

BLOODSTOCK WORLD



Growing reputation and a growing list of clients

Sky Lantern is set to shine later this season

START OF THE FLAT

Martin Stevens talks to highflying young agents Ed Sackville and Alastair Donald



A SMALL, simple first-floor office on the high street in Hungerford is the unlikely nerve centre of a dynamic young bloodstock agency that sources winners of premier races at the most glamorous meetings across the world.

It was from here that Sackville Donald masterminded the purchases of numerous Hong Kong superstars including this month's Hong Kong Derby winner Designs On Rome, last season's superstar three-year-old and juvenile fillies Sky Lantern and Chriselliam, and global top-flight scorers such as December Draw, Forte Dei Marmi and My Kingdom Of Fife.

The agency's record of success stands at 39 Group 1 wins, 100 Group wins and 155 stakes wins – a fine record made all the more impressive when you consider it was launched just three years ago, when Ed Sackville and Alastair Donald left Kern/Lillingston to launch their own business.

The agency has a broad range of clients, with Sackville concentrating on the purchase of youngstock and broodmares – he bought 1,000 Guineas heroine Sky Lantern on behalf of family friend Ben Keswick as a yearling at Goffs for €75,000 – and Donald specialising in horses in training for the international market, although he does buy yearlings too.

"If I have a client who wants a horse in training I will act as the point of contact but the ideas are Alastair's," says Sackville. "Vice versa, if Alastair has a client who wants a broodmare, he's the point of contact but the ideas are mine."

The two agents' differing roles mean the business works harmoniously at times, as Sackville explains: "When I buy yearlings, a lot of the time Alastair ends up buying them as horses in training. Then we know the history of the sale and everything about the horse."

"Ed knows my requirements for selling further down the road," Donald agrees. "These days you have to bear the resale value in mind so much."

Donald has become synonymous with his success buying for Hong Kong; Designs On Rome was his third winner of the Derby after Collection and Viva Pataca, while Military Attack, a leading fancy for today's Dubai World Cup, is another Group 1 winner he bought to race there.

"Military Attack could put up a big run in the World Cup," Donald says. "Over a mile and a quarter I think we can beat Ruler Of The World – I see him more as a mile and a half horse – and ours is match-fit."

One of Donald's rare yearling purchases was Chriselliam, who was bought at Tattersalls for 40,000gns and went on to win the Fillies' Mile and Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies' Turf. She would surely have had a big say in the 1,000 Guineas but was tragically put down due to the effects of a foot infection last month.

"If we had managed back-to-back 1,000 Guineas winners it would have been hard to top," he says. "The gutting thing is whatever she did at two she would have been better at three – she was a big filly."

Chriselliam was the first yearling Donald had bought for her trainer Charlie Hills.



Dynamic duo: Alastair Donald (left) and Ed Sackville



"I bought him a few more last year. Let's see how we go with a replacement for Chriselliam," he says.

The increase in business for Hills is symptomatic of the growing demand for the services of Sackville Donald. Despite this, the agency won't be outgrowing its unassuming Berkshire base by recruiting new staff any time soon.

"We want to keep the agency as we are, we don't want to start employing other people," says Sackville. "We ourselves are our greatest assets. If someone rings up, I hope they want either me or Alastair to buy them a horse. We take people on for work experience but we're not looking for other agents under us."

"In 30 years' time, I hope I'm still buying for Ben Keswick and Alastair is still buying for Charlie Hills. It's about maintaining existing relationships."

Diplomacy needed for negotiations

NEGOTIATING the sale of horses abroad is not just about form study and offering pots of cash. Trying to convince trainers to part with their better horses needs skilful diplomacy and this corner of the bloodstock market is becoming crowded, writes Martin Stevens.

"There's a bit of politics involved as it's the trainer's good horses you're after," Donald says. "You don't want to upset them as you need to go back there for business."

"But they're fairly expensive horses, so the sales are good for everyone in the industry and for

British racing. As long as our exports do well abroad, people will come back and the market gets stronger. People want our bloodstock. I don't see it as a bad thing."

Owners in Hong Kong are allowed to have only four horses at one time, so there is a big burden of responsibility for Donald to source the right ones.

"Because prize-money out there is so good the owners are willing to give a lot of money," he says. "Last year I reckon there were a dozen million-euro-plus horses bought for the Hong Kong Derby and I think only one of

those made the race.

"You may have the orders but sometimes the demand outstrips the supply, especially as the demands for Hong Kong are so rigorous – the horses have to be sound, very correct with good feet and able to cope with firm ground, poorish air and a boring environment."

Those stringent demands and the big money involved means the standard of horse in Hong Kong is always improving. For further proof see today's card at Meydan, where Hong Kong fields eight runners, none whose chances can be dismissed.

THE wraps won't be taken off Sky Lantern, who became Sackville Donald's first Classic winner when she landed last year's 1,000 Guineas, until Royal Ascot in order to preserve her for another trip to Hong Kong's international meeting in December, writes Martin Stevens.

The daughter of Red Clubs won the 1,000 Guineas, Coronation Stakes and Sun Chariot Stakes for Richard Hannon snr last year, but was a disappointing last in the Hong Kong Mile after suffering travel sickness on the trip to Asia.

"It looks like Sky Lantern will start off in the Duchess of Cambridge Stakes," says Sackville. "It's only a Group 2 but there's a long season ahead and although Hong Kong was a disaster last year the plan would be to try to get her back there, simply because her owner Ben Keswick is based out there and it gives him a huge amount of pleasure to see her run on his home turf."

"Plus it would give me a huge amount of pleasure to try to beat one of Alastair's purchases out there!"

Sackville also says Sky Lantern's programme will include a revenge mission in the Falmouth Stakes, the race in which she finished second last year after being carried left by the winner Elusive Kate.

"We took her to Highclere Stud for a two-month holiday – the same prep she had before she won the Guineas – so she's had a holiday and an MOT. Highclere do a fantastic job and she's back in full training," the agent says.

Sky Lantern could stay in training after this season too.

"If she does well this season and does as well as last year, why not run her as a five-year-old?" Sackville says.

"She's never going to be sold, and look how much fun the owners of Snow Fairy and Ouija Board had running them at five."

Keswick, whose family has a stud in Gloucestershire with around five high-end mares, will breed from Sky Lantern to race.

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