

Age of Wonderment: A Champagne Toast to ...

TDN Staff Blog

by [Lucas Marquardt](#)

Breeder Rob Whiteley has long held that older mares are unfairly discriminated against. He insists that if a buyer has an attractive foal or yearling in front of him or her, there's no reason to look past the horse's attributes and guess at whether the womb from whence it sprang will prove a hindrance. (Well, put that way, it just sounds silly, doesn't it?)

Anyway, I'm not aware of any studies that fall on one side of the issue or another, but Whiteley's line of reasoning makes sense to me.



And while you might have your own thoughts about the subject, it's tough to argue with his success. On Belmont Stakes day, he and co-breeder Brandywine Farm, owned by Jim and Pam Robinson, were represented by Ruler On Ice (Roman Ruler), who posted the big 24-1 upset. Fittingly, Ruler On Ice's win fell on the one-year anniversary of his half-sister Champagne d'Oro's victory in the GI Acorn S. Champagne d'Oro, by Medaglia d'Oro, was an even bigger price on Belmont day in 2010, winning at 39-1, but later proved it was no fluke with a win in the GI Test S. at Saratoga.

Both horses were produced by the Saratoga Six mare Champagne Glow, a half-sister to the Grade I winners Grand Canyon (Fappiano) and Jurado (Alleged). A foal of 1988, Champagne Glow was a juvenile stakes winner and Grade I placed (behind Meadow Star) in the Frizette S. in 1990.

She sold for \$150,000 as a broodmare in 1997, then, two years later, was acquired by Whiteley and partner Dr. Christopher Elia's Oratis Thoroughbreds for \$70,000 while in foal to Favorite Trick. An 11-year-old at the time, she had had seven previous foals, none of whom had earned black-type. And it would be five more until she came up with Champagne d'Oro--her 12th foal and her first black-type winner.

Champagne Glow was 19 when she had Champagne d'Oro and 20 when she had Ruler On Ice, which is really a testament to Whiteley's faith in the mare. Many would have written her off at that point and sent her out to pasture. (Ensuring she would, in fact, be sent out to pasture when her breeding days were done, Whiteley and Elia gave Jim and Pam Robinson a 50% share in her and several other older mares under the agreement that the Robinsons would provide retirement for the mares at Brandywine after their reproductive days were over.)



Champagne Glow at 23 at Brandywine Farm

In today's day and age, and given the market's contraction, it's not uncommon to see nice-pedigreed, black-type mares whose first three or four foals haven't done much, go through the ring and barely bring the in utero stud fee. And sellers are more than happy (well,

happy might not be the right word) to part ways with a mare like that. Hell, maybe that's just smart business in this climate. Many buyers are going to be a bit reluctant to take a chance on the offspring of a mare who hasn't yet produced, so who can blame them? Young, unproven mares are a safer bet. Yet it's refreshing to see a mare like Champagne Glow given a chance to succeed over the long haul, and maybe the lesson for smaller breeders with a limited budget is that there's value to be had shopping for an older mare.



Champagne Glow

Interestingly, Champagne Glow had a counterpart in Europe last week, as regards aged mares producing Grade/Group 1 winners. Darara (Ire) (Top Ville {Ire}), foaled in 1983, was 24 when she had Rewilding (GB) (Tiger Hill {Ire}), who at Royal Ascot doubled his Group1 tally when beating So You Think (NZ) (High Chaparral {Ire}) in the G1 Prince of Wales's S. That added to his earlier victory in this year's G1 Dubai Sheema Classic.

Unlike Champagne Glow, Darara showed promise early--her first foal was a stakes winner--but she too did her best work in her later years. Watership Down Stud's blue hen now has four Group 1 winners to her credit, and they were born when she was aged 10 (Darazari {Ire}); 16 (the roughly \$5.2 million record-priced yearling Diaghilev {Ire}); 22 (the very fine Dar Re Mi {GB}); and Rewilding at 24. All of which made the Ir470,000gns Watership Down paid for the half-sister to Darshaan (GB) as a broodmare in 1994--also when she was 11--seem like a bargain.

June in general has been a terrific month for the offspring of older mares. Acclamation (Unusual Heat), who recently defended his title in the G1 Charles Wittingham Memorial H. at Hollywood Park, was born to a mare who was 18 at the time (and who hadn't previously produced a stakes winner). The Belmont Stakes undercard was flush with such runners. Trappe Shot (Tapit)'s dam was 19 when she had him, C. S. Silk (Medaglia d'Oro)'s dam was 18, and Justin Philip (First Samurai)'s dam was 14. In Europe, meanwhile, Reliable Man (GB) (Dalakhani {Ire}), winner of the G1 Prix du Jockey Club, was born to a mare who was 15 at the time, while G1 Gold Cup hero Fame and Glory (GB) (Montjeu {Ire})'s dam was 13.

I emailed Whiteley the other day to congratulate him on the Belmont victory, and asked about Champagne Glow's slow start. He tried to shoulder the blame, then offered some more insight on the older-mare debate. "Don't blame this good mare for her slow start...It took me a while to figure her out and get it right," he said. "It may not happen, but this should be the final nail in the coffin of that silly and enduring sales myth and stigma that older mares lose their ability to produce good horses as they get older. The genetics don't change, and if they produce a quality foal, it IS a quality foal."

Incidentally, one need only to see the condition of Champagne Glow to believe she's still capable--now at 23--of throwing a quality foal. A resident of Brandywine Farm near Paris, Kentucky, she looks in great shape. On Tuesday, Jim and Pam Robinson were nice enough to show me around the property, a sprawling 600-acre farm that is home to some 200 broodmares and 120 foals. Pam said there was no real secret in taking care of the older mares. "We have a tendency to separate some of these older girls out and put them into similar groups," she said. "We'll put four or five in together and get them out of the big herds. But it's all just practicing good, basic horsemanship."



Pam (under attack) & Jim Robinson, together with new addition Einstein (attacking) and Taylor

During his unexpected debut on the national stage after the Belmont, the gelded Ruler On Ice gave the impression of a horse that could be a handful at times. But the Robinsons remember him as a horse who just needed to be kept busy. "He was energetic and very full of himself," said Pam. "He was never a problem child, but always wanted something to do. We gave him a jolly ball--which we'll do with a lot of the colts--to help him occupy his time, and he'd throw the thing around. Champagne d'Oro was actually bigger than he was, but he was very well-balanced and very well made."

Champagne Glow will have to wait a year to see if she can make it three straight stakes winners--she didn't have a foal in 2009. Her 2010 foal, a filly by A.P. Warrior, sold as a weanling to Bill and Susan Casner for \$130,000 at last year's Keeneland November Sale. According to the Robinsons, the Casners originally considered pinhooking the filly back at the yearling sales, but well before the Belmont, nixed that idea. "Bill gave the filly to his wife, and Sue said, 'No, we're *not* selling her,'" laughed Jim. Champagne Glow did

not produce a foal this year, but has been bred back to Roman Ruler. And who knows? Maybe the best is yet to come for this golden girl.



Mares and foals led out at Brandywine Farm

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Photos by Lucas Marquardt

Posted By TDN Staff Blog to [Thoroughbred Daily News Staff Blog](#) at 6/23/2011 10:15:00 AM