FROM FIELD *to the* *FARM*

MATT STEWART

RACEHORSES have long fascinated sports people. Famous cricketers, tennis players and footballers – of any code – have always popped up on racetracks and as part-owners of horses.

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The interest has been in the athlete and the social trappings that come with racing and cheering them; a release after long winter seasons of running, hitting, bumping and kicking.

Some sporting heroes, like Billy Slater, have been more interested than others, so much so that at the Magic Millions Yearling Sale in January, the legendary Melbourne Storm fullback will be leaping into the afterlife.

Recently-retired Slater isn't merely one of the sale's celebrity vendors but a very committed and nervous one.

Fledgling breeding enterprise Slater **Thoroughbreds** owns two broodmares and one of them, Inishowen, will be represented at the sale by a striking Wandjina colt.

Slater bought Inishowen in foal to Wandjina at the 2017 Magic Millions Broodmare Sale. He didn't just like the mare – although he was taken by her pedigree, her race performances and even her pretty head – but the overall package.

"Wandjina himself was a cracking colt trained by Gai Waterhouse and I liked pretty much everything about Inishowen," he said. "She ticked pretty much all the boxes; she won twice at Flemington, she was by three times champion broodmare sire Encosta de Lago …"

Slater has no idea what his colt will cost its new owner when the gavel comes down in January, or even how he will feel on the day. But he knows the Magic Millions sale represents the most important step yet in his transition from sportsman with a dash of racing pedigree to retired footballer trying to make it as a commercial breeder.

"I'm not sure how it will hit me on the day. I'd always been interested in watching yearling sales but it was always someone else's horse, not your horse. I'm guessing I'll be pretty nervous but I'm already really excited," he said, describing the Wandjina colt as "a cracking bay with a distinctive white blaze and three white socks; a great head, just like his mum."

Like a few of his sporting mates, Slater has been fascinated by these horse athletes; their speed, their strength, their courage, their conditioning.

"There's a huge amount of parallels between human athletes and racehorses," he said. "How they train, how they eat, how they recover, all the training protocols. It's amazing how close we used to prepare and train compared to how horses do it.

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There was one very special horse person who knew how to read the body language of both her horses and her staff; a trainer who not just advanced Slater's horse skills but taught him life important lessons.

Slater grew up in Innisfail in Queensland where rugby league and horses duelled for his affections. He was 12 when given a young horse with a bowed tendon to care for. He'd ride it in gymkhanas and "through sugarcane paddocks". Slater left school at 16 and went to work for Gai Waterhouse, that "very special person," at Tulloch Lodge at Randwick.

Slater says he wasn't a superstar teenage footballer – that came later – and was happy for rugby to take a back seat as Waterhouse took him under her wing.

"It was the greatest time of my life," he said. "I'd played football all my life and it's all I ever knew. It's just what you did.

"Gai was amazing. And it was an amazing time in the stable. She had great two-year-olds like Assertive Lad and Phoenix Park. I strapped and rode Tempest Morn in all her trackwork and she won the Australasian Oaks.

"Gai ran a tight ship but she leads by example. She never expects anyone to work harder than she does. She taught me to have a strong work ethic."

Rugby League again dominated Slater's life through his twenties – although he'd always enjoyed a punt on the horses and a day at the track - before at age 35, the 300-gamer called it quits in August this year.

Even before that emotional day, Slater had been plotting his transition. Since retirement he has secured coaching roles with both the St Kilda Football Club and the Storm but it was over two years ago that Slater laid the first foundations of his breeding operation.

The year before he bought Inishowen in foal to Wandjina, Slater bought his first broodmare, Hamam, at the same sale.

The Al Maher mare's first foal, by Shooting To Win, unfortunately died as a weanling. Her second, a chestnut colt by Written Tycoon, is now a yearling and will either be sold at auction later this sales season or kept by Slater **Thoroughbreds**.

The third, a foal by Street Boss, dropped recently and Hamam is now in foal to Cable Bay.

For Inishowen, a Choisir colt came the season after the Wandjina colt and she is now in foal to Redoute's Choice.

Slater's new farm south east of Melbourne will be home to an increasing number of Slater **Thoroughbreds** horses but he is mindful of taking baby steps. That said, he wants to be competitive.

"It's always been my nature. Whatever I've done I've been passionate to doing it the best I can," he said. "There's no point being half-hearted."

The Wandjina colt will be sold under the banner of Victoria's Woodside Park Stud, a great "mate" and ally of Slater's. "They are great people to lean on," he said.

Black Caviar's breeder Rick Jamieson imported Cable Bay to Australia from England. Slater says he has learned something of the art of good matings from the revered Jamieson, "although with breeding you can never know enough."

Slater said he was thrilled that Hamam fitted Jamieson's strict criteria for a mating with Cable Bay.

"You can try and find the right mating for your mare and you can delve into as much information as you want," he said. "But Rick's got this amazing track record and it's great to have a mare as a matched rating to his stallion."

Slater says the combination of the Magic Millions Gold Coast Yearling Sale and the late May, early June Broodmare Sale hadn't been a specific target; "it just worked out that way," he said.

"For me, it's the best opportunity to select broodmares, with the added bonus of the yearling sale. There's an incredible amount of lots, whether mares or yearlings, and you know they are quality animals," he said.

Slater's philosophy for his bloodstock business, which faces its first commercial test at the Gold Coast in January, is to simply give it his best shot.

"I've **bought** the best mares we can afford, **found** them the best possible stallions at our disposal, **have them prepared by the best in the Woodside team** and get them into the right sales," he said.

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