

Taking on the mantle

Lissa Oliver meets bloodstock agent Cathy Grassick, who has taken over running her family's bloodstock interests

Photography by Peter Mooney



LISTENING TO Cathy Grassick speaking often demands a reality check. Her wealth of experience simply doesn't add up to her apparent youthfulness, while the amount that she packs into a day surely requires at least a 36-hour day?

Cathy (who wished to be described as a 30-something) is bubbly and fun, however beneath the warm and friendly exterior is a sharp, dedicated business brain that keeps her on top of her many and varied duties.

As a successful bloodstock agent she is an inspiration to many professionals in the bloodstock industry; as a role model to the young, she is an inspiration to all.

Newtown Stud, which she helps her mother Sheila to run, has in recent years seen some excellent racehorses emerge from its drafts at foal and yearling sales.

The farm has sold the subsequent Great Voltigeur Stakes (G2) winner Centennial for 360,000gns; The Last Drop, who finished second in the St Leger, for 80,000gns; Invincible Force, winner of the 2006 running of the valuable Tattersalls Ireland Sales Stakes; last year's winner of the Norfolk Stakes (G2) and Gimcrack Stakes (G2) Approve; the Listed winner Sirens Song and Lexi's Hero, this year's winner of the Bond Tyres Trophy Stakes and of over £90,000 in earnings.

Of ten yearlings consigned in 2009 there have been six winners from eight runners and both of the other starters have been placed.

“Brian Grassick Bloodstock has been very successful over the years with my father purchasing horses such as Equiano, Dimitrova, Lime Gardens and Just Special to name but a few,” explains Cathy. “He also purchased the dams of horses such as Millenary, Preseli, Sahool, Alexina and Approve as well as the top-class racehorses such as Paco Boy and Corporal Maddox as foals.

“Working with him allowed me to learn so much and many of these purchases took place while I was working with him.

“Since he passed away, we have continued to try and maintain his high standards. We have bought Spritza for Oaklawn Stud, she is the dam of the very exciting first time two-year-old winner Rougemont.

“We have also purchased the Green Desert colt foal out of Rosy’s Posy, who is now the half-brother to Grade 1 winner and Beverly

D Stakes (G1) runner-up, Dubawi Heights. He will be consigned at Tattersalls Book 1 by Gormanstown Stud.

“We had purchased his year-old brother by Cape Cross the year before for Oaklawn Stud and they did very well with him. He sold as a yearling for 190,000gns last year and is now named Red Coast.

“We bought some very exciting yearlings last autumn, such as the inexpensive Bertolini filly called Appealing, whom we bought for Yvonne Jacques. Her half-sister Electric Waves won a Group 3 the week after we bought her for Yvonne. There is also a half-brother to Second Empire by Holy Roman Emperor named Romantic, who should be an improving type.

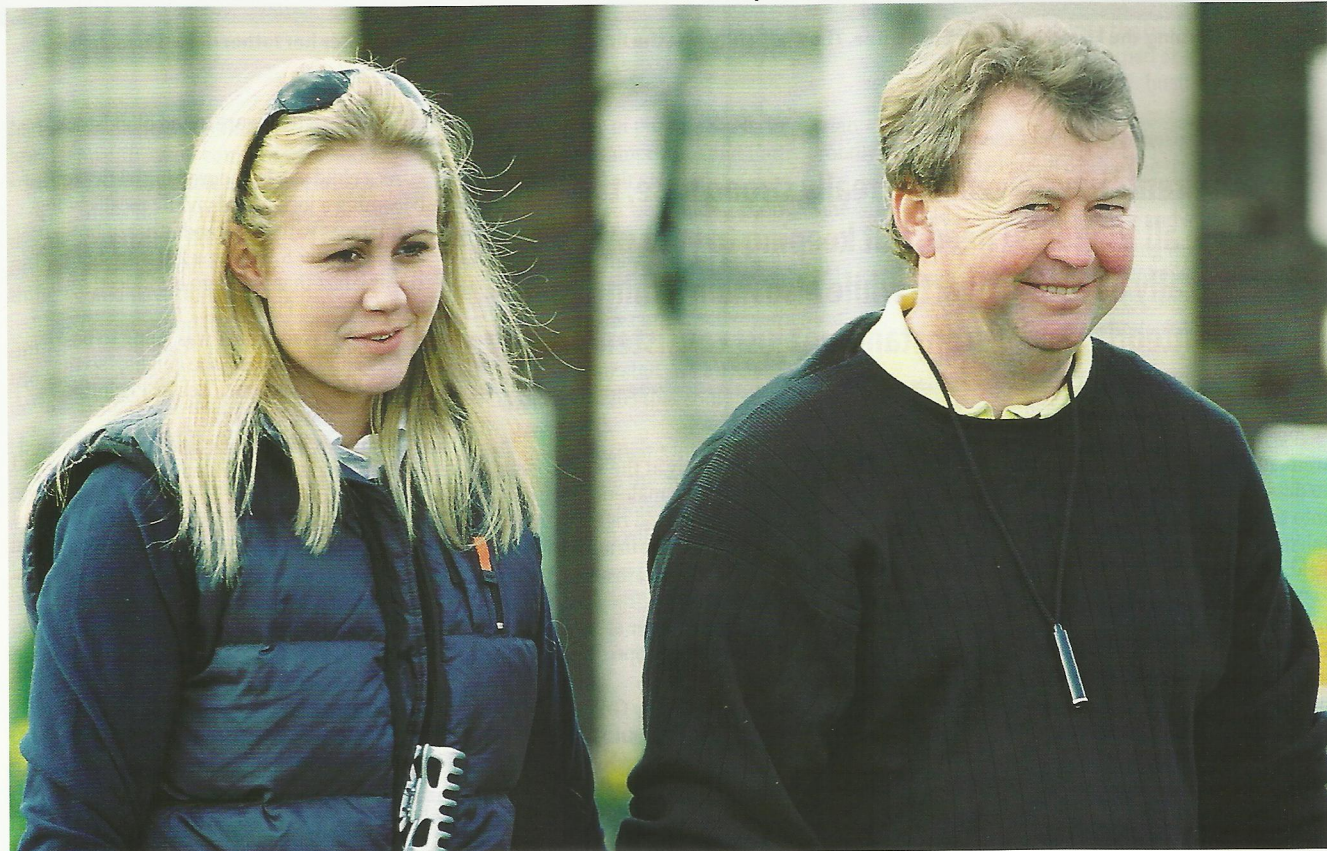
“Others whom we like a lot are a Verglas colt named Grandeur, who has won a Brighton maiden, a Teofilo filly named Intimacy, and a Cape Cross filly called Candycakes, who has finished fourth in a maiden. We are looking forward to seeing them all progressing.”

This year, August 13 was something of a landmark day for Cathy when Babycakes, a Marju filly purchased for 90,000gns, won the Listed Prix Luth Enchantée at Clairefontaine for owner James Acheson and trainer Michael Bell. She was the first horse that Cathy bought on her own following the death of her father and the young agent was there in France to enjoy the victory.

When walking round the paddocks of Newtown Stud with Cathy, her love and knowledge of the horses raised there is obvious. Hailing from the renowned and respected Grassick dynasty, Cathy may have enjoyed a few more privileges in this industry than some, but she has made her own luck, not least through hard work and a keenness to learn. While she now sits comfortably in her dream job, it was a far from an easy transition and is a perfect reflection of the strength and dedication that has seen her through to the top of her profession.

“In many ways it’s an advantage to come from such a racing background, there’s a

Left, Cathy Grassick and, below, with her late father Brian, who ensured that his daughter got a top education both within and outside of the bloodstock world





Babycakes winning the Listed Prix Luth Enchantee. The Marju filly was the first horse bought by Cathy after her father died Photo: aprh

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tremendous pool of knowledge here at home to draw on,” admits Cathy, “but once you get into the big bad world there’s so much young talent out there and it really is a level playing field.

“My parents have given me a really strong base, they’ve given me all the tools I need. But keeping to your principles is the really important part, while also maintaining your integrity and be constant, not just consistent. I want to focus on that aspect, clients respect that, they’re putting their trust in you.”

And Cathy is a very easy person to trust, she is open, friendly and uncomplicated and willing to share her knowledge with her

clients so making a day at the sales a genuine pleasure for them. In a male-dominated world she has always fitted right in and it’s impossible to imagine her in any other role.

“My earliest memories are always of being around horses,” she says, “I used to follow round after my grandfather at his racing stables and I hero-worshipped everyone there!”

Grandfather was Christy Grassick, a successful NH jockey and stud manager who trained Godswalk to win the Norfolk Stakes. His five sons, including Cathy’s much-missed father Brian, all work within the industry.

It’s no surprise then, that Cathy is now

such a respected figure in the bloodstock world.

As a child she harboured initial dreams of becoming a jockey and vividly recalls being at the races with her grandfather, a broken arm in plaster following a fall from her pony. It was a fact that didn’t go unnoticed by his jockey, Lester Piggott.

“Lester asked me if I was going to be a jockey and I said yes,” she laughs, “so that was it! I told everyone, ‘Lester Piggott says I’m going to be a jockey!’ ”

But it was bloodstock that most captivated her interest and it was a natural progression that she should follow her father into the bloodstock agency that he founded in 1991. From an early age and with a catalogue in hand, she trailed around the sales with him and his influence was very strong.

Though Cathy has forged a strong career and reputation of her own, she is at pains to stress how important the advice and support of her parents has always been.

“My father always believed strongly that education was very important,” she says, “probably because he went straight from school to the BBA.”

On leaving school herself, Cathy already



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had an excellent grounding in practical horsemanship, so an equine degree didn't seem to be of any additional benefit.

“My father thought I should do a business degree so I studied Business and Legal Studies at U.C.D. and that was really the best thing I could have done,” she enthuses.

“The business and financial end is the most difficult part of the business and having done those courses and worked in that sphere has definitely made me look at things differently.

“When I'm drawing up an agreement I'm very aware of all the various things that go into making it. And also, the experience I gained during my time at Lycetts in the insurance where my responsibility was to increase the client base, was very important.

“The time I have spent outside of the bloodstock business has been valuable. Dad had been very conscious when I was growing up that I learnt all aspects of the business, so I also worked in both racing yards and stud farms.

“I also spent time working in PR and marketing for two or three years outside of the industry, but, always, the whole thing on my mind was to get back into horses.”

The influence of parents Sheila and Brian has always been important and Cathy proudly acknowledges their support.

“Mum and Dad were such a good business partnership; Mum studied accountancy, which was why they worked so brilliantly together.

“Mum and I also work well together too, but we have excellent support from our farm manager and our staff; we all have individual strengths and skills that complement each other really well.

“I am so lucky that Mum had confidence in my ability to keep the business going. It was really very brave of her and I wouldn't have been able to do it without her.”

WHILE IT HAD always been Cathy's intention to work alongside her father and perhaps one day take over the business, she had planned to strengthen her experience elsewhere for much longer than eventually transpired.

“Dad needed someone in the office, so I came back to work for him two years,” she explains. “Then Lycetts, who did our

insurance, wanted an Irish office, so I helped set that up with John Anderson. An opportunity then arose to go to Australia, to set up the Magic Millions/Lycetts partnership.

“I'd been before when working at Inglis and the yearling sales, so I always knew I'd go back if I could and I jumped at the chance! It was amazing, living on the Gold Coast, working for Magic Millions, and I got to see the whole of Australia and learn about the industry more and I made great contacts.

“I would recommend travelling to every young person, it teaches so much and you learn something from everybody. You might not always agree, but, as Dad said, if you're clever enough you'll listen and pick up what you feel works. He was a very clever man. He was always helping people and I'd be there, tagging along and hearing all his advice!

“I spent two and a half years in Australia and I came home for the winter sales, so I continued to work for Brian Grassick Bloodstock, as well as Lycetts.

“Then Dad took sick and Australia was a bit too far away. Dad naturally wanted to take things a bit easier and the time was right for me to come back into the business. It was my dream job, so I jumped at the chance. It combined the bloodstock business with the stud.

“I'd been home only three or four weeks when Dad got ill again. The transition period had meant to be years, not months. It was a very steep learning curve and still is.

“But Mum and I working together has been good and we've developed a really great partnership. Caroline Hannon manages the stud and she does a wonderful job as did Edie Murray-Hayden before her. Belinda Warwick, who used to work for John Mulhern, runs the office. Together, we're working on growing the business. I have a stronger involvement with the agency than the farm, they are separate entities, although they have similar clients and overlap.

“Our original clients have all been extremely supportive and have been wonderful to work with, as have the newer clients.

“I like them to be as closely involved as possible. When I've drawn up a short-list at the sales I show the clients the horses. I like them to see them and I like them to like what they're buying.

“Horses are wonderful creatures, they can surprise us all, there's always a percentage of luck and the unknown quantity in every

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horse. That unknown quantity is what makes people so passionate about horses, the individual personalities are what get people hooked on racing.”

No one seems to appreciate those “individual personalities” more than Cathy, who is never more happy than when out in the paddocks. She has a natural eye for a horse, but picked up more than a little from two of the finest bloodstock brains in the industry.

“Tom Cooper was Dad’s mentor at the BBA,” Cathy recalls. “Dad was trained by one of the greatest bloodstock agents and it was very much hands-on; he served his apprenticeship in the old-fashioned way and worked at the BBA for 17 years before setting up on his own in 1991.

“Dad was always teaching us things and keen to get us all involved. We were very young when we bought our first foal and with the profit we bought a second foal. That was how he got us interested and how we learnt.”

Her enthusiasm for both learning and horses is put to good use by Cathy, who regularly gives her time to the Young Irish Thoroughbred Breeders’ Association (YITBA), the Irish National Stud’s Diploma Course, as well as to the Darley Flying Start Programme.

“I’m lecturing now at NUI Maynooth for the Equine Business Degree. I’ve never seen myself as a teacher, but it’s great to combine what I learned at university with my practical experience and to pass that on.

“It’s a great feeling that you get from young people – I was so lucky that people gave time to me, it’s important to pass that on,” she acknowledges.

Newtown Stud makes great demands on Cathy’s time and during the breeding season it’s a case of all hands on deck with Cathy, Sheila and Caroline doing all the foaling themselves. The resident boarders and the stud’s own mares have their ranks swelled by 10-15 seasonal boarders and the team foal between 25 and 30 mares each year.

“We all love foaling, it’s tiring, but it’s wonderful,” Cathy says. “A lot of our clients are breeders, so we’re often asked to go down and look at foals and inspect yearlings and give opinions. There’s a big benefit in having a fresh pair of eyes – when you’re looking at a horse every day there can often be something you don’t pick up on. It’s helpful to the client, while we can also look and suggest which sale might suit the horse best.”

As a bloodstock agent, Cathy’s time is usually spent in bloodstock study, whether of stallion progeny or form books or pedigrees.

“We go to the races a lot and are always looking at potential orders, looking at opportunities,” she says. “Morning’s are spent studying the *TDN*, *EBN* and *ANZ* newsletters; you have to have your finger on the pulse. The internet is an amazing device, it’s such an effective working tool. Everyone in the industry is now much more technologically advanced than they once were.

“The work involves a lot of research, updating pedigrees, but it keeps me busy and I love that. Dad knew so much about pedigrees and I love talking to older people who can tell you about perhaps even a horse’s fifth dam.

“For instance, I might look at a horse and say that it was very small and Dad would say ‘but its from a good family that is usually small.’

“He knew families. It’s wonderful to know families, particularly with first-season stallions, where we’ll look at stock and get a feel for what the horse produces. Even if you don’t buy foals, when it comes to the yearling sales you’ve a clearer picture.”

Cathy is a rare jewel in the crown of the bloodstock industry, a font of wisdom and experience already at a relatively young age, with an insatiable appetite to continue to learn and one who is willing to pass that on to others. She is proud of the industry and a keen supporter and promoter.

“People in Ireland don’t realise how proud they should be of their industry,” she says. “As a nation of horse people it’s the envy of everyone internationally. There aren’t many industries that Ireland can boast of being a world leader and it’s important that this industry is recognised in wider circles and gets the credit it properly deserves.

“It’s a passion. Sometimes it’s hard work, standing on Newmarket Heath freezing, but it’s a wonderful job, just amazing. It’s not a profession, it’s a lifestyle. It’s what I’ve always wanted to do and what I love doing. I’ve been so lucky.” ■

Mum Sheila
at Newtown
Stud

