

Liberation Farm and Brandywine Farm

BY EVAN HAMMONDS

It took not one, but two Ph.D.s—and an electrical engineer—to come up with the mating of this year's Belmont Stakes (gr. I) winner. Ruler On Ice, the surprising winner of the "Test of the Champion," was bred in Kentucky by Rob Whiteley's Liberation Farm and Pam and Jim Robinson's Brandywine Farm.

Classic triple threat: Rob Whiteley and Pam and Jim Robinson

Whiteley grew up in California and went on to head the graduate program in counseling psychology at Rutgers University in central New Jersey before switching to the Thoroughbred industry, making a name for himself with Carl Icahn's Foxfield in the mid 1980s.

Pam Robinson, a retired Ph.D./M.D., held the "premier sports job in the country" directing research and graduate pro-



grams at the University of North Carolina before moving to Kentucky with her husband, Jim, an engineer with GTE.

In North Carolina the couple operated Brandywine Farm, with 100 mares and five stallions while both worked full time. Retiring and moving to the Bluegrass State 12 years ago, they started with 100 acres. Now their spread outside Paris is about 600 acres, and one of their 200 broodmares is the 23-year-old Champagne Glow, the dam of Ruler On Ice. Whiteley bought the mare in 1999, and the Robinsons bought in the year before Ruler On Ice was foaled.

With Foxfield and his own Liberation Farm and partners, Whiteley notes he's bred or planned the matings for 15-20 grade I winners including Hall of Fame member Silverbulletday; Better Than Honour, the dam of two Belmont winners; and major winners Blushing K.D., El Corredor, Henny Hughes, Strong Hope, and Badge of Silver, to name a few.

He also co-bred Roman Ruler, the sire of Ruler On Ice, who stands at John Sikura's Hill 'n' Dale Farms near Lexington, and planned the mating for Silvery Swan, the dam of Roman Ruler.

When Whiteley left Foxfield to go out on his own in 2005, he and Robinson noted they were buying similar mares at the sales and decided to partner on a few. The partnership expanded, and now, according to Pam Robinson, they have about 100 mares together.

"We might be the last surviving major commercial breeders without wealth outside the horse industry, or control or access to major stallions," Whiteley said.

Whiteley, who lives in Califon, N.J., plans the matings, while the Robinsons handle the foaling, raising, and sales prep in Kentucky. Each season the Robinsons prepare up to 125 youngsters for the yearling sales. Just like Ruler On Ice, they get the usual Robinson sales prep, which begins with a mile walk from the barns to a Eurociser where they'll get 30-45 minutes of warm-up before exercising. Robinson alternates between putting them on an underwater treadmill and free-lunging them in a round pen.

Brandywine Farm has bred 2010 Silverbulletday Stakes (gr. III) winner Jody Slew and with Liberation Farm bred grade II winner Vision in Gold.

Champagne Glow has really come into her own as an older mare. Her 2007 foal, a filly by Medaglia d'Oro, was a \$210,000 yearling purchase by Southern Equine Stables. Named Champagne d'Oro, she developed into a grade I winner, taking the Betfair TVG Acorn Stakes (gr. I) on the Belmont Stakes undercard in 2010. The following foal, a colt by Roman Ruler that George and Lori Hall bought for \$100,000, took Belmont day's biggest prize the next year.



Brandywine Farm's Jim and Pam Robinson



Rob Whiteley

ANNE M. EBENHARDT PHOTOS

"I do all my matings starting out by trying to match the mare and the stallion physically," said Whiteley. "With Champagne Glow I didn't do such a good job in the beginning. It took me a while to figure her out. I think I finally got a handle on it and stopped getting in her way.

"What I wanted to do was bring a little more scope and size to Champagne Glow in order to get slightly bigger and better-balanced results. Both Medaglia d'Oro and Roman Ruler fit the kind of quality, physical stallion I was looking for in that regard. The results from the gene pool finally came out in the right way."

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While buyers are increasingly focused on buying yearlings out of younger mares, Whiteley is quick to try to debunk what he called an "unsubstantiated stigma" against foals out of older mares.

"Older mares often have a reduction in their ability to reproduce effectively, but if you get a quality result out of a quality mare, the genetics don't change," he said. "Ruler On Ice came out just the way we were hoping."

Robinson remembers the future Belmont winner as "an extremely active child; very athletic. He had a lot of natural ability."

The next foal out of Champagne Glow was a "drop-dead" gorgeous filly by A.P. Warrior. Offered by Brandywine Farm, agent, as a weanling at last year's

Keeneland November breeding stock sale, Bill Casner purchased her for his wife, Susan, for \$130,000.

Just days prior to the Belmont, based on the high regard both Whiteley and the Robinsons had for Ruler On Ice as a foal, Champagne Glow was bred back to Roman Ruler.

Whiteley, who just had surgery on his back two days before the Belmont, watched the race from home. Worn out and recovering, he noted he celebrated the win by just getting his head off the pillow.

The Robinsons also watched the race on television at the farm in Kentucky but had a different reaction to Ruler On Ice's 24-1 upset score.

"I thought, 'He's (jockey Jose Valdivia Jr.) taking him right up to press Shackleford right from the beginning?'" Pam Robinson said. "I couldn't believe how he hung in there and didn't give in. At the sixteenth pole, I'm jumping up and down in front of the TV. My Jack Russell thought there was something wrong, so it was getting excited and biting me on the back of the leg."

There is nothing wrong with putting the puzzle pieces together on a pedigree and getting back-to-back grade I winners out of a mare, including America's latest classic winner. Both the Robinsons and Whiteley have a lifetime of experience in the Thoroughbred industry. Sometimes it's conventional, and sometimes it's not.

"There was plenty there to work with, just not a foal out of an older mare myth," Whiteley said. "Twenty-five years ago when I got involved, it was taboo to inbreed to Raise a Native and Mr. Prospector. I was unfettered by what people thought. Just doing what made sense has certainly paid off in a big way here because Ruler On Ice is inbred to Raise a Native and inbred to Mr. P.

"It's fun to watch," he said. 🐾