

Take a sire, a dam, and a mouse

Breeders turn to computers and software to take some guesswork out of planning matings

by Bob Ehalt

IF YOU HAVE watched enough television, you have probably seen the commercial.

A gray-haired man is grinning wider than the Cheshire cat. With the lyrics of the Natalie Cole song "This Will Be" playing in the background, he tells lonely hearts how they can go online and find the love of their life.

"This will be an everlasting love. This will be the one I've waited for. This will be the first time anyone has loved me."

Thoroughbred racing does not have a veteran psychologist as a front person or Cole's catchy tune, but it does offer an electronic means of finding a perfect match for males and females.

In recent months, more and more breeders have been turning to web-sites to perform the pedigree research that used to entail long hours of tedious paperwork. Instead of having to house a library of old sales catalogs and other material, anyone can just sign on to the Internet and with a few clicks of a mouse produce a five-generation pedigree of a horse based on the hypothetical mating of a stallion and a mare.

Welcome to the equine versions of eHarmony.com.

Werk database

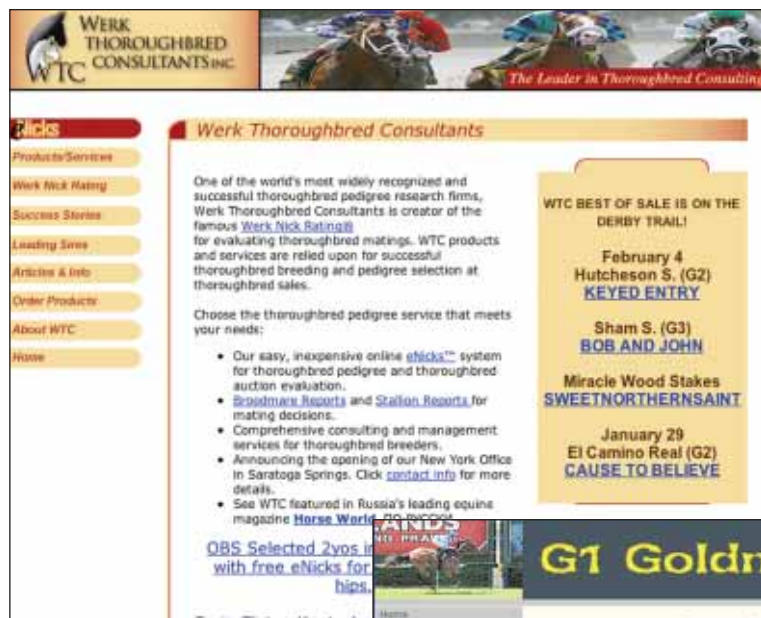
While numerous websites offer pedigree information, two companies have sites that reflect how modern technology has enhanced the age-old process of choosing a stallion for a mare. Both Werk Thoroughbred Consultants (www.werkhorse.com) and G1 Goldmine (www.g1goldmine.com) offer similar services. They provide detailed pedigree information in a quick, efficient manner so even a novice to the breeding industry can make an intelligent decision about buying a yearling or finding the best match for a mare. And both websites have grown rather quickly in a short amount of time.

"The days of doing your own pedigree work are over," said Jack Werk, president of the California-based Werk Thoroughbred Consultants. "Now you can go online and analyze information from a computer data bank."

Werk's website is about 2½ years old, but in the past six months visits to the site have soared since the introduction of its eNicks service. Stressing the importance of the nick, or sire-line crossings, the Werk Nick rating uses a database that extends back to 1977 to grade the effectiveness of matching a certain male line and a certain female line (with A++ being superior and D+ being weak).

"When I first started out in racing, I felt breeding, dosage, and nicks were the key areas to study," said Werk, 61. "In time, I found nicks were the most important element."

Werk offers an example of how nicks can be put to work by pointing out that according to his research, the best way to succeed with A.P. Indy as a sire is to breed with a Mr. Prospector-line mare. A nick also can identify crosses or matings to avoid, he said. "A horse can outrun its pedigree," Werk said, "but he won't out-



produce his breeding."

Werk's early research on nicks led to the creation of CompuSire pedigree software. His work also gained popularity through Joe Bagan's 1989 book, *Lukas at Auction*, where Werk showed how concentrating on superior nick ratings can improve the chances of finding a better runner. Accurately predicting in the book the success for two of trainer D. Wayne Lukas's 1988 yearling purchases, Stella Madrid and the ill-fated Grand Canyon, certainly did not hurt Werk's reputation.

"In the book, I showed that if Lukas had just bought horses with Grade A nicks, 52% of his horses would have been graded stakes winners," Werk said.

Now through his website, Werk has taken his grading concept to a different level through an innovative marketing plan. Instead of billing customers for his service, Werk solicited farms and charged them a small fee for making data on their sires available on the website. Most of Kentucky's top farms now are included among Werk's roster of approximately 450 stallions.

The response from customers has been highly favorable. Werk said his website had slightly more than 50,000 requests for eNicks data in January, marking a sharp rise from 36,000 in October.

"I thought this was a good idea to offer the data, but I didn't think it would be this popular," Werk said. Part of that success, Werk believes, is based on the desire of owners to get more involved in a part of the racing industry they had previously left strictly in the hands of trainers and bloodstock agents.

"Most people in horse racing do not want to participate simply by handing over money and watching from the owners' boxes," Werk said. "They want to learn more about all areas of the business and have a hand in decisions. Since more and more people are becoming comfortable with computers, they can learn how to do that online."

Werk warned that nicks alone are not a surefire recipe for success. "No one should base a decision solely on nicks," Werk said. "You still need an expert to look over a yearling and

make sure he's worth the money. Our nick ratings are like past performances in the *Daily Racing Form*. Buying just because of a nick rating is a mistake. It's like golfing with one club in your bag."



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Global customers

Nineteen time zones ahead of Werk in California, Leo Tsatsaronis runs another relatively new player in Thoroughbred racing's electronic dating game. Based in Victoria, Australia, Tsatsaronis's website, G1 Goldmine, is a testament to how the Internet has brought the world closer.

Without the Internet, Tsatsaronis's business would be a mystery to horsemen in the United States. But now, as word spreads about his product, he is finding more and more customers from the U.S. are accessing his website.

"Thanks to computers, it's like we're next-door neighbors to people in New York or Kentucky," Tsatsaronis said. "We have customers all over the world because of technology."

G1 Goldmine offers a wealth of pedigree information for all group and graded stakes winners since 1992. Like Werk's website, G1 Goldmine has a free component that enables customers to download a five-generation pedigree for Group/Grade 2 and Group/Grade 3 winners. There is a charge for the Group/Grade 1 information, with updates available through the website.

Tsatsaronis said that after a slow start, he is up to about 200 downloads per week, with about 40 coming from the U.S. While that number might seem puny, it reflects only the number of times the software has

been downloaded—not how many times people have used it.

"We haven't done much advertising, so our growth has largely been through word of mouth from people who have enjoyed success with our product," Tsatsaronis said. "We give people the tools to be successful because knowledge is power. The information we provide for horsemen is like telling them you should dig for gold where gold has been found before."

Among the novel features of G1 Goldmine's software is a query-by-position function that allows a user to enter the name of a horse that appears anywhere in a pedigree to find

system called the Ventura Geo Score (VGS) to quickly measure the impact of crossing two sire lines. Tsatsaronis collaborated with Michael Ventura to create the formula, which measures a cross on the basis of how many graded stakes winners it should have produced against the number it actually generated.

"We allow breeders to identify the patterns of great horses so they can see what works and what doesn't work," Tsatsaronis said. "For instance, when you cross a Northern Dancer-line sire with a Northern Dancer-line mare, it has produced 340 graded stakes winners in North America. Yet when you inbreed two daughters of Northern Dancer, it has produced no graded stakes winners."

"The sad part of breeding is that some foals are simply doomed to be slow," Tsatsaronis continued. "Even before the foal races, you know the line is a dud. That's frustrating."

No, every match is not made in heaven. But at least many members of the Thoroughbred industry have embraced the electronic revolution and turned to computers and software to take some of the guesswork out of playing matchmaker. A new era is clearly at hand, and that alone sounds like a good reason to belt out a happy chorus or two. Right, Natalie? Cue the trumpets. ■



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out how many graded stakes winners have come from having that horse positioned in that spot in a bloodline.

G1 Goldmine also offers a rating

WEBSITES TO VISIT

TesioPower

(www.tesio.com)

In keeping with the topic of electronic pedigree services, TesioPower is another popular website with a loyal following. It offers a software program and database linked to Federico Tesio's famed linebreeding guidelines.

Six- and seven-generation pedigrees can be viewed, and research can extend as far back as 12 generations. The website also features an area where a breeder can test the compatibility of a mare with various stallions.



Road to the Triple Crown™

(www.thoroughbredtimes.com)



Just how successful breeders have been is being measured at racetracks from coast to coast as members of the current cast of three-year-olds continue their quest for glory at Churchill Downs. To help track all the action and analyze the scene heading toward the Kentucky Derby (G1), THOROUGHBRED TIMES has launched Road to the Triple Crown™ on its website.

Traditional features of the website include news; previews and results of major prep races; and biographies of breeders, owners, trainers, and jockeys with contenders. New this year is expanded pedigree information about the horses being aimed toward the Triple Crown and a weekly analysis of the division by THOROUGHBRED TIMES's award-winning news editor, Tom Law.

