

Winbak Farms

Cecil County's little slice of Heaven

By Apryl Parcher



A Winbak Farms horse, CR Commando, in full racing form

What do Badlands Hanover, CR Commando, Powerful Toy and Shotgun Scott have in common? If you guessed they were names of horses, you would be correct. If you guessed racehorses you would be correct again. Each horse also is a champion and has won hundreds of thousands of dollars in purse money before retiring to stud—all without carrying a single rider on its back. These winners are part of a family of pacing and trotting stallions at Winbak Farm—home to some of the Standardbred industry's top stallions and broodmares.

Winbak Farm encompasses more than 2,300 acres of gently rolling, lush Maryland farmland near Chesapeake City, and is the largest and leading Standardbred foal nursery in the state. Winbak stallions also stand in Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York and Canada, and produce winners in record numbers. This year alone, Winbak-bred foals have tallied up 1,234 wins for more than \$11 million, and are prominent in the local harness racing scene. CR Commando's progeny swept all the trotting spots in Delaware last year, and Badlands Hanover (retired as the fastest two-year-old pacer of all-time) sired foals that dominated the 2004 Delaware Sire Stakes, winning all of the finals. Both stallions are world champions and Breeders Crown winners as well.

Horsing racing in general might be called "The Sport of Kings," but even not-so-royals find the

What's the Difference Between a Thoroughbred and a Standardbred?



Thoroughbreds race with a mounted jockey at a gallop, and Standardbreds pull a driver in a sulky cart at a fast trot or pace. Although the Standardbred is an American breed, it does have Thoroughbred roots, beginning with a stallion named Messenger, an English Thoroughbred foaled in 1780 and exported to the United States. One of Messenger's great-grandsons, Hambletonian 10, is at the root of the American breed's family tree -- every Standardbred foal can trace its lineage back to him.

Standardbreds resemble their Thoroughbred ancestors, but have slightly different physical characteristics (besides gait) that give them advantages for their original uses (carriage and cart) and racing style. Somewhat shorter (average 15.2 hands) but longer in the body, the Standardbred's compact musculature and skeletal structure gives it more endurance over the long haul than its lighter-boned Thoroughbred cousins; they can be raced more often in longer matches with less injury, and were considered the most speedy, reliable and durable mode of transportation available before the automobile.

The term "Standardbred" came about because early trotters were required to reach a certain standard time for the mile distance in order to be registered as part of the new breed.

Standardbred to be quite an investment value. The United States Trotting Association asserts that Standardbreds make more than three times as many starts, win three times more stakes races, and win more than their purchase price three times more often than Thoroughbreds. Plus they cost less to maintain, and their purchase price averages 90 percent less than their flat-racing cousins.

"Vivid Photo is a good example of the value of Standardbred foals," says Ed Howard, trainer at Winbak "Purchased for about \$30,000, he became a Hambletonian winner with world record heats, and made over \$1 million in 2005. Rainbow Blue, a famous Winbak filly, was purchased for only \$10,500 and is the world record holder at Dover Downs, making over \$1.5 million in two years. That's a great return on investment."

Howard also noted that Standardbreds are more "hands-on" for owners. "An owner can be more directly involved with the horse—even sit behind them in a sulky during training. They're generally less high-strung than Thoroughbreds; a delight to work with."

Many local and regional trainers, breeders and just plain horse-lovers got the chance to invest in some of Winbak's champion lines recently at its first annual Select Yearling Sale, which was held Oct. 10 at the Chesapeake City farm. Although the weather was grey and misty, an estimated 200 guests arrived at the auction and parked along the sycamore-lined drive leading to the farm office.

Prior to the auction, grooms walked the young horses out of the yearling barns on request, allowing bidders to inspect them closely and see how they moved. Once the auction started, the yearlings were led one by one through a large white auction tent. Each was introduced by one of harness racing's legendary sports announcers, Carl Becker. Auctioneer Larry Martin of Martin Associates started the bidding, which ran hot and heavy; some bids coming from inside the spacious tent in front of the podium, and others coming from just outside, where people gathered to see the yearlings lining up along a fenced mulch path. Two "spotters" stood atop platforms on either side of the auction podium and fielded bids from the audience, singing out with a loud "Hey!" as bids were taken. A talented auctioneer, Martin worked the crowd with his sing-song voice, pausing every now and then to accentuate the features of a particular yearling or to call out encouragement to bidders. Phrases like, "Look at all the money in that family!" "There's a shiny filly here," and "Half-sister to a \$300,000 winner," punctuated the bidding.

Forty-two yearlings were sold under the Winbak tent, bringing in more than \$380,000. Some sold for as little as \$3,000, while the highest bid was placed for Miss Fanelli, a pretty chestnut filly by CR Commando that sold for \$22,500.

Trainers, breeders and horse-lovers looking for a bargain participated. Even a few Amish gentlemen lined up along the fence for a look-see.

Farm manager Bill Gerweck notes that, "people from all walks can own a quality horse with a winning pedigree whether they want to enjoy their investment locally or compete in the Grand Circuit."

To educate prospective buyers, Winbak offers seminars to teach them about the breed and what they can expect. The farm's training and breeding centers also host internships where equine students have the opportunity for hands-on experience, and anyone who wants a tour of the farm is invited to call the office for an appointment.

"We like to work with local high schools and colleges as well," says Gerweck. "The more familiar people are with the horse industry, the better land use decisions they make down the road."

In Cecil County, land use is of particular concern, especially with the housing boom and the pressures upon Maryland's remaining open space. The horse industry, which includes pleasure horses as well as racehorses, has a major impact on the state's rural economy.

"The equine industry as a whole is the last firewall to overdevelopment," notes Gerweck. "Most people see this big farm and lots of horses, hear about the millions they've won and think that it doesn't impact them, but it does. What you see is only the tip of the iceberg. The local economic impact is actually much broader—from the hay, straw and grain that we buy locally to the businesses we support, such as veterinarians and farriers—all that adds up to about \$25 million for the Maryland economy."

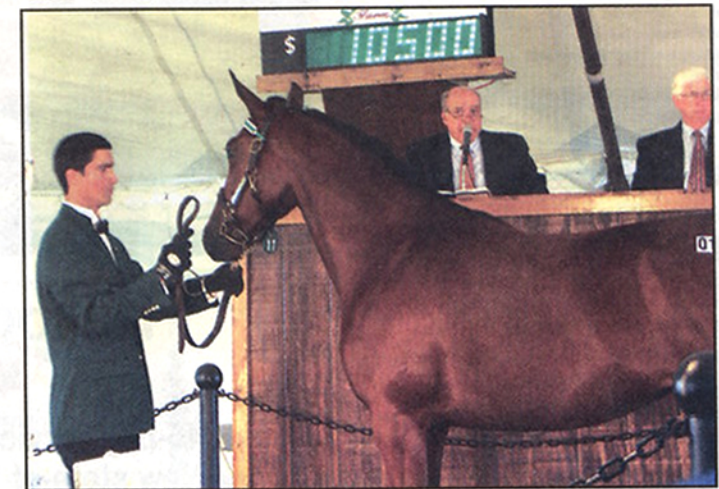
The horses definitely seem to enjoy Winbak's bucolic landscape. With bright eyes and shiny coats, they glow with vitality and energy.

"You can't help but love these animals," says Gerweck. "When we give a tour and someone touches one of those velvet noses, they're hooked."

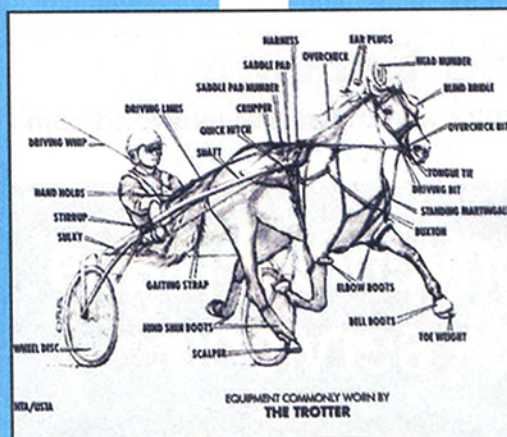
He gestures to the surrounding pastures. "This is clean farming, the way the land was meant to be used. The single best use for land is grass, which acts as a natural filter, eliminating runoff and loss of topsoil—a win-win for the bay."

Take a drive down Interstate 310 and enjoy the Winbak view—its rural beauty will take your breath away. Add the fact that many of farm's gorgeous horses grow up to be champions, and that the industry promotes cherished open green space, and Winbak Farm could very well be characterized as Cecil County's "little slice of heaven." ○

A horse up for auction at the first annual Select Yearling Sale at Winbak Farms.



The Racing Gaits



- Trotters move with a diagonal gait; the left front and right rear legs move in unison, as do the right front and left rear. The trotting gait is natural to horses, but it requires a skilled trainer to get a trotter to move perfectly at high speeds.

- Pacers move with a lateral gait: left front and rear, alternating with right front and rear. Because of this unique movement, pacers are often called "sidewheelers." Due to the sureness of their action, pacers are usually several seconds faster than trotters, and account for about 80 percent of the performers in harness racing. Maintenance of the pacing gait is aided by plastic loops called hobbles, which keep the pacer's legs moving in synchronization.

Information and diagrams from www.ustrotting.com

