

Amazing O'Reilly more than just a record breaker

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Statistics tell one part of the story of O'Reilly, the standout on the New Zealand thoroughbred breeding scene who for the second year running has dominated active stallion ranks.

Silent Achiever and Sacred Falls were again the headline performers for the Waikato Stud home-bred, along with a support cast that included leading two-year-old filly O'Marilyn, star Singapore galloper War Affair, and Group winners Hera, Annie Higgins and Miss Selby. For the second year running O'Reilly made a clean sweep of the prestigious Grosvenor, Dewar and Centaine stallion premierships.

Those facts neatly summarise the past 12 months in the career of the amazing 21-year-old, but still don't paint a full picture of the horse that starred on the racetrack nearly two decades ago and has since stamped his personality on daily life at the country's leading stud.

No-one knows O'Reilly better than Waikato Stud owner Mark Chittick, whose family acquired the son of Last Tycoon and Golden Slipper winner Courtza with their lock, stock and barrel purchase of the Matamata property in 1993, which coincided with the birth of the brown colt.

"The earliest memory of O'Reilly that has stayed with me was the day when he and a half-dozen other weanling colts were running in the paddock we call Curragh," Chittick recalls. "Back then it was a 21-acre paddock – it's since been split into two – which was plenty of room for a bunch of active colts to roam around.

"One day on the inspection rounds our manager Gordon Cunningham noticed he had a nick on the outside of a hind fetlock, so the three of us – Gordon, his wife Robyn and I – went back down the farm to clean the wound and wrap it up.

"He was happy to stand in the paddock while we tended to the leg, and everything was going fine until we unclipped the lead. To one side was a segmented roll of paper towels and before we could grab them, O'Reilly had clamped his teeth on the end of the roll, reared up and then crapped himself when the roll unravelled.

"You'd think he would have let go, but no, he tore off across the paddock with his mates scattering everywhere being chased by these yards of paper towel!"

O'Reilly grew into a strapping colt deemed classy enough to send to Australia for his racing career with Flemington trainer Gerald Ryan, but this time he got properly in the wars when he took fright coming off the track and fell badly, tearing muscles over his hind-quarters.

A long recovery back home ensued before he was put into work with local trainers Dave and Paul O'Sullivan. Ryan had enough of an insight to tell the Chitticks that he "could gallop" and in time he created the same impression at Wexford Stables. Much anticipation surrounded his first



Champion stallion O'Reilly with Mark Chittick and another of his biggest fans, Raffles Farm principal Dato Yap Kim San.

public appearance in a home track trial as a spring three-year-old, but once again he tested his owners' patience when he sprung a plate behind the starting gates and after some quick farrier work had to be transferred into the next heat.

That mattered little as he proceeded to run his rivals ragged and by the time he was set for his race debut he was the talk of the town and elsewhere. Blowing the start in a 1000-metre race down the Trentham chute mattered little as he strolled to an emphatic win, another followed over 1400 metres at Tauranga and at just his third start he notched a Group One victory in the 1600-metre Bayer Classic at Otaki.

That extraordinary form continued when he took on the country's best sprinters six weeks later in the Gr. 1 Telegraph Handicap at Trentham, enticing his connections to look west for some Australian form to add his prospective stallion CV.

That campaign began well enough with an Australian Guineas second to star colt Mouawad, but disaster struck when he badly ruptured the ligaments of his off-fore fetlock. In another anxious chapter, the realisation that his racing career was over came as a huge disappointment, but he was at least salvageable for stud.

Seventeen years after retiring to Waikato as the 1997 New Zealand Horse of the Year, O'Reilly is now the multiple champion sire of 12 Group One winners among his total of 75 stakes-winning progeny. In the 2013-14 season he was represented by a remarkable 15 individual stakes winners.

None of that success is taken for granted, nor does Mark Chittick cease to be amazed by the horse that he doesn't hesitate to call a mate. "He's got so much personality, he's very straight forward and has a remarkable constitution. He loves to play to the camera or crowd to the point of being a clown.

"A few years ago we had a photographer here and we went out to the paddock to get some shots. I had him on the lead and clicked him to get him up on his hind legs. He acted the part well but ever since then, every time he sees someone with a camera all he wants to do is get up off the ground.

"It's the same when there's a large group here and we parade the stallions out on the lawn. The look on people's faces when he starts his antics – anyone who knows him understands but first-timers tend to get a bit anxious for him."

Chittick still shudders slightly as he recounts the occasion

Continued on page 6

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O'Reilly Continued...

when the All Black squad visited the stud and were shown the stallions. True to script for the horse named after former Irish international winger Tony O'Reilly, the big brown played to his audience, only this time quite differently.

"It was 2009 and a couple of days before a test against the Springboks in Hamilton. We pulled O'Reilly out in front of his box and I warned them that we were dealing with a live stallion and just to watch themselves.

"So there's O'Reilly on his best behaviour, so laid-back that before you knew it he's surrounded by All Blacks, they're patting him on the bum, rubbing his neck, they're all over him! I'm there imagining the headline: 'Key All Black ruled out of test with stallion injury', but of course he was the complete gentleman, he just lapped up the attention."

When it comes to the business of breeding, O'Reilly has no peer. In 17 years at stud he has covered a total of 2,342 mares for a combined foal crop of 1,575 (up to 2013) at a fertility rate of 85.18 per cent.

"He has a phenomenal work rate and is just so efficient in the breeding barn, that's a big part of his success and his longevity," says Chittick. "His biggest year was when EI hit Australia (2007) and he ended up covering 232 mares. Through a combination of factors we were caught out a bit that year – we had announced his fee at \$20,000 early in the autumn and then he had a huge run of form, so you combine that with the change in mating plans because of EI and he was flooded with mares.

"To his credit though, he took it all in his stride. For 36 days in a row he covered four mares, starting at dawn and sometimes finishing late that night, but at the end of that season his fertility figures were just a tick under 90 per cent."

Chittick in fact takes great pride in the work-rate and overall outcomes of his whole stallion complement, which this breeding season will number seven. "Going back to that EI year we mated 836 mares across 111 days and a total of 1,132 coverings. That's quite a feat, it takes organisation and it takes stallions that do their job properly."

The master of Waikato Stud remains very hands-on in daily breeding season activities. "We've got a very good group involved directly with the stallions but they appreciate that I still like to play a part in things, especially when it comes to getting a new stallion going.

"A stallion that takes a long time to breed can be a real problem and would be especially in an outfit like this when you've got your own mares and walk-ins queued up. I remember a few years ago Pins, who's normally a very quick breeder, decided he wanted to muck around with this mare.

"I decided we were having none of that, so back to his box he went while the others boys went about their business – and when we took him back to the breeding shed he knew he had to get on with it.

"We had a busy time last season and it was great to know that on a normal morning we could get through six matings inside an hour. That sure helps the rest of your day and your results at the end of the season."



Manawatu Sires' Produce Stakes winner O'Marilyn, one of O'Reilly's stars of the past season.

Year-round stallion management is also crucial. Any visitor to Waikato Stud will be aware that the stallion paddocks are in close proximity to each other, as are the stallion boxes. In a departure to what may be standard practice elsewhere, no Waikato stallion has his own designated paddock.

"Garry and I decided not long after we took over here to alternate the stallions around the paddocks," says Chittick. "As our numbers have grown that's become even more important and now we have a group of stallions who rotate around the paddocks every six weeks and are just so relaxed doing so. There's nothing territorial about their behaviour, they're very relaxed as an overall group."

The past year for Mark Chittick and his family has been difficult beyond words as his late wife Lisa fought leukaemia but tragically succumbed in May. The day of her farewell at the stud remains special, none more so than when Mark and their children Charlotte, George and Harry took Lisa for one last tour of her former domain, her coffin in the stud horse float towed by Mark's trusty Landrover.

"As we drove up the lane through the stallion paddocks and came to O'Reilly, he looked up from grazing and swaggered over to the fence," Mark recalls. "Sure it was a float and he would be naturally curious, but I swear, looking into his eye as he stretched over the top rail, that he knew this was a time to reflect. It really was uncanny."

O'Reilly had the full book sign up even before the Sydney autumn carnival headlined by Silent Achiever's Ranvet-BMW double and Sacred Falls' second Doncaster Mile. This year he will cover a book of 120 mares, marking a gradual reduction in deference to his 21 years.

"The biggest thing with O'Reilly has been the opportunities he has given us," says Chittick. "Twenty years ago when we arrived here it was 430 acres, that's now grown to 1,500. The young stallions coming here – and they are the key to the business – it's important to be able to secure the right horses. Having the ability pay up-front for a horse like Pins and be able to make what can be snap decisions to buy into Savabeel, Ocean Park, Rock 'N' Pop and for the future, Sacred Falls.

"We have had tremendous support from other breeders of course, but for us all that is largely down to O'Reilly. As his outright owners he's given us the cash flow to develop both as a farm and to be able to stand a group of stallions that we can be confident will take us into the future.

"He owes us absolutely nothing and we totally respect that," says Chittick. "Obviously there's still huge demand for him and we're grateful for every day, every season that he's here doing what he does best." •

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