

Starman starting to go clear for that landmark Group 1 victory in the July Cup, inset, jockey Tom Marquand congratulated by owner Sue Ward



Written in the Stars

James Thomas chats with David Ward, owner breeder of Starman, Group 1 winner, the Cartier Award-winning sprinter and new resident at Tally-Ho Stud



PERHAPS THE GREATEST INSIGHT into David Ward's outlook as an owner-breeder comes when he is asked to nominate the high point of the racing career of his homebred July Cup winner Starman.

It is tempting to assume that that breakthrough Group 1 triumph would be Ward's abiding memory of Starman's time on the track, and naturally he recalls that day at Newmarket fondly, saying the success

rates a "once-in-a-lifetime experience."

However, racing and breeding are endeavours that move people in different ways, and Ward says that Starman's demolition of a relatively humble Doncaster novice stakes on just his second outing in August 2020 was the performance that had the most profound effect.

"I've never really thought about it," he says, followed by the kind of pause that suggests the question is suddenly being given considerable consideration.

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“Strangely, his second race at Doncaster really lit the flame for me. That really was a transformational performance.”

He continues: “I remember I called my mother up afterwards and explained to her that I’ve been to Doncaster hundreds of times and seen thousands of horses run there but my horse, on his first run on Turf, broke the track record.

“That’s when the penny really dropped that he was going to be something special. When he won at Doncaster that was much more of a revelation, whereas when he won the July Cup it was a confirmation, because I knew what he was by then.”

To get a better perspective on Ward’s relationship with racing, it helps to understand how he first became interested, then involved, in the sport.

It was through his father, Donald, who had in turn inherited an interest from his father, that Ward was introduced to racing with childhood trips to courses such as Goodwood and York. He continued as a spectator well into his adult life, by which point he had assumed a senior role within the family’s sizeable recycling business.

When his father passed away, Ward decided to take stock and in 2011 he took the step from onlooker to owner, something he did not only for himself, but as a nod to the man who had introduced him to the sport many years earlier.

“I lost my father around 15 years ago and he’d

always contemplated having a horse but never did,” says Ward. “So, after losing him, I thought I would do it not just for myself, but because it was something my father would’ve enjoyed me doing too. That was the main reason I took the leap.”

His initial purchases were sent into training with Tom Dascombe, who introduced Ward to bloodstock agent Ed Sackville, a trusted ally to the present day. Among those early acquisitions was a daughter of Montjeu sourced from the 2011 Goffs Orby Yearling Sale at a cost of €50,000.

NAMED NORTHERN STAR and sent into training with Dascombe, the filly broke her maiden in a modest contest at Bath midway through a light three-year-old campaign. However, what followed proved to be far more significant as Northern Star went on to produce Ward’s first homebred winner, the Kodiak mare Sunday Star, and, more significantly, Starman himself.

“I struggle to recall quite what I was thinking at the time, but my brief to Ed Sackville was to find a filly by Montjeu,” Ward says. “I was keen on Montjeu, so I had breeding in the back of my mind even at that stage.

“I remember we’d picked her out and, bearing in mind I was a pure novice at this stage, I can still see her in my mind’s eye going around the parade ring at Goffs and thinking what a fabulous-looking filly she was.

“It was very much a case of when I saw her I knew she was the one. Maybe it’s fate, who knows, but it’s all flowed since.”

Sackville proved to be in particularly good form on that Tuesday evening some ten years ago – just nine lots before signing for Northern Star he purchased a Red Clubs filly from Tally-Ho Stud. She turned out to be Sky Lantern, whose daughter Snow Lantern landed the Falmouth Stakes a little over 24 hours before Starman’s July Cup strike.

While that serendipitous double reaffirmed Sackville’s skills to the masses, Ward plainly already held the agent in the highest regard.

“We’ve got a strong friendship and a great working relationship and we just hit it off straight away,” says Ward on his association with Sackville. “He’s heavily involved with everything; the horses I buy, which stallions I send the mares to, strategy now that Starman has gone to stud. He’s been instrumental in everything that I do from a racing and breeding perspective.”



The team in the winners’ enclosure at Newmarket racecourse after Starman won the Group 1 July Cup



An early-season victory in the Group 2 Duke Of York Stakes under jockey Oisín Murphy set up 2021 for the son of Dutch Art

While Ward has been able to call upon the counsel of Sackville as his bloodstock interests have flourished, he has had to progress without Northern Star, who was tragically lost after delivering her third foal, the Kingman filly Lodestar, in 2018

Starman was the result of Northern Star visiting Dutch Art in 2016 when the Cheveley Park Stud resident stood at a career-high fee of £40,000.

It did not take long for connections to realise that the decision to breed to the son of Medicean had been a wise move. Ward remembers a young Starman impressing almost as soon as he was born on March 31 in 2017, and then repeating the feat once he went into training with Ed Walker.

While they had to wait until mid-July of his three-year-old season to get Starman to the racecourse, with connections opting to give the strapping individual due time to mature, Ward says he was always content the colt would be worth waiting for.

“He was a nice strong foal and he showed Ed plenty as a two-year-old,” says Ward. “Ed is pretty patient, and being an owner-breeder that suits me well as I’m not operating on a commercial enterprise so there’s no rush.

“He’s a big horse so we gave him plenty of time, but Ed always knew he was a nice horse. We didn’t know quite how nice, but we certainly knew he wasn’t going to be running in class five handicaps!”

While Starman takes his moniker from the David Bowie track, Ward explains how the name was initially earmarked for another of Northern Star’s progeny.

“Northern Star was in-foal to Kingman and I was wondering what I could name a colt with that pedigree,” he says. “Starman was a combination of the two and when I looked the name up it was available, so I actually booked the name for a colt, who turned out to be a filly!”

“I still thought it was appropriate so I gave the name to Northern Star’s colt; it turned out to be a portent of something wonderful.”

Latent talent saw Starman overcome greenness to make a successful debut in a Lingfield maiden before the Doncaster track record-breaking performance that Ward holds so dear. A first black-type success soon followed when he ran away with the Listed Garrowby Stakes at York on his penultimate outing at three before he was bogged down in a soft-ground British Champions Sprint Stakes (G1). Normal service was resumed when Starman returned at four with victory in a hot running of the Duke Of York Stakes (G2) – the subsequent Group 1-winning sprinters Oxted and Emaraaty Ana were amongst those in arrears.

That Group 2 success saw Starman installed as ante-post favourite for the Diamond Jubilee Stakes (G1) only for torrential rain to scupper his chances and force connections to declare him a non-runner.

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However, any frustrations felt after Royal Ascot were quickly banished by what came next.

He faced 18 rivals in a competitive Group 1 July Cup, including the previous year's winner Oxted and the improving three-year-olds Creative Force, Dragon Symbol and Rohaan. Things appeared to be going awry when Starman found himself tangled in traffic with just over 2f to run, and matters looked like getting even worse when Oxted's right-hand drift created something of a roadblock. However, once Tom Marquand angled Starman into open water, he quickened into the lead in striking fashion.

"I don't think I'll ever have another moment like the July Cup," says Ward. "I couldn't really see him until he started to get in the clear around a furlong out, but watching him power home was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It was just fantastic."

As an independently-owned, bona fide stallion prospect, Starman had not only developed into a top-class racehorse but a hugely sought-after commercial commodity.

WHILE WARD speaks of being flattered by all the interest from studs keen to stand Starman, including the phone call Sackville received barely 30 seconds after the horse crossed the line in the July Cup, he is candid in his assessment of the process that followed and it is clear that he did not get into racing and breeding to mix business and pleasure.

"It was fantastic and it wasn't all wrapped up in one as the journey changed at that point," he says on finding Starman a berth at stud. "For someone like me to get a horse such as him with only the second horse that I've bred, it was flattering to get the offers but it was tinged with a sort of sadness as well, the thought that someone could take him away from you.

"My overriding desire was for him to become a stallion, the thought of having bred a horse who could go on to a career at stud was wonderful, but it brought with it different things to think about, and they weren't always the easiest things to think about."

After much deliberation and no shortage of offers, Ward opted to send Starman to Tally-Ho Stud in County Westmeath where the O'Callaghan family have recently applied a midas touch to the likes of Kodiak, Mehmas and this year's leading first-crop sire Cotai Glory.

"Tally-Ho is such a good nursery at getting stallions to become a success," says Ward. "And he means something to them, and that was



Photo: Tattersalls

David and Sue Ward will be at this year's breeding stock sales on the hunt for mares for their new stallion

ultimately the deciding factor.

"They viewed Starman as their biggest investment and the best horse they've bought. The farm is on an upward curve and wanted a stallion of increased standing, and I think he fitted the bill. He's a magnificent-looking horse and he'll appeal to their client base.

"I wanted to give him the best opportunity I could to make this part of his journey as successful as the first part was, and I think Tally-Ho will give him that chance. I've retained a percentage ownership of the horse so I have ten nominations to him, which is quite a big commitment. I'll throw everything I can at him to play my own small part."

Starman can expect a visit from another of Ward's headline names in runaway York Listed winner Primo Bacio, but that will have to wait until at least 2023 as the daughter of Awtaad is being kept in training next year and will bid to land a Group 1 prize.

Ward has other exciting breeding prospects on the go too – Sunday Star is set to visit Frankel, while Lodestar is in-foal to Dutch Art carrying a three-parts relation to Starman. Another mare, New Day Dawn, is closely related to Mohaather, and is in-foal to his sire Showcasing.

Given his broodmare band currently numbers less than the ten mares he plans to send to Starman, Ward says he is looking to supplement his numbers.

"I tend to buy fillies so I've got a number in training and half a dozen broodmares," he says. "I will be at Goffs and Tattersalls looking for mares to support Starman; mares that are probably going to be expensive based on how strong trade has been, but it's a nice problem to have. Having my mares going to my own stallion, gosh, how lucky am I?"

Given the considerable investment, both emotional and financial, Ward has put into racing, here's hoping he continues to have the kind of luck that money simply cannot buy. ■