



SUGAR VALLEY



FARMS

DALE E. WALTERS • D.V.M.

Optimism For Ohio

Joe McLead and his Uncle Billy Walters have brought four class stallions to Sugar Valley Farm in Delaware, Ohio, hoping to be in on the beginning of the resurgance of harness racing and breeding in that once prosperous state. By Nicole Kraft

When Dale Walters brought his champion pacer Sugar Tree home in 1969 to stand stud at his family's Sugar Valley Farm in Delaware, Ohio, the Buckeye State was the center of the Standardbred universe.

It bred among the most, raced among the most and attracted the best horses and horsemen to its tracks.

A lot has changed since then.

The world famous Delaware County Fair may still draw racing's spotlight to Ohio for a few precious days, but the rest of the year is filled with limited racing opportunities at decaying tracks with purses barely bigger than they were when Sugar Tree raced.

But the Walters family, especially Dale's son Billy, remember when harness racing glory and Ohio were synonymous. And on the eve of slot machines potentially coming to Ohio tracks, he and nephew Joe McLead are striving to bring Buckeye State breeding out of the rubble of its crumbling recent past to shine once again.

Walters, a longtime driver and trainer, and McLead, former general manager of Winbak Farms, have joined forces to bring stallions back to Sugar Tree to create a stallion station for the 21st century. With support from such industry heavyweights as George Teague Jr., Winbak's Joe Thomson,



Joe McLead (left) and Billy Walters - Photo by Amy Allan



Photo by Lisa Photo

Tara Hills Farms' David and Peter Heffering and Aaron Waxman, they aim to offer the best bloodlines in the Midwest and restore Ohio breeding to its rightful place among the sport's best.

"One thing about Ohio is, the roots are still here," said McLead. "The infrastructure is here to bring back the best in the sport. I give credit to anyone involved in racing in the state of Ohio through these times.

"But Ohio-bred horses can still compete anywhere; just look at Buck I St Pat. And we are going to do what we can to bring great horses back to Ohio."

If anyone should know how to make great horses, it would be McLead, who learned from the best the business has to offer. After starting his career training with Walters, and working with his grandfather, Dale, he struck out with his own racing stable. But the traveling trainer life eventually got old, so he left the sport and started selling radiators, which led him to the blind date that changed his life.

McLead not only met, and later mar-

ried, Patty Thomson, but he eventually encountered her cousin Joe, who in 1991 had opened a little breeding farm in Maryland he called Winbak Farms.

At Joe Thomson's urging, McLead came to work at Winbak in 2004 and helped it continue its rise to the pinnacle of Standardbred nurseries, producing such champions as Horses of the Year Rainbow Blue, No Pan Intended and Muscle Hill, and managing such stallions as Angus Hall, Artiscap, homebred Bettors Delight and Badlands Hanover.

"I've been around good people since I was a kid," McLead said. "I was raised in the business by my uncle, and I would study pedigrees with him. I got to stand next to Gene Riegle and have him explain a yearling. I got to listen to Joe Thomson on a daily basis, and that in

itself (gave me access) to one of the best people ever to come into sport.

"The people I got to work with at Winbak, (yearling manager) Jim Ladwig, our vet Sara Mackey, our trainer, Jeff Fout, Garrett Bell (Winbak's current general manager) and broodmare manager Raymond Fernandez, when you put yourself around good people, if you don't take anything out, it's your fault."

However, part of the message McLead took from Winbak was the importance of family, and after the McLeads had their first child, they decided in 2008 to move closer to their family in Delaware, Ohio. Joe once again put racing on the back burner while taking a job selling equine pharmaceuticals for Milburn Equine, a division of Webster Veterinary.

A TRUE 21ST CENTURY PEDIGREE FOR OHIO!!



WOODSTOCK

p,2,1:52.4s, 3Q1:50.3-1:52h (\$178,926)

Rocknroll Hanover-Gothic Lady-Abercrombie

Introducing one of the finest pedigreed stallions to go to stud for 2012 – WOODSTOCK. A \$100,000 yearling, WOODSTOCK has a lineage second to none being a son of leading sire Rocknroll Hanover out of the full sister to super sire Artsplace - Gothic Lady p,3,1:53.1s (\$486,047). Bloodlines do not get any better than that.

A natural two-year-old, WOODSTOCK won his first pari-mutuel start in 1:52 and shortly thereafter captured an elimination of the \$1 million Metro Pace, was second in the International Stallion Stake and third in the Bluegrass. The following season before being injured he was second in a New Jersey Sires Stake beaten a neck in 1:49.3, won a NJSS in 1:52h over Freehold's half-mile track, and was second in an elimination of the \$400,000 Cane Pace.

"Woodstock was the best gaited Rocknroll Hanover I've ever had and one of my favourites horses. He's a gorgeous individual and a perfect horse to breed to – I certainly would look at his yearlings."

...trainer Noel Daley

"Woodstock looked like a champion from his very first start when he came his last quarter in :26 and a bit and then came right back to win in 1:52.4. Had a terrific finishing brush to him and a fabulous gait. All I ever did was point him."

...driver Tim Tetrick

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Joe McLead points to \$2.3 million winner Buck I St Pat as proof positive that Ohio-bred horses can still compete anywhere. The Jailhouse Jesse daughter is shown above winning the 2010 Ambro Flight Stake at Mohawk.

Racing, however, never really left his heart, and when rumours began to swirl that Ohio racetracks would soon be allowed to install long-coveted slot machines, under the orders of Gov. John Kasich, McLead's phone started ringing.

"With my background from Winbak a couple of people called and said they knew Ohio had the possibility of getting slots, and asked if I was doing anything," he said. "Joe Thomson had mentioned when I left that if Ohio got anything, he might do something, so I had that in the back of my mind.

"I also knew my Uncle Billy was 55 years old and just training a few head, so I asked him, 'What about a stallion station at Grandpa's farm?' which is just two miles north of the Jug track. He agreed it might be a good idea."

Billy Walters had moved his own training operation to Florida in 1977, but returned home to Ohio to work on the family farm when his parents' health began to fail. He had a lifetime of watching the Buckeye State's racing fortune rise and fall, like an amusement park rollercoaster, but he also saw the potential for a profitable ride ahead.

"Between the slots coming in and my nephew's past acquaintances, we saw an opportunity, and we thought we'd

NEW for 2012! At Ohio's

Sugar Valley Farm Stallions



MR WIGGLES p,2,1:53.3f; 3,1:49.1f (\$1,195,099)

Badlands Hanover-Wiggle Hanover-Life Sign

- ❖ The second-richest son of leading Ontario sire Badlands Hanover and out of multiple stakes producer Wiggle Hanover p,4,1:52.4.
- ❖ At three he earned nearly \$1-million with victories in the \$500,000 Hoosier Cup, \$100,000 DSBF final, Reynolds Stake and eliminations of the Breeders Crown (finishing second by a head in the Final to If I Can Dream and ahead of Pacer of the Year Well Said), North America Cup, Adios and Max Hempt Memorial.
- ❖ At four he won multiple legs of the Levy Memorial before retiring at the end of 2010.
- ❖ He stands his second season at stud after standing his first year in Indiana in 2011.

2012 Fee: \$3,000



I'M GORGEOUS p,2,1:50.4; 3,1:50-1:50.2h (\$573,698)

Bettor's Delight-Joy-Andrel

- ❖ A multiple stakes-winning son of 2011's leading money-winning pacing sire Bettors Delight and out of multiple stakes winner Joy p,4,1:53.3f (\$536,237).
- ❖ A stakes winner at two, he battled an incredible group at three that included the likes of Horse of the Year Rock N Roll Heaven and One More Laugh. His victories that year included the \$200,000 Battle of the Brandywine consolation, an eliminations of the Cane Pace in 1:50.4h and his Little Brown Jug elimination in 1:50.2h. In the Jug final he was race-timed in 1:49.4 finishing second to Rock N Roll Heaven in his 1:49.2h World Record. He also finished second in his Meadowlands Pace elim and was race-timed in 1:48.2 finishing fifth in the final.
- ❖ He stands his first season at stud in 2012.

2012 Introductory Fee: \$3,000



WOODSTOCK p,2,1:52.4; 3,Q1:50.3 (\$178,926)

Rocknroll Hanover-Gothic Lady-Abercrombie

- ❖ A \$100,000 yearling purchase, he's a gorgeous son of the great Rocknroll Hanover and out of multiple stakes winner Gothic Lady p,3,1:53.1 (\$486,047) who is a full sister to World Champion racehorse and sire Artsplace.
- ❖ At two he won his Metro elim, finished second in the International Stallion Stakes and third in the Bluegrass on his way to earning more than \$120,000 in his freshman season. He was retired early at three due to an unfortunate injury in the Cane Pace Final.
- ❖ He stands his first season at stud in 2012.

2012 Introductory Fee: \$2,000



PILGRIMS TAJ 2,1:55.2f; 3,1:53.3 (\$1,006,203)

Broadway Hall-BWT Maija-Tagliabue

- ❖ The second richest performer by Broadway Hall, trailing only 2011 Hambletonian Champion Broad Bahn in earnings, and out of multiple stakes winner BWT Maija 3,1:56.1f (\$137,075).
- ❖ In 10 starts at two, he posted 7 wins and 3 thirds and was the year's richest 2YO colt trotter with \$764,939. His victories included the Breeders Crown elim & Final, Valley Victory elim (second in the Final) and Peter Haughton elim (second in the Final).
- ❖ At three, he won his Hambletonian elim in a career best 1:53.3 and finished fourth in the Final, timed in 1:52.1.
- ❖ He stands his second season at stud after standing in Ontario in 2011.

2012 Fee: \$3,000

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Photo by New Image Media

try it," Walters said. "The farm was pretty well set up already. We had already invested in it, now we could make it something new.

"We were both in 100 per cent agreement that we wanted to stand stallions that would be appealing, not only to local people, but to breeders across the country. Things are very depressed in Ohio right now. People have limited access to money, and a lot of people have moved out. We wanted stallions that could be competitive not only in Ohio, but everywhere."

From a bloodlines standpoint, they seem to have fished their wish. The stallions standing in 2012 include:

- Woodstock p,3,Q1:50.3 (\$173,176), a son of Rocknroll Hanover out of \$480,000 winner Gothic Lady, a full sister to Artsplace;

- Millionaire Mr Wiggles p,3,1:49.1f, a son of Badlands Hanover and the Life Sign mare Wiggle Hanover, he captured the 2009 Hoosier Cup (to watch that race, [click here](#)) and was second in the Breeders Crown and Adios;

"I knew Joe (McLead) through Winbak, and I know how respected he is in the business. That's a very big plus. He is also very passionate about Ohio. I just think it will be a good mix. If anyone can work to get (my stallions) booked and make them profitable, it will be Joe," said George Teague Jr. who has sent Mr Wiggles (above) and Im Gorgeous to Sugar Valley to stand.

- The Bettors Delight son Im Gorgeous p,3,Q1:50 (\$573,722), out of the Andrel mare Joy, won a heat of the 2010 Little Brown Jug ([see that race here](#)); and

- The \$900,000 winner Pilgrims Taj, a son of Broadway Hall and the Tagliabue mare BWT Maija, and winner of the 2009 freshman colt Breeders Crown Trot, see that race by [clicking here](#).

George Teague Jr., who sent both Mr Wiggles and Im Gorgeous to Sugar Valley Farm, said he was betting Ohio's future and the experience of the farm's personnel might just be the perfect recipe to bring his stallions success.

"I'm gambling," Teague admitted. "Back in the day, Ohio bred more horses than anybody, and it might be there again. A lot of studs have left, so there is a good opportunity for fresh, different breeding, appealing breeding. We want

to try and be one of the first on board before the slots.

"I knew Joe through Winbak, and I know how respected he is in the business. That's a very big plus. He is also very passionate about Ohio. I just think it will be a good mix. If anyone can work to get (my stallions) booked and make them profitable, it will be Joe."

To get the Sugar Valley stallions started off right, McLead and Walters gutted and rebuilt the inside of the farm's main barn to build collection rooms, a state-of-the-art breeding shed and six stallion stalls. They also put in 22 acres of new four-board fence and created six two-acre stallion paddocks.

Although it can house half a dozen stallions, McLead said Sugar Valley is content with its quartet. And while the farm may be home to a handful of the family's

own mares, it will focus now on breeding and leave the boarding and foaling to others.

"As time goes on, we may have mares," he said. "We have the room to do it. But right now we want to do the best we can with the stallions."

While McLead said he hopes to breed 300 mares this year, he also knows he must face Ohio's current reality. The state, according to USTA statistics, bred just 664 mares last year, compared with 2,024 in 2006 and 3,384 in 1996. Just 59 stallions called the state home in 2011, less than half the number that stood in 2006 (122) and down from 227 the decade prior.

And that's not the only challenge.

On October 21 the Ohio Roundtable filed a lawsuit in Franklin County (Ohio) Common Pleas Court aimed at blocking the racetrack slots, claiming the governor's executive order allowing the machines violates a 1973 amendment to the Ohio Constitution. Ohio voters had four different times rejected casino-style gambling for racetracks before a meas-

ure to legalize four casinos in the state passed in 2009.

But the fact that Ohio breeding has sustained in the face of near crippling economics, and the intention by two of the state's four tracks, Raceway Park (relocating from Toledo to Dayton) and Lebanon, to build brand new facilities, in addition to the revitalization of Scioto Downs and Northfield Park, means Ohio is poised for better days ahead, McLead said.

"The fact that there were still 600 mares bred last year in Ohio is a testament to the people who are still here working hard," he said. "And there were 1,700 Ohio residents who bred a mare somewhere.

"I think in the first year, half to three-quarters of them will come back. And once they see people sitting in the stands or racinos filling up, it will really flourish.

"The economy here is still very weak. The state can't deny the money this will bring in, the licensing fees, the revenues, the thousands of jobs created,

as well as the agriculture boon. We need this."

And the Sugar Valley crew is not alone in its Ohio optimism. The state in 2012 will welcome some of the best bloodlines in the sport, including 2011 Jug winner Big Bad John p,3,1:49 (\$1,000,559); the Rocknroll Hanover - Worldly Beauty son World Of Rocknroll p,3,1:50.3s (\$338,561) and Triumphant Caviar 4,1:51.4s (\$796,794), a son of SJs Caviar.

"We believe the quality of our horses and the athletic ability they have shown in time and money earnings will help bring Ohio out of the grave and back to the living," Walters said. "I remember when I was a kid, Billy Haughton, Joe O'Brien, George Sholty, they all came in to race in Ohio. People came from all over the US and Canada to the Ohio Select Yearling Sales. We were breeding 2,500 mares per year.

"Now we don't see trainers like that here. We don't get the crowds. We don't breed big numbers. But we can. And I think we will." 🐾



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