over 1m2f and is for four-year-olds.

“But we’ll buy a lot of sprinters too – there are only three middle-distance Group races and there are no races over a distance of ground for run-of-the-mill horses.

“So we’ll look at a lot of lightly raced two-year-olds with the right profile – they need to be correct, want fast ground, be solid, scopey types.

“Hong Kong-based trainers don’t like small horses as, on the whole, the horses are running in handicaps carrying big weights, and with the humid climate small horses tend to fall away and lose weight too quickly.”

ES: “Knowing now the horses that Alastair likes to buy for Hong Kong and elsewhere has influenced the type of yearling I buy

“We feed off each other and quite regularly one of Ed’s clients will want me to value one, or be advised as to when the time might be right to sell

for Tom and other clients.

“We used to look for the early type of jump and run two-year-old, but if you don’t get to Ascot with that sort, then the resale value is not always that great.”

AD: “It is hard for that sort even if it does get to Ascot: the 100-rated, 15.1hh two-year-old can make very little at the sales as it does not appeal to Hong Kong, while the US doesn’t want to buy sprinters.”

ES: “It works well if I buy a yearling with the right conformation, who ends up good enough and with the right profile for Alastair to consider for his clients.

“Then we’ll know the horse’s history, that it vetted clean as yearling, while it might also have been under our management as a racehorse so we know its ongoing story. It gives greater buying confidence.”

AD: “We feed off each other and quite regularly one of Ed’s clients will want me to value one, or be advised as to when the time might be right to sell. It is a good mutual arrangement.”

“Yes, we are doing a sales job, but it doesn’t feel like that – what other sales job lets you be involved further down the line?”

Three Chimneys

ES: “I really enjoy my role as European agent for Three Chimneys, it is a great chance to sit on the other side of the process for three days of the year. I think I can be a bit more ‘pushy’ than if I were a vendor selling at every sale who may have persuaded an agent or buyer into looking at lots of yearlings, foals and horses in training at the earlier sales in the autumn; I am doing this as a one-off.

“Three Chimneys are also very particular about bringing over a certain level of black-type filly, and if someone has come to see one of them, I feel perfectly justified in telling them that they ought to look at the others.

“But, primarily, they are very good people to work with, in fact all our clients are good people to work with which makes it particularly nice when things go well.”

AD: “Again, the mutual arrangement works well as often I may have bought the fillies for Three Chimneys to run in the US. It gives that greater depth and knowledge about a horse.”

Doing a sales job, schmoozing at parties?

AD: “Yes, we are doing a sales job, but it doesn’t feel like that – what other sales job lets you be involved further down the line?”

“When you sell a house or a car, you never get to see it again; we get to drink champagne in the winners’ enclosure and can celebrate with the owners!”

ES: “I suppose I see our role as advisors....”

AD: “Well, when I am at a dinner party and I need to explain my role, my best analogy is that I am an “equine football agent”. I am looking in the Vauxhall Conference for a player who might be good enough for the Premiership.

ES: “I find it difficult to just go up to a stranger at a party and say “Hey, I’m Ed Sackville, let me buy you your next horse!” If I am introduced to someone then I will chat away and explain what I do, that’s fine. People are all different, some like that forward approach and some don’t.”

AD: “You do still have to be thick-skinned to an extent, and, yes, trainers still shout at me! But I think our honest straight-forward method is appreciated.”

ES: “And I think we are approachable. It’s great when it all works out. We have been lucky, things have gone the right way.” ■