



ABOVE Lot 16, a pretty black filly, was the pick of the day and sold for \$7200. In the main image at right, she is on the right, and Lot 18, who achieved the second-highest price of \$6500, is in the centre. The horses carry a mixture of the best New Zealand stationbred and jumping bloodlines, and the herd is evolving over time to a more athletic, modern type

High country BEAUTIES

The biennial St James Station horse sale in North Canterbury enjoyed a huge turnout this year, as Róisín Magee reports

IMAGES: PIP COAKLEY PHOTOGRAPHY, ANNABELLE LATZ, ANNA HANSEN

The last Saturday of January saw another wonderful day out at the marvellous, mercurial St James horse sale near Hanmer Springs. The crowd was noticeably bigger than the last sale two years ago; this may be

due to the increase in domestic travel due to Covid-19, but could also be a response to interest generated by the evolving St James breeding programme.

Like all breeders, brothers Ben and Hugh Dampier-Crossley keep a keen eye on the foals coming through and as the

older mares start to have less influence, the look of the herd as a whole is definitely changing. The solid and dependable stationbred/hunter type has been retained (with some lovely examples of strong gentlemen's hunters for sale this year) but the St James horses

have a new flash of athletic potential that is clear even at two or three years old.

Hawk, a new stallion bred by neighbouring Muzzle Station in Clarence, was introduced to St James in September 2019 and has foals on the ground now. He is a beautiful mover and his temperament is superb. Hugh led him to St James through Maling Pass, backed him that evening and rode him in a muster the next day.

He was quiet to start and it seems reasonable to expect that his temperament and quality over the bigger, tougher St James mares – with their lovely hock action – will produce some seriously nice foals.

Another relative newcomer is a big, solid stallion, Thunder, bred by Jim Hartnell of Sandford Downs in Culverden; he was used last season, and had some 2018 foals in this year's sale.

The Dampier-Crossleys also recently purchased a third stallion, Hunter, who is now running with 25 mares on the station. He is an impressive 16.1hh eight-year-old who carries some of the

best Gisborne stationbred blood as well as international warmblood jumping lines. He is by Buck, who is in turn by the well-known East Coast breeder Paul Johnston's stallion, Doc.

Buck was out of Neisha, who is by the imported warmblood Salute the Stars, who left a number of world-class show jumpers including Katie Laurie's Olympic Cup winner Daffodil, and Amanda Wilson's Showtym Viking. Neisha in turn was out of Ngahiwi Neisha, who was by the Panikau son, Ngahiwi Sasquatch. Sasquatch only sired a couple of foals before he was sold overseas as a jumper, including Julie Davey's World Cup ride Clypso.

All being well, Hunter's offspring will be showcased at the 2023 and 2025 sales.

All being well is the caveat, however! There was some controversy this year with certain horses who were initially advertised for sale being withdrawn shortly beforehand.

As frustrating as this must have been for buyers, especially those travelling long distances, it was largely caused by a

lack of understanding of the St James Station breeding programme and the nature of the sale itself.

The St James horses run wild over some of New Zealand's most beautiful and remote country. The advantages of buying horses like this are many and various: they are hardy, footsure, bold, tough and intelligent, and because they start their lives in a herd environment, Hugh says that they tend to be better 'horse citizens' than many who are, by contrast, born in small paddocks with just their dam and surrounded by people from the beginning.

The dedication required to run a breeding programme like this, however, is huge.

Every time the Dampier-Crossleys need to simply check the horses, wean youngsters, geld the colts or do any handling, they have to muster them off the hills. It's a day's ride to where the horses run – and then you have to actually find them. The station is huge – more than 78,000 hectares – and the terrain is rugged. As you watch the herd



LEFT A large crowd turned up for this year's sale, and the bidding was brisk with most horses going for between \$3000 and \$4000

flowing effortlessly over the tussock and gullies of their home lands, unencumbered by riders, it feels like sweaty lunacy to follow them. And of course, the musterers don't just follow – they have to get ahead of the horses and turn them back down a valley to bring them into the yards.

The valleys are lined with dense bush – if the horses duck left or right, it's

impossible to bring out!

This year, a group of 10 horses broke away en route and ended up back at the Ada homestead, which is 60 kilometres away from the saleyards. Ben, Hugh and the rest of the musterers had hoped to handle all 10 and then lead them out in time for the sale, but as anyone who works with horses will understand, it takes as long as it takes. With time

“I had a feeling that if I didn't bid early, I would go home empty-handed.”

nearly impossible to get them out. If they turn and gallop away back up the valley, it's back to square one... except this time you've been in the saddle for several hours, and even the fittest horse might be starting to flag.

Meanwhile, the herd flies over everything in its path at a gallop, seemingly without breaking a sweat.

This all happens before the horses are moved to the saleyards.

Visitors on the St James Facebook page have reminisced fondly about previous years when the sale had to be cancelled in its entirety, as the horses had proved

running out, they had to make a call on which horses to do and they prioritised the geldings, leaving most of the fillies behind to produce foals for the next sale.

The disappointment of some potential buyers didn't seem to affect the bidding, which was brisk. The pick of the day was lot number 16, a pretty black filly who sold for \$7200 – not bad for an unhandled two-year-old. She was followed closely by lot 18, a classic tall hunter-type gelding who sold for \$6500.

The other horses all went for between \$3000 and \$4000; well above the reserve of \$1500. There were definitely one or

two bargains to be had for buyers prepared to jump in early. Lots one to five had been handled, and in particular lots 2 (a tall, typey three-year-old gelding) and 3 (a pretty chestnut two-year-old filly) went for the relatively low prices of \$3900 and \$3800 respectively.

Ashley Marie Robb of Queenstown was delighted to snag the chestnut filly, lot 3. She had been surprised by the horses presented for sale, but not at all disappointed. “Unfortunately, my top picks for the sale, aside from one lovely black filly (lot 8), didn't make it in with the muster. However, I was delighted to see the little chestnut filly, who had not been catalogued previously, in the sale ring.

“She was up early in the auction and I was really pleased to hear that she was one of the five who had been led in from the Ada, so had had substantially more handling than many of the others.

“I decided to take a gamble early on and spend my pennies on her, in the hope she would move well based on her excellent conformation. I had a feeling that if I didn't bid early I would likely be outbid later in the auction and go home empty-handed.

“How glad was I to have secured one of the nicest in the sale! And she was half the price of my top picks who were run through at the end of the auction.”

Congratulations to all the successful bidders and a big thank you to the Department of Conservation and Kingsley Timpson in particular for their continuing support of the St James horses. The next sale will be held in January 2023. ■