

Broodmare of the Year? Irish Sovereign is Making Her Case

By Bill Finley

Winning just three races and earning a little over \$100,000, Irish Sovereign may not have fulfilled her potential on the racetrack, but she's more than made up for that in her second career.

There may not be a broodmare anywhere in America having a better year than Irish Sovereign, who calls Overbrook Farm in Colts Neck home. Her best known offspring, of course, is Irish War Cry, whose year already includes wins in the Wood Memorial and the Holy Bull and a second-place finish in the Belmont Stakes. While the spotlight was shining on Irish War Cry, his 5-year-old half-brother Irish Strait won the Grade III Red Bank Stakes at Monmouth on May 27. It was the first graded stakes win by the son of English Channel. A third "Irish Sovereign," Irish Defence won a Jersey-bred nw2x allowance race at Monmouth June 16 and won two races last year. She is by First Defence.

The mare has had seven foals to race and six of them have won.

"What these horses have done, it's brought a lot of excitement to the farm, our friends, our neighbors and New Jersey racing," said Overbrook farm manager Rory Huston. "New Jersey racing needs this type of thing to try to stimulate the breeding program because we are in a downward spiral. It has created a lot of excitement for everybody."

Huston was also the trainer of Irish Sovereign and still has a small string of horses for Isabelle de Tomaso, who owns the mare and all her offspring. As a three-year-old, Irish Sovereign, who is by Polish Numbers, broke her maiden at first asking, in a \$40,000 maiden claimer at Aqueduct. Her best efforts would come the following year when she won a pair of New Jersey-bred allowance races at Monmouth. Huston always thought she had talent, but realized her career was sure to be hampered by physical problems.

"I trained her along with my wife, Sharon, and she was a real project," Huston said. "If you look at her she has a very poor hind end on her. My vet at the time told me, 'If you get this mare to the races you deserve a medal.'"

Twelve of Irish Sovereign's 13 races were at six furlongs or shorter. She tried the one-mile distance one time, finishing eighth. Now her two graded stakes winners have won at nine furlongs on the dirt and at one mile on the grass. That doesn't necessarily surprise Huston.

"The thing about New Jersey bred, it's hard to get a Jersey bred race to go long," he said. "We always wanted to try her at a distance, but most the time it just never worked out. She was a nice big mare. She looked like she could go further."

Irish War Cry has never run in a New Jersey-bred race as it was clear from the start he had the talent to take on open stakes company for his trainer, Graham Motion. Though he was born at Overbrook he was there initially for less than two weeks as he accompanied his dam to Kentucky so she could be bred again. Still, Huston remembers him as a standout foal.

"He was nice big foal and he definitely stood out over the other ones," Huston said.

Irish War Cry returned to Overbrook that July before being sent to Brookdale Farm in Kentucky and later to Webb Carroll's training center in South Carolina to prepare for his debut.

Irish War Cry will now be pointed towards the Haskell, a race de Tomaso wants to win, perhaps, more than any other. She is the daughter of Amory L. Haskell, the founder of the modern day Monmouth Park and the person for whom the race is named after.

Meanwhile, de Tomaso and her sister, Hope Jones, are keeping Huston and the team at Overbrook

busy. Seventeen mares delivered foals at Overbrook this year, nine of them owned by either de Tomaso or Jones.

“They are great owners and have been in the business a long time and have put a lot of blood sweat and tears into the game,” Huston said. “It’s good to have owners like that. We really appreciate them.”

The trajectory of Irish Sovereign’s broodmare career shows a change in de Tomaso’s approach to breeding. The first three sires she was bred to were Oratory, Political Force and Even the Score. It’s only recently that de Tomaso has stepped up and started breeding to A list sires like Irish War Cry’s sire, Curlin. Huston said that’s due to a number of factors, one of them being her desire to produce a horse capable of winning the Haskell. He also said de Tomaso, who lives in Italy part of the year, has disbanded her breeding program over there because of the decline of that country’s racing industry. That has allowed her to focus more on her Jersey breds.

It will be a while before we see a new Irish Sovereign baby on the racetrack. After Irish War Cry, she was bred to Lookin At Lucky but was barren. She was bred back to the same sire and produced a filly named Lucky Irish, who is now a yearling. That horse, however is a Kentucky-bred. The next in line is a weanling filly by Graydar. A Jersey-bred, she was born at Overbrook.

Perhaps the Lookin at Lucky and Graydar offspring will also prove to be top horses, but it’s hard to imagine any of them outdoing Irish War Cry. He will go down as one of the top New Jersey breds ever.

“I am very proud to have to been involved with that horse,” Huston said. “Especially since it’s been so long since a Jersey bred has been to the Triple Crown races and here he was the favorite in the Belmont. It’s been a proud moment for us, for the farm, for everybody involved. It’s once in a lifetime that you get an animal like that. That is if you’re lucky.”