

Find Your Passion to Be Successful

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"Only passions, great passions, can elevate the soul to great things." - Denis Diderot (1713-1784)

Upon meeting Gail Wood her passion for the thoroughbred industry and her love for horses is perhaps the most evident trait that emerges at first, but behind that lingers a self proclaimed optimist who always looks for the positive in everything, even when disaster strikes.

It has been nearly a year since the dreadful May 9 fire swept through the training division of Gail Wood's Woodlands Farm, as with any tragedy there are many heartbreaks, 22 horses perished only four survived the fire, there wasn't enough time to save the rest as the flames rapidly swept through the barn.

Upon thorough investigation the fire department wasn't able to assess the cause of the fire, when they reached the farm it was already too late, everything had burned to the ground and there were many questions that could never be answered. For many horsemen this was a painful déjà vu of the awful fire that destroyed two barns at Woodbine Racetrack in the early morning hours of August 8 2002. For many the wound was still tender and it was like throwing salt on it, there was no amount of money that could replace the lives of their horses and without an explanation it was that more difficult to reach closure and move forward.

As Gail recalls that dreadful day the anguish is clearly visible on her face, it was an awful accident that will never be forgotten, nevertheless the kindness and support she received from the horse community touched her heart and soul and it will be vividly remembered.

Gail was able to recognize the opportunity to rebuild a better facility, the barn was finished at the end of November and it now is one of the best facilities in southern Ontario.

Over the years she has evolved, but the fact that Gail was always attracted to horses never changed. As a little girl she was the oldest from a family of five girls, they all loved horses and after a lot of persuasion and pleading she was able to convince her father to buy a pony for herself and her sisters. From then on it was all etched in stone, there would be no turning back the love affair that had begun.

Her first experiences with horses were in the show ring, she and her sisters were involved with hunters and jumpers, they would show their horses and compete in the local circuit. From the time she was sixteen she coached students in the hunter and jumper disciplines right through high school and university. At any given point she had sixteen to twenty students, as well as competing in the local horse shows herself.

Gail graduated from Ryerson University with a Radio and Television Arts Degree, and after working for a year in the television industry she realized that it wasn't her calling. She found the work too tedious and slow, because by nature she likes to be active and she assumed that as she got older she would settle and eventually go back to the television industry however as life unfolded it is very unlikely that she will ever pursue a career in the media field.

As faith would have it, she realized that she wanted to redirect her career and wasn't sure yet which path to follow and decided to move back home for a year as her parents were travelling and needed someone to look after the house. At this time she started to work for Mr. Harry Hindmarsh.

This was the pivot that transformed her into one of the leading forces in today's thoroughbred industry. Back in the mid 70's when she first started to work for Mr. Hindmarsh women were not welcomed in the industry, most of them were treated unfairly and never had a chance to proceed towards better positions. To this day Gail speaks of Mr. Hindmarsh with the highest regard, he was a fair and just man who would give anybody a chance to prove their worth regardless of their gender. From the beginning of her employment with Hindmarsh Farm she assumed great responsibilities, and after just one year she was the manager of the training farm, and within a few years she became the farm manager. In 1996 Mrs. Hindmarsh made the decision to downsize the operation. A mutual agreement was reached between Mrs. Hindmarsh and Gail, and in April of that year Gail leased the training farm and carried on the training and boarding of a large roster of owners under the new name of Woodlands Farm.

One of the most valuable lessons that Mr. Hindmarsh taught Gail over the years was the preparation and representation of horses in the sales ring. With any successful racing stable there is usually a natural evolution toward the sale of the yearlings, as it generally is too overwhelming to keep and race every one of them. Mr. Hindmarsh had the same philosophy as Mr. E.P. Taylor, which was to gain the public's confidence that he would offer every yearling for sale and would keep and race only those that he could not sell for a fair market price. As Gail entered the business under Mr. Hindmarsh's wing she learned precious hands on experience that would later enable her to build a tremendously successful business as a leading consignor in the sales arena both here and in the United States. Perhaps the most important lesson for Gail was the realization that the horse's conformation has nothing to do with its racing career and ability, she herself admitted that, "we as humans have set requirements for horses because we want the control, people like to pretend that they can pick a good horse. So many times I saw the most crooked horses become champions, look at Phoenix Factor, she was terribly crooked."

Winter Garden, one of last year's top three Sovereign Awards finalist just happens to be Phoenix Factor's granddaughter. Winter Garden's dam, Hillsburgh Rumors, was so offset in the knees that she didn't even make it to the races, nevertheless it didn't stop her from producing a Graded Stakes horse, so much for conformation.

Gail believes that all we can do to develop a racehorse is to give them the best opportunity possible, if you allow that to happen it is amazing what they become as race horses. In many ways she believes that the same approach as raising children should be taken, we as parents give our children the best opportunity we can and when at the end of the road we sit back and look we are amazed at what they have become.

An increase in purse money the past few years directly influenced the local yearling market, and in Gail's opinion, now more than ever, there is an opportunity for the little guy to purchase a thoroughbred and make money. There are so many more races, a bigger Stakes program and in many ways the Ontario Sired Maiden Races are a gift for the smaller breeder. For those interested in becoming new owners Gail suggests that you get recommendations from various sources, get involved with people you like and trust, and once you choose your trainer let them do their job, don't try to do their job for them, after all you are paying them for their knowledge.

One of the most important aspects of becoming an owner is to stay within a financial comfort zone. When there is financial pressure it does not work and most important of all is to follow your instincts. "Just go out and try. If you fail, try it a different way, don't give up." says Gail.

Although buying a yearling is very much like buying a lottery ticket there are traits that every trainer and breeder specifically look for. At the top of Gail's priority list is a strong female family. Any mare that she purchases for breeding purposes must have strong female representation, and on a few exceptional cases she has purchased mares that were lacking this quality but possessed a tremendous amount of natural talent. Gail is a strong believer that quality will reproduce itself and if you start with quality you can breed quality stock. Most of the mares that she owns are purchased with a long term plan in mind. She likes to develop strong female lines and when it comes to the breeding between her broodmares and the many stallions available Gail has a mental picture of what she wants the foal to look like. At times the foals conceived look like a mistake in the matching between the mare and the stallion, and on such occasions she goes back to the drawing board and tries again. At the end of the road her perseverance has paid off.

The stallions she selects are mostly young stallions due to the fact that the first-rate established sires are behind the realm of most breeders. Even though the studs are young there are various criteria that must be present, one of the factors that is never overlooked is a high level of brilliance, great things can only be produced if there is a high level of quality present. The next factor considered is how dominant the horse was in his racing career. In order to gain Gail's vote the stallion had to have clearly demonstrated that at one point in his career he was dominant and was able to win by wide margins.

When all of these aspects are taken into consideration you are more likely to succeed, but because the thoroughbred industry does not come with any guarantees even after all these factors are accounted for quite often there will be parts of the stallion's genetic make up that will resurface and you won't be happy. This is when an eternal optimist, like Gail, puts all that aside and tries the whole process all over again, all in the quest of breeding the perfect thoroughbred.

The only unfortunate part with this process is that by the time you are able to see the foal the mare is generally already booked back to the same sire, but Gail is quick to point out that she would not book a stallion to a broodmare in the first place if she didn't think highly of the possible outcome and therefore she must really be keen of the stallion to rebook her mare.

In 1996 Gail was able to expand her operation to include racing horses of her own. This was a new direction for Gail who was now able to keep the yearlings that didn't fetch a fair price at auction. And what is a "fair price"? In Gail's opinion a breeder usually assesses a "fair market price" by the following three principles:

First there are the horses that the owner views as a business, they have to sell them to generate cash flow in order to pay for the stallion fees and to keep the operation running. In this case the "fair market price" is established according to the lowest price they can afford to sell the horse for. Second, there are the horses that the breeder is not committed to because he/she does not like them. This doesn't necessarily mean that there is something wrong with them, but for whatever reason the breeder isn't taken by the horse and wants to sell. Third are the gems. The horses that the breeder or owner considers to be the cream of the crop. The horses that from day one were looking like being superior specimens. These horses are great prospects and deserve to be protected in the sales ring. With so much experience in the breeding industry Gail strongly believes that most of the personality of the foal derives from the dam as they spend most of the time with her. Many times the foals that are the most difficult to deal with or are described as unruly develop into good racehorses, "The fire that keeps you fighting for authority keeps you fighting for the win." says Gail. A typical day for Gail is long and exhausting. First thing every morning she feeds all the horses starting her rounds in the broodmare barn and working her way to the training barn and then discusses the day's plans with the training staff. Once everything is running smoothly she returns to the broodmare barn to check up on the mares and foals and by that time the day is over. With 115 horses currently stabled at Woodlands, Gail doesn't view her job as work, "This is what I want and like to do, if I wasn't doing this as a living I would be doing it as a hobby. If you can find a passion and work at it, you will be successful."

