

ILKA GANSERA-LEVEQUE A WOMAN WITH A RACING PASSION

By Debbie Nicholls

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Mrs. Ilka with her Husband 'Stéphane Léveque' and daughter 'Elea'

ON ONE UNFORGETTABLE DAY AT NEWMARKET RACES AN UNFANCIED CHESTNUT HORSE GALLOPED HIS HEART OUT FOR HIS YOUNG TRAINER, AND HELPED DEFINE ILKA GANSERA-LEVEQUE'S CAREER.

Her horse, Joe Sugden, rejected by two trainers for his fragility, repaid every ounce of her faith to beat the biggest yards in the country on his racecourse debut in 2013 at a wide outsider's price of 80-1.

His win against the odds was a highlight of the remarkable journey that has taken the daughter of a German fighter pilot to owning one of the most attractive yards in Newmarket's global flat racing headquarters—all within three years of taking out her trainer's licence.

Far from her homeland, she lives and works in the birthplace of British flat racing, with a 32-box yard and access to the training splendour that is Newmarket with its two world-class racecourses and more than 50 miles of grass and all-weather gallops.

Along the way she has ridden as an apprentice jockey, worked as an assistant trainer, and spent a year with legendary horse whisperer Monty Roberts.

As a mature student she qualified as a vet, giving her a rare mix of talents needed to juggle the demands of running a yard, expanding the business and caring for her five-year-old daughter with husband and fellow trainer, French-born Stéphane.

And that includes a 4.30 am start on summer mornings, appropriately the title of her blog, fourthirty-am!

German-born Ilka had a stellar start to her career. In August 2012 she started from

scratch with just two horses in her care in Newmarket.

A beautifully bred bay filly Tosca bought by Ilka as a yearling traveled to Germany as her first runner and dead-headed in a valuable race on her two-year-old debut. Four days later her first UK runner, Tiger Cub, also won on her debut. It was a 100% record and a dream come true!

Three years on she has purchased her own yard, named St. Wendred's after a heathen saint locally associated with the healing of horses. One particular well was an ancient water source which later became Christianised into St. Wendred's Well, widely renowned for the restorative power of the water used for treating horses. It's a fitting link with Ilka's veterinary skills and natural horsemanship.

"I hope it's a good omen, and I count myself very lucky to be where I am," says ilka.

"I had an Air Force upbringing and my family were not involved in racing. But ever since I was a child I wanted to be a jockey. I left school at 15 and was apprenticed to German trainer Bruno Schütz and was only Bruno's second girl apprentice."

Her year with Monty Roberts altered her whole approach to horses. Every newcomer to the yard has a join-up session and she concentrates on getting their mind-set positive.

"I make sure that every horse in my care gets personal treatment and is trained as an individual. I have had a lot of project horses who have lost their way. It takes time to restore their health and confidence but it's very rewarding."

"I have always followed my heart and worked hard. I am very competitive but you need the horses to make your name. People don't know how good you are without the horse to advertise it!"

Always ready to network, Ilka is a member of Women in Racing, keen to invite others to her yard and lunch at the town's world-famous Tattersalls bloodstock sales.

"I travelled to Abu Dhabi with a group from Women in Racing and met the owner of a promising Arabian racehorse just at the time that Stéphane was setting up as an Arabian trainer."

Enter Storm Troupour, a stunning racing stallion newly arrived from the States and aimed at a valuable series of turf races having an all-turf pedigree.

A new Ladies-only syndicate also provided some fun moments, and a rare chance to get some parade ring finery on for a professional photo-call at her barn!

But amidst her busy life, it remains Joe Sugden, a horse whose stout frame led doubters to even question his breeding, who still encapsulates her greatest triumph and her greatest disappointment. A portrait of 'Joe Joe' hangs in her office, reminding her of the horse she took on as an unraced four-year-old.

"He came to us with a lot of problems but we got him right and recognised he was something special," said Ilka. "It was a great day when he won. Very sadly he died after just three starts with a post-operative complication."

"We lost him right before Christmas and my birthday, so it couldn't have been at a worse time. Things had been so good, we had a good year and there was so much to be thankful for, and then that had to happen. That's racing; the highs are high and the lows are low."

Undaunted, she is fiercely ambitious, and wants to see every one of St. Wendred's 32 boxes filled with quality horses. *"It's onwards and upwards for us and anyone who wants to join us on our journey."*

For more information:
www.gansera-leveque.com