

A DREAM FULFILLED

Just 17 months after opening WOODLANDS, Gail Wood's yearling consignment included the most expensive horse to be sold in Canada in 1997.

by Jennifer Morrison-Learn

Growing up, many young girls dream of horses. Some live out their dreams and get a chance to ride a pony or own a horse of her own.

And some become so dedicated and passionate about horses that they build a successful career around them.

Gail Wood is one of those success stories.

Some 20 years after her first day of managing a thoroughbred breeding farm and several years more than that from her days as a college student, Wood is the proprietor of Woodlands Farm, a burgeoning operation in southern Ontario.

In September, just 17 months since the official opening of Woodlands, Gail Wood's yearling consignment (the second under her own farm's name) included the most expensive horse to be sold in Canada in 1997.

"It's just like any other business," said Wood, a day after her farm sold Jean-Guy and Mathilde Gauthier's yearling colt by West by West for a healthy \$200,000 to Japanese interests. "It's a long haul to figure out how to be successful in the horse business and you need a lot of luck. Perhaps you need luck before anything else."

An optimist by nature, Wood started her career in a different direction, pursuing a life in radio and television and attending Ryerson College in downtown Toronto. A Hillsburgh, Ontario girl, she was the daughter of a real estate agent who sold the odd farm. One fateful day, her father sold a farm to Harry Hindmarsh.

While working freelance jobs in radio and television, she went to work for Hindmarsh one winter at his new farm.



Gail Wood's Woodlands consigned hip #39 to the CBS Sale, as agent for Haras Du Chevrillard. The colt, by West By West brought a sale-topping bid of \$200,000 from Crystal River Bloodstock.



"Once I had been there working for some time, I got hooked," Wood fondly remembered.

It was bye-bye to showbiz and hello to the business of thoroughbred racing.

Wood's passion to learn the breeding industry took her all over North America. She attended virtually every breeding seminar and class she could get to and Hindmarsh soon made her the farm's manager. Wood's promotion represented one of the first significant positions to be held by a woman in the Canadian horse industry.

For the next 22 years Wood built her reputation as one of the most respected horsepeople in the game. Hindmarsh Farm's stallion and yearling business thrived, and stakes winners popped up almost yearly from each foal crop.

She earned the highest praise from her peers in 1989 when she became the first farm manager of the year named by the Ontario Farm Managers Association.

In 1991, Hindmarsh passed away. Soon after, his widow, Lynne, decided to cease commercial operations of the farm. In the fall of 1995, Wood was given an opportunity to lease one of the two Hindmarsh farms and she jumped at the chance.

"I guess I thought that it was the time to do it, if I was ever going to do it. I wanted to try and meet the same standards as the Hindmarsh operation, basically keep it the same as it was."

The transition could not have been smoother. Loyal clients from the Hindmarsh years stuck with Wood and in June

of 1996, she consigned her first group of horses to the local two-year-old sale. That was followed by a large and profitable first consignment to the prestigious select yearling sale in September.

A tireless worker - her friends and family marvel at her endless energy - Wood's plan of attack for 1997 was to try and convince more clients to keep their yearlings in Ontario to sell rather than be lured to the larger sales south of the border.

"I'm a die-hard Canadian. I tried to encourage people to bring more and more horses back here, horses that I thought suited the market. There were a lot who were afraid to make a commitment to the Canadian industry. But the market has started to turn around here."

Clients that listened to Wood were rewarded on the first Tuesday in September when consignors and buyers were swept away by giant results. Overall, the sale's average yearling price leaped 39 percent to over \$34,000.

The Gauthiers were just one group of rewarded consignors as they sold all of their yearlings in Ontario for the first time.

"It was very exciting," said Jean-Guy Gauthier, "You work all those years and it's a great reward for all the work you did, and the work you're going to do."

Gail Wood consults with the late Harry Hindmarsh, the man who gave her her first job in the business. Wood's promotion to Farm Manager at Hindmarsh Farm made her one of the most prominent women in the Canadian thoroughbred breeding industry.



Wood anticipated a big sale, especially as far as the West by West colt was concerned.

"I told the Gauthiers in the spring that he'd be about a \$75,000 colt, which is quite a bit of money," said Wood. "But he really did well this spring and he rose to the occasion."

Speaking like a proud parent, Wood talked about the colt, a son of the good allowance winner Feather Necklace, and his attitude at sale time.

"He had a tremendous amount of eye appeal and he enjoyed being admired," she said. "He played to the audience. I like it when horses do that because it means to me that they enjoy their involvement with humans, which I think carries on to the racetrack."

Twenty-four hours before the sale, Wood said one prominent horseperson remarked that her colt was one of the best half-dozen in the sale and perhaps could be the sales topper.

Only minutes after the colt walked into the sales ring, the bidding had reached \$75,000, and the hammer finally fell at \$200,000, just one bid higher than that of American pinhooker Tony Bowling.

"Tony told me it was the best colt he had seen at sales this year," said Wood.

By the night's end, Wood's consignment of 21 sold horses reached \$850,000 making for an impressive average of \$40,476.

"It's great to go into the ring and feel confident that your horses are going to sell. You have to be ecstatic.

And, as nothing in the horse business is perfect, or explainable, Wood admitted there were some weak spots in her consignment.

"I feel badly about that. I don't think anyone ever knows what's going to happen once you get into the sales ring. Some horses that I think will get sold, don't and some that are nice horses sell for a lot more money than you expect.

"I'd like to feel that I've sold everyone's horses and everyone's happy. Maybe that's an unattainable goal but it's something I like to set for myself."

Wood will have many of the clients' yearlings at Woodlands for several weeks before the sale, but does, on occasion, travel to other farms, such as the Gauthiers, to check up on a horse's development.

"The people I'm involved with have raised better and better horses every year. It's not a struggle to sell these horses. The small breeder in Ontario produces a great product. You just have to look at a horse like (Dom Romeo's) Flashy n' Smart. She leaves Canada and wins a Grade 3 and runs third in a Grade 1."

Wood acknowledges that a lot of help comes from her longtime partner Dan Steeves, the 'computer whiz' in the Woodlands family. "He's a tremendous assistant to me, he does all my computer stuff."

The woman who continues to fulfill her dream of horses also considers herself blessed. "I always feel like I've been rewarded. I've always loved horses and to be able to spend my day with them, how can you beat that? Most people work all week and have the weekends to do what they want. I get up each morning and do exactly what I want to do, every day."

And that dream is hard to beat.