



# Cream of the Crop

GLOAM LEFT THE RING, GLIDING ON THREE DELICATE SOCKS. NOT YET TWO AND ALREADY THE MOST SIGNIFICANT SALE OF THE DECADE. IN ANY OTHER YEAR ROGER MARLEY AND HIS COLLEAGUE JOHN CULLINAN MIGHT HAVE MISSED THE MOMENT GODOLPHIN ENDED THEIR GALILEO BOYCOTT.

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In any other year Tattersalls Book 1 would have prompted nothing more than a wishful glance. But last year was different. They too made their most significant purchase of the decade at Tattersalls last October.

Marley and Cullinan are concisely described by trainer Ger Lyons as his eyes and ears at the sales. He's among a select band of Irish trainers still buying breezers and yearlings with his own cash at the sales every year, and the men who sort the wheat from the chaff are Marley and Cullinan. What they believe in, Lyons believes in. What they buy, Lyons races. What Lyons races, he sells. What cash he accrues, he reinvests. This is the snowball that has been rolling since Marley came on board some 10 years ago, and in 2017 it stopped and grew a head.

"Ger started off last season with a bang," remembers Cullinan. "He felt his horses were well forward. Everyone insisted he would get the ball rolling very quickly, which

he did. And he sustained that momentum right the way through the year. "I think, when it came towards the end he'd be the first to admit he was struggling for ammunition to keep Colin Keane going, but it was a fantastic performance for Ger to finish so high up in the trainer's table and for Colin to win."

Lyons had been solidly the fourth best trainer in Ireland, but last year he stepped up to the podium, placing third with a record 72 winners and almost €1.8m in prize money.

With this success attracting new support and further support from long-term backer Sean Jones, it meant he went to last autumn's yearling sales with double the budget he had in 2016.

"He's wanting to mix it with Bolger, and Aidan and Weld," Marley explains. "You can get lucky buying cheap horses, but to do it every day, you have to spend money - and not just on horses." He added: "His operation at Glenburnie has improved every time you go. It's an impressive set up and has changed an awful lot from the first time I visited."

Marley wasn't involved in racing or thoroughbreds the first time he did visit. He had ridden with Lyons when both were journeymen jump jockeys in the North of England, and they'd been housemates, but they hadn't spoken for too many years when Marley called.

"Jeez, Roger Marley, a blast from the past," Lyons smiled as the reconnection was made and an invitation extended for Marley to stay while he attended Goresbridge sport horse sales. "I just ran a small yard, buying and selling a few hunters and sport horses," Marley explains. "Then, after that, I started buying the odd cheap racehorse myself and I was just starting to buy a few personal pinhookers when Ger asked would I be able to help

him look for his yearlings."

The first sale they went to together proved Lyons's faith right, though not immediately. "I remember in that first year buying City Of Tribes for myself to breeze. He was from the first crop of Invincible Spirit and I bought him for 19,000 Guineas. Ger bought a Noverre yearling

he called Summit Surge for 34,000 Guineas, and he ended up buying City Of Tribes off me at the breeze ups for 110,000 Guineas." That was enough for Lyons to be convinced that this was the judge for him. This was the magnet he needed to extract the needles from the haystacks.

"Harry Fowler once helped go through a book for us and carried a pedometer," Marley remembers. "He said he clocked up 13 miles, and that was just covering half the long list."

For a long time Marley was doing all the long lists at the yearling and breeze-up sales. Thankfully for his feet, five years ago he met John Cullinan from Horse Park Stud in County Wicklow. "I grew up in Dublin, but we've been involved in thoroughbreds for the majority of my life here," says Cullinan. "My father always kept a couple of mares, and we always had an interest as small breeders. I started pinhooking foals on top of our own breeding, and activities gradually broadened to pre-training for Eddie Lynam and then the breeze-ups."

As a breeder, Cullinan has produced talented miler Trumpet Major, Group 2 Chairman's Trophy winner Packing Whizz and the dam of Lightening Pearl, who Ger Lyons trained to win the 2011 Group 1 Cheveley Park Stakes. As a horseman, he broke the Power family's two star sprinters, Slade Power and Sole Power, both trained by Lynam - as was Lightening Pearl's dam Jioconda - and the latter retired to Horse Park Stud. It became immediately clear to Marley that here was a brain and eyes to trust as his partner on the hunt for the best value yearlings. They began splitting the work for Lyons and soon built another business together producing breeze-up horses.

"The way the market is at the moment, you need to be in partnership," says Cullinan, founder of the newly-formed Breeze-up Consignor's Association. "It's very hard to do that on your own, and the majority of breeze-up consignors would now have various allies and partners to help finance what has now become a very serious industry."

He adds: "You need more than one set of eyes. This year again we bought

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quite a few for the breeze ups and split them up between us. We share the responsibility, share the bills, and the upsides and the downsides."

With Cullinan based in the Garden County of Ireland and Marley in the racing country of Yorkshire, most of their purchases start with Cullinan. They are broken and wintered, then sent to Marley's Church Farm Stables in Malton to be finished off for the spring breeze up sales. Marley said: "We have a 7f grass gallop and 3f all-weather so all our work is done at home, for the bumper horses as well. Our breezers will only go for a gallop at Malton twice, they'll do it in a bunch on the grass about the third and second week before going to sale."

"That's what I enjoy doing, getting them ready to run. I've never wanted to have my name in lights and be answering to owners."

"We are backroom boys only," chimes Cullinan.

They might not be trainers, but they are occasional owners. Cullinan's colours being carried to course-record victories by the speedy Kodiak gelding Foxy Forever at York and Kempton last year.

"He won four and broke Sole Power's record at York, trained by Michael Wigham," the owner explains. "But usually we'd be at the lower levels with our unsolds." The team aiming to not become unsolds is 23-strong for 2018's breeze-up tour, with Kodiak again featuring prominently amongst the lot, joined by "a nice Wootton Bassett and a very precocious-looking Dandy Man".

Ascot's April sale opens breeze-up season with the main events coming later that month at Tattersalls, then in France at Arqana in early May, the season concluding at Goresbridge a week before June.

Alongside selling their own breezers, Cullinan and Marley spot for Lyons throughout the spring, but the real work comes back at the yearling sales in the autumn. "John and myself do it together," Marley explains. "We probably look at about 50 per cent of the catalogue, each taking half the lots. We get it down to that initial long list by first tearing out the horses we can't afford. There is no point

looking at the Frankels and Galileos, so they are the first to go. We don't look at too many fillies unless they are speedily bred, then there are sires we don't like, and we don't buy from old mares. Our cut off is about 19-20 years old, if the dam is that age, we don't look. That gets us to about 50 per cent and from there we build a shortlist for Ger to look at the next day. He's usually about a day behind us and could have a short list of say 30-40 a day at Doncaster and 50 a day in Book Two at Tattersalls, for example."

The pair trust each other implicitly. What Cullinan says about his half sticks, and ditto Marley, with very few exceptions. When there's a maybe, they'll confer.

"That happens particularly when something has stood up well, but not walked," Marley explains. "If he stands up a really beautiful, sharp horse, and just doesn't walk we leave it on the list, because the next time he might walk for somebody else. They are only babies and they aren't guaranteed to walk consistently every time. If it doesn't walk for both of us, that's a different story."

He adds: "When we have a shortlist we sit down with Ger and tell him what we'd like to try and buy for breezing, and John and I might walk around together then and speak to the vendors, that's the first time we talk to them. We don't bother on first and second looks, but then we might ask how much they think they'll make and whether they recommend them." It's an efficient and thorough process that they go through at each and every yearling sale, a good chunk of foal sales, and also the breeze-ups.

There are few horses in training they have not seen in the flesh as youngsters.

"Ger can't believe what we remember. He's a memory like a sieve, but I can even remember what stable they were in at the sales. I can often go over to a barn and pull them all out without looking at the catalogue once we've been through it, and John's the very same. It's essential."

He adds: "Ger has given up arguing with me because he knows nine times out of 10 I'm right!"

The pair have indeed been right more times than they have been wrong. Group 1 Falmouth Stakes winner Music Show a

highlight of their breeze-ups career, and three of their Lyons picks standing out.

"In recent times I think the two best horses were Medicine Jack and Psychedelic Funk. They were from the same crop, each bought for about €30,000, and both met problems, but were very talented. Psychedelic Funk was owned in partnership with Sean Jones and won his first two for Ger. They turned down a lot of money for him because they wanted to see if they could win a Group race with him, and he was a short price for Coventry.

"He finished third in that. Then he got injured. He fractured a hind pastern, but they put a screw in it and he came back last year to win his Group 3 at Tipperary. He's still only four."

He continues: "Medicine Jack won the Group 2 Railway Stakes as a two-year-old, but ran into problems last year and was gelded."

Many of Sean Jones and Ger Lyons's top racehorses are sold on to the US and Hong Kong as three-year-olds, and one of the best was Strata Colorato.

Purchased for 10,000 Guineas at Tattersalls Book 2, he was from the first crop of La Vie De Colori and won a Naas maiden before being bought to race in Hong Kong by Richard Gibson for a sizeable sum. His name was changed to Gold-Fun and he won two Group 2s there, before finishing second in the 2016 Golden Jubilee Stakes at Royal Ascot.

That trio were value buys with commercial prospects, but the game is changing for Lyons.

"He's been able to raise his game at the sales," says Cullinan. "He's capable of buying horses that otherwise wouldn't be on our radar. It gives us a wider net, and our shortlists are getting longer."

Marley adds: "We did Book 1 this year, which we've never done, and the Dark Angel colt we picked up for £180,000 was by far the most we've ever spent for Ger."

"It shows you the support he has earned as this horse was bought for a new American client. He sent Ger one last year, and he won a couple, then was sold on, so he left a lot of the money made on that two-year-old to spend on a yearling."

And the snowball keeps on rolling.