

Fifty Years On, Sir Ivor Remains an Inspiration for the Global Village

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By *Chris McGrath*

In the wider world, 1968 has a very different resonance: the murders of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Vietnam protests, the tumultuous Democratic convention in Chicago, Nixon picking up the pieces. On the Turf, however, we can look back 50 years in a spirit of undiluted celebration. For Sir Ivor, the first Epsom Derby winner bought at an American auction, was a horse that brought nations together.

It could be argued, in fact, that his success at Epsom launched the era of international commerce that continues to sustain the bloodstock industry to this day. Later that summer his trainer, Vincent O'Brien, gave \$84,000 for a yearling by Northern Dancer. Two years later, as Nijinsky, this colt won the Triple Crown in Britain.

From that point a transfusion of North American blood not only revived the European gene pool but also caused such manic inflation in the market, following the entry of the Maktoums, that the business model of O'Brien and his partners was stretched to breaking point by its own success.

It was salvaged by the homebred Sadler's Wells and his trainer's namesake and successor at Ballydoyle, Aidan O'Brien. Now John Magnier—the common link to both horses—is hoping that **Saxon Warrior (Jpn)** (Deep Impact {Jpn}), odds-on favourite for the next running of the Derby on Saturday, can become the first Triple Crown winner since Nijinsky. As the son of a Japanese sire, of course, Saxon Warrior already reflects the same questing spirit that brought Sir Ivor and Nijinsky to Europe—and would, as such, bring a pleasing element of circularity to the anniversary of Sir Ivor's Derby.

But if Sir Ivor helped to trigger seismic change in the global industry, he also represented a new beginning on a far more intimate scale. And really that industry—being so prone to rushes of blood, to fits of avarice and despair and vainglory—would do well to borrow the temperate and seasoned judgement that remains the hallmark of the farm that first announced itself with a son of Sir Gaylord, sold for \$42,000 at the Keeneland July Sale of 1966.

Not that Alice Chandler was especially seasoned when she sent an 11-year-old mare named Attica to Sir Gaylord at Claiborne in 1964. Attica was one of just four mares given to Alice by her father, Hal Price Headley, who had died two years previously—along with the 286 acres just down the road from Keeneland, which he had co-founded, that became the nucleus of Mill Ridge Farm. She owed much, in those early days, to the counsel of Bull Hancock of Claiborne.

"He was ever so helpful to Mom when she went out on her own," remembers Alice's son Headley Bell, who took over the running of Mill Ridge in 2008. "He sent her overflow mares, that he didn't have room for, and was just very helpful in growing her business. Obviously Sir Gaylord was a Claiborne horse, so he'd have worked with her on that, too."

Hal Price Headley and Bull Hancock's father, Arthur B. Hancock Sr., were both among the dozen Pillars of the Turf nominated last week for induction to the Hall of Fame this summer. And both had an important role in the sowing of the American breed with European Classic blood. Hancock Sr. had been central to the syndicates that imported Blenheim in 1936 and Sir Gallahad ten years earlier. Hal Price Headley, for his part, exported Pharamond from England to Kentucky in 1929: a siphon for some of Europe's most precious Classic blood as cultivated by the 17th Earl of Derby.

Pharamond was by Phalaris, ultimately the most influential sire of the century, out of Selene. That made him a half-brother to Hyperion and full brother to Sickle, while his deeper family tree drew together several of the most iconic names of the Victorian Turf.

The year Pharamond started in Kentucky, Headley raced the champion juvenile filly in Alcibiades—herself a blend of indigenous and Classic European blood. At three, she proceeded to win the Kentucky Oaks and, with a fortnight's interval between races in those days, also ran tenth in the Kentucky Derby.



Lester Piggott on Sir Ivor | Getty Images

In 1934, Headley mated Alcibiades with Pharamond. The result was Menow, the champion juvenile who became sire of Tom Fool (and grandsire of the very important Buckpasser). Two years later, the mare was sent to War Admiral and produced Salamina, who proved a high-class stayer on the track, winning the Ladies' H. among other races of historic stature at the time. When herself mated with Pharamond, Salamina produced another Ladies' H. winner in Athenia. And Athenia became the dam of Attica, whose Sir Gaylord colt was one of the first bred at Mill Ridge by Alice Chandler.

So the idea of Sir Ivor as a pioneer needs placing in context. He was not so much the first link in a chain, as an extension of a perennial process of transatlantic regeneration. Nonetheless his acquisition at Keeneland represented a turning point for the modern breed. It served as a new post on which to hang the chain.

More cross-pollination: Sir Gaylord's sire Turn-To had himself been sent over the ocean to the U.S. as a foal. And Turn-To's sire Royal Charger was by Nearco out of Sun Princess—a half-sister to Nasrullah.

It was Bull Hancock who imported Nasrullah from Europe to become one of the all-time patriarchs of the American Thoroughbred. And it was also Hancock who purchased Alice Chandler's son of Attica and Sir Gaylord on behalf of Raymond Guest, the American ambassador to Ireland.

Vincent O'Brien had seen the potency of American blood through Larkspur, his first Derby winner and a son of the Kentucky-bred Never Say Die. But Sir Ivor's arrival from a public auction was a game-changer. It set a template for the commercial transfer of virtues associated with dirt racing in America to the ultimate European racing environment, an undulating mile and a half on turf; a template, arguably, for the whole Northern Dancer revolution in Europe.

"It's monumental, to some degree, from a few different standpoints," said Headley Bell. "It obviously got the attention of John Magnier and team, leading them to regard our American-bred horse as an opportunity. That's the bottom line. Really, it was the beginning of the commercial market."

As a youngest sibling, then only 13, Bell has limited memories of the stunning breakthrough for his mother's nascent farm on 29 May 1968.

"My oldest brother Mike attended the Derby, he would have been just out of high school," he recalled. "He went over with Mom and Mom's mother, so that was very, very special. The story goes that Mike was standing on a chair and it broke under him, so he grabbed the rafter or something of that nature, and I believe was hanging off it when the horse made that move."

The way Sir Ivor reeled in Connaught, who had gone clear while he was caught on the rail, proved a defining moment in Lester Piggott's career. Unfortunately, Guest himself was unable to be at Epsom. He watched the race on television as he planted a tree to open the Kennedy Arboretum in County Wexford, commemorating the late President's birthday. (Poignant to reflect that RFK would be killed just eight days later.)

Aptly, Sir Ivor ended his career shipping back across the ocean to win the Washington International—only the second Derby winner to run in the U.S., Papyrus having lost a \$100,000 match against Kentucky Derby winner Zev at Belmont in 1923.

Granted all the great things that have happened at Mill Ridge since—the Diesis and Gone West years, the graduation of Giacomo and Point Given and Havre De Grace and all the rest—how do we account for an opening salvo as unerring as Sir Ivor? Luck can only take you so far, whether that of the beginner or the type earned by years of graft and experience.

"You know, I'm not going to talk about destiny," Bell said. "But there's just continuous threads here that overlap. My grandfather was a sophomore at Princeton when his father had a stroke and he had to come back and take over. He took a horse called Ornament [beaten a neck in the 1897 Kentucky Derby] to the St Louis [World's] Fair and he won all these prizes, showing this horse. That was the start of it, and then he found a money man to help him on stallions.

"This was all self-made. That's what's hard to fathom: you had land, that didn't mean you had money. Then he had his heart attack at Keeneland after training horses in the morning. And he left my mother those four mares, and Attica among them. Descended from Alcibiades, his foundation race filly who ended up trickling throughout the breed. And then the colt is sold at Keeneland, which keeps that thread running through."

Moreover Mill Ridge would consolidate its role in the commercial integration between America and Europe when Bell's mother Alice remarried.

"Here you have to throw John Chandler into the mix," Bell confirmed. "Because he was a conduit for this marriage between America and Europe. He had all these relationships when he came over and that's how our client base grew, mostly on the European side. At one time we had mares for two of the Maktoums on the farm, and also for Prince Khalid. [Dr Chandler] ended up playing a significant role as the commercial side started to grow. And all the time that comfort level with Keeneland, which provided a badge of integrity. But Sir Ivor was really the start, it all grew from there.

"It's great because in Horse Country to keep history alive is so very important. I'm thankful for our family, after five generations, but these cycles contribute to us all, make us all richer. It's fascinating to think my grandfather went over there for Pharamond and then came back on the boat. Can you imagine navigating all that kind of business back then, to seek out a stallion to make your broodmare band better? Because you weren't thinking about the commercial side, you were thinking about your mares."

In which connection, a final point about Sir Ivor. How is it that he, his sire and his sire's great half-brother Secretariat were all such profound influences as broodmare sires? Two hugely important stallions out of Sir Ivor mares were El Prado and Green Desert, while Shareef Dancer in turn achieved fame as a broodmare sire by producing the dam of Dubai Millennium.

"With Secretariat, my personal opinion was always that it was about the quality of the mares that he got," speculated Bell. "Just the richness of those mares made him more prolific as a broodmare sire. I could be wrong. But with Sir Ivor, maybe it is that blend, the Sir Gaylord; or maybe it was the richness of his own dam side. He wasn't a sire of sires, but he was a filly sire as we know. It happens."

Pedigrees are so often lazily interpreted in just two dimensions-sire-line, and broodmare sire-line-when the genetic contribution to every horse is divided equally between sire and dam. And the common link between Secretariat, Sir Gaylord and Sir Ivor, as distaff influences, is Somethingroyal.

She was a daughter of that copper-bottomed fount of toughness and class, Princequillo. And Princequillo was himself famously exported from war-torn Europe. (The wisdom of which move became manifest when his Belgian-trained sire was killed by gunfire.) Sadly Princequillo's own sire-line appears to be on the point of extinction. But his name surfaces routinely at the core of many of the most influential families in the modern breed.

Hal Price Headley's imprint on O'Brien's revolutionary work with North American blood was not confined to Sir Ivor. For when O'Brien bought the colt who became Nijinsky, the catalogue page showed his dam to be out of a daughter of Menow, the son of Pharamond and Alcibiades.

It would be nice to think, then, that the anniversary of Sir Ivor will renew a sense of adventure in some who have become too inflexible in their view of pedigrees. Certainly there are too many Europeans, half a century on, who remain blind to the immense value, on turf, of the classic dirt hallmarks: that ability to carry speed, that toughness.

After all, both the colts on the Triple Crown trail this year—either side of the Atlantic—are by sires who have transcended narrow prescription. Someday, no doubt, European breeders will be keen to use Justify (Scat Daddy) because they have seen the versatility of his sire. Equally, perhaps, Sunday Silence's grandson Saxon Warrior should not be painted as a pure turf horse.

And just look who gave us Deep Impact's dam: Alzao, son of a Sir Ivor mare.

"We're always just a cycle away from this richness," Bell agreed. "And you just hope it makes them better with each generation. It's so cool to see Deep Impact coming through over there. And it's making the world closer as a result."

