

Boutique consignor Bedouin Bloodstock making an impact in the auction ring



SALES APPEAL

By Glenye Cain Oakford / Photos by Anne M. Eberhardt

Keeneland has been an important location for Neal Clarke and Conor Doyle's Thoroughbred sales careers. The two Irishmen first met there in 1995, and, since then, their Bedouin Bloodstock breeding and sales business has become one of the Keeneland September yearling sale's most successful small consignors. But Bedouin's consignments are small in the way of small-batch bourbon: smaller in quantity but higher in quality, and developed with careful individual attention from hands-on producers. And lately the Bedouin horses have been catching Thoroughbred connoisseurs' attention in a big way. Last September, Clarke and Doyle sold the highest-priced colt at the Keeneland auction's opening day, a \$1.1 million yearling by the fashionable sire Unbridled's Song. Now named War Ride, the gray is a son of the accomplished race mare Irish Smoke, winner of the prestigious Spinaway Stakes. Bedouin sold War Ride to Nat Rea's Regis Farms on behalf of the colt's breeder, SF Bloodstock.

Conor Doyle, above left, and Neal Clarke strive for quality over quantity in their consignments of yearlings to the major auctions.

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“That’s what we strive for and hope for,” said Clarke of the agency’s first million-dollar yearling, which was also a personal-best sale price for the Bedouin team, just edging out the \$1.05 million they sold broodmare Love to Dance for in 2010. “It’s even more fun with a yearling because it’s so much tougher,” added Doyle. “There’s vet work, X rays, and everything has to be perfect. They have to meet a lot of criteria to do that.”

Heading into the 2013 auction, Clarke and Doyle thought the Unbridled’s Song colt might bring as much as \$500,000. In the end his home-run \$1.1 million price helped make Bedouin Bloodstock one of the auction’s top 10 consignors with an average sale price of \$186,700 for its 10 yearlings.

The season also featured their \$700,000 sale of broodmare Shamarbelle, the \$410,000 price for Little Bug at Keeneland’s November breeding stock sale, and racetrack success for Bedouin and Keeneland sale graduates Broken Sword and Financial Mogul. Broken Sword, a \$20,000 Keeneland September yearling in 2011, won the grade II Bayakoa Stakes



Bedouin Bloodstock's yearlings undergo preparation for upcoming sales.

in California, bringing her purse earnings to \$160,660. Financial Mogul, a colt they bred in partnership, finished second in the grade II Nashua Stakes.

Foundation for the future

Clarke and Doyle’s business partnership also fell together at the right time. Clarke is a native Dubliner who got bitten

by the racing bug when he rode for a steeplechase trainer in Mullingar, and Doyle, the son of a bookmaker, is from Bray, County Wicklow. They grew up within a dozen miles of each other and had numerous mutual friends and a shared love of Thoroughbred racing, but their paths never crossed until they both landed at Keeneland’s July yearling sale in 1995, where Doyle was a groom and Clarke a showman, parading yearlings for potential bidders.

“It was a hot, muggy July day, and we were the grunts,” recalled Clarke. “He was in Taylor Made’s intern program, and I had been working on the racetrack and came in to work the sale. We just struck up a conversation, as you do when you’re working a sale, and we just got on well from there.”

The two quickly found they had similar goals and compatible skills that would make a beneficial business partnership.

“He was very keen on racing and pedigrees and is very strong in that area,” Clarke said of Doyle.

For his part, Doyle described Clarke as “a remarkable horseman. He’s got a gift,

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and he's a natural in a way that I am not. He's very intuitive, vigilant, all the qualities you need to be a good horse farmer."

After their 1995 meeting each man went on to other jobs — Clarke to Viking Stud and Doyle to Fred Seitz's Brookdale Farm after a stint in Keeneland's publicity department — but that July sale experience had laid the foundation for their future, both as friends and business partners and as horsemen.

"Taylor Made was a great introduction to the American way of doing things and how to do things efficiently and properly," said Clarke, who also worked at Taylor Made's Nicholasville, Ky., farm for a time. "They do things right, and they have a system that makes sense and works well. When you get to see that in operation, you learn. You might tweak things a bit to make them work for you, but it was a great education. We've definitely drawn from that."

Hardy and resourceful

Doyle and Clarke formed Bedouin Bloodstock at the end of the 1990s, naming it to honor the famed desert horsemen whose hardy Arabians contributed their bloodlines to originate the Thoroughbred breed. The two friends have had to be hardy and resourceful themselves, something they say is part of the culture of their operation.

"When you start out on your own, you do everything, and every bit of everything," Clarke said. "That's how we've stayed. When we first started, if someone needed a horse broken, we'd break it. If you needed a horse sales-prepped or a mare foaled, we'd do whatever needed doing."

Diversification remains a strength at Bedouin. In addition to boarding, breeding, and raising horses, Clarke and Doyle also buy a few weanlings for resale as yearlings, campaign a few racehorses, and



Doyle and Clarke, accompanied by dog Lady, put in many hours and miles on the farm.

invest in stallions. "We try to have irons in every fire," Clarke explained, "just to broaden the horizon a little bit. You know you're going to have bad luck someday in one or two areas, and you hope that when that happens one of the other areas will support you for that year. And I hold out faith that what they say is true: A horse will pull you out of a bad time."

"We had a Rockport Harbor colt back around 2009 that we couldn't sell as a yearling and couldn't give away," he recalled. "So we get to spring, and, you know, in March, April, and May you're buying so much straw and hay and feed, it's a high-expense time. But we had sent that colt down to Ciaran Dunne to break and sell as a 2-year-old, and he got it done. The colt sold for something like \$180,000. When that check came in, we didn't get to look at it before it was gone, but we were current again."

For the last 12 years Bedouin Bloodstock has been based at the historic Atlas Farm on 260 acres near Keene, Ky., where Clarke

lives with his wife, Julie, and their children, Georgia, 9, and Henry, 7; Doyle lives in Lexington. Bedouin also owns another 100-acre farm just down the road. The operation has a total population of about 150 horses at the peak of the season, but Doyle and Clarke keep their consigning business relatively small by design.

"We're small and we like it that way," said Clarke. "We don't want to go through the headaches of not really being in touch with the horses we sell or not knowing exactly what's going on."

"We strive to have well-suited horses at various points in the sale, but rarely more than a handful or six at a time," added Doyle. "A lot of these larger consignors now are purely consignors; they're not farmers. If you're expecting to do both, and to do both pretty well, it can be a real stretch for most people."

Said Keeneland's director of sales Geoffrey Russell: "Conor and Neal are representative of what makes up the core of our industry. They are tireless workers, to-

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tally hands-on horsemen, with great intuition and business sense. It is always a pleasure working with them and we have enjoyed watching their success.”

Not your average farmers

Clarke and Doyle see themselves primarily as farmers, albeit growers of a sleekly beautiful product at the glamorous heart of the Sport of Kings. If they are farmers, their yearling program certainly is not Big Ag; it's more the artisanal producer at a boutique market. And that's exactly the way Doyle and Clarke want it to stay. Although they have eight employees — many of them long time — and have now sold million-dollar horses, both of Bedouin Bloodstock's owners still like wrapping their own hands around the horses' lead shanks, too.

“Essentially, our days start on the farm, and then Neal might go fix a fence or mend a tractor, and I'll do the billing or whatever I need to do, so it's never changed in that regard,” explained Doyle. “But it's farm first, and the extracurricular stuff we need to do, we just do that when we can.

“We're farmers first and consignors second. But the sale is the shop window for what we do, so we just like to be in control of everything when we get to that point. With more horses and more people we might not be able to do that.”

Most of the yearlings Bedouin consigns were raised on the farm for a range of clients from Canada, Washington state, California, Texas, Illinois, and Kentucky.

“We're lucky that we have a couple of big clients and then this great variety of people that have been with us for years and years and trust us,” Clarke said. “That's the backbone of the whole thing.”

“Because we're smaller, the expenses are smaller,” Doyle said. “We're selling for clients that board horses with us, and we're selling our own horses, too. And that's an important part of it, to be in control of the bloodstock that we produce ourselves, either by ourselves or with partners.”

As with any other farming venture, the land is all-important at Bedouin, where horses gallop and graze on the gently rolling landscape that has stood several generations of horsemen in very good stead. Today, Doyle and Clarke take advantage of the bone-strengthening land and the horse-friendly climate by turning their young horses out as often as possible rather than “hot-housing” them before the sales.

“We get to benefit from being able to turn horses out and let them feel like horses,” Clarke said. “It makes such a difference and makes life so much easier. Yes, you'll have problems that come up anyway, but the fact that the horses can go out onto that green grass every evening — it's idyllic, compared to being locked up in a box in cold, rainy Ireland until they sell. Kentucky is a good environment for horses, and we just try to stay out of the way and let it do its magic.” **KM**

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