

# From Foal to Finish Line: Colebrook Farms Makes the Best Better

**A**ny Thoroughbred farm that has been breeding champion runners for over 20 years must be doing a lot of things right. Colebrook Farms in Uxbridge, Ontario, Canada epitomizes that claim. Owned by John Burness, this breeding and training operation has turned out homebred racehorses that boast a history of enviable performance at the track, proving their worth season after season.

But what breeder doesn't wonder about that elusive victory that slipped away at the last second, or that well-bred, muscular yearling that goes on to post a lackluster race record as a two-year-old? In spite of good planning and management, the sport of racing is full of such questions. Obviously, nothing is so close to perfection that it can't be made better. While time-honored breeding, feeding, and training techniques have enormous value, new discoveries about managing growing horses can be incorporated into traditional styles to lend an extra advantage. At Colebrook Farms, this stirring together of old and new has produced a plane of success that is a credit to all those who manage, train, and feed Colebrook's equine athletes.

## Nobody stops at one horse

Growing up on a farm, John Burness was introduced to horses at an early age, but in the way of young men everywhere, his interest soon gravitated toward horsepower. Automobiles, race cars, drag racing, a taxi service, and an automotive after-market business followed. His first move toward horse ownership was when he went into partnership on a racehorse owned by a business acquaintance. The friend also introduced him to claiming races as a way to acquire more horses. Expanding next into visiting sales in Kentucky and Florida with bloodstock agent Richard Hogan, Burness found himself buying better horses, finally ending up with a colt that became a consistent sprint winner on the Florida tracks.

It seemed a natural progression to buy a farm to house his expanding roster of young race stock, as well as his racing fillies that had achieved broodmare status. A few stallions joined the ranks, barns and paddocks filled up, and Burness began to look for a place where he could build a state-of-the-art breeding and training center. Two years ago he moved his horses to new facilities that offer every convenience.

*Frank Passero, Jr. holds Foxy Money, a stakes winner bred by Colebrook Farms. Passero is integral to the Colebrook Farms team. He oversees the training of young horses once they arrive at the racetrack.*

Photo courtesy of Stacie Roberts



## New farm is more than a hobby

"I spend part of each day and all weekend at the farm," says Burness. "I like the hands-on work with the young horses, and I spend some time on the tractor, too. My horses are my hobby." And what a hobby it is! Encompassing 300 acres, Colebrook Farms is now a complete operation where hundreds of Thoroughbred horses have been bred, foaled, weaned, and prepared for their racing careers.

A stallion barn houses eight breeding stallions, half with Mr. Prospector/Northern Dancer bloodlines and the others bringing the considerable merits of Sham, Our Native, Turn-to, and War Relic to the shed. Burness owns 60 broodmares of his own, with a number of outside mares coming in to be bred.

Gail Bosscher and her capable staff manage the stallions and broodmares, bringing years of knowledge to their jobs. "We don't put the mares under lights here," Burness says, "because I really don't want January foals. Most of our foals are born in March, April, and May. None of our young horses go to the sales as weanlings or yearlings—we train them all here—so we don't have to worry about pushing the babies to get really big and heavy." Without the pressure of producing the typical "sales look," the farm can afford to let mares cycle in a more natural manner, avoiding some problems of horse production in a northern climate with short winter days and a late spring.

Weanling and yearling manager John Clow and his experienced personnel are in charge of the young horses as soon as they leave their dams. It is the responsibility of these staff members to monitor the myriad details involved in keeping growth and development on track: hoof care, dental exams, vaccinations, dewormings, and nutritional management. They also build good manners in their young charges as they work on daily handling, grooming, and leading. When the colts and fillies are ready to begin the process of training, this early handling ensures they will get a good start.

## Heading for the starting gate

The new training center includes 62 stalls. There's a 300-foot by 80-foot indoor arena for winter work, a regulation four-horse starting gate, and a 7/8-mile training track where time trials and performance evaluations can take place. Training center manager Tom Bowden and his staff handle all the steps involved in turning gangly youngsters into track-ready two-year-olds, and Burness is familiar with every phase. "We're working with 30 young horses right now," he says. "We usually start the long yearlings in October, working with them for about a month and just



*Colebrook Farms' homebred Foxy Money claimed victory in the Bull Page Stakes at Woodbine Raceway in Rexdale, Ontario last October. Finishing in second place in the same race was another graduate of the Colebrook program, Trail Fox. This one-two finish speaks volumes for the farm's aptitude for breeding, raising, training, and racing winners.*

letting them get used to a lot of new things. Then they're turned back out for the winter and brought up again in early spring. We take our time about getting them legged up." As two-year-olds, the future racehorses learn to break from the gate and run individually and in small groups without ever leaving the familiar surroundings of the training center.

Burness has nothing but the highest praise for his training center staff. "Tom is really good with the young horses, and he and his helpers do a great job of working out the training program that best suits each one," he says. "He's the one who decides which horses need a little more time and which ones are ready to move on."

By July, the horses are usually ready for their first official starts at a commercial track under the watchful eye of Frank A. Passero, Jr. This veteran trainer, who has worked with Colebrook Farms' horses for more than 20 years, knows the way to get the best performance out of each horse that comes into his training stable. Like all the other professionals associated with Colebrook, Passero brings extensive experience and know-how to his job, and he has had excellent results in preparing young horses to reach the winner's circle.

## Nutrition management: more than meets the eye

With blue-blooded stallions, proven foundation broodmares, a complete training facility, and top-notch managers and trainers, any Thoroughbred farm owner should be satisfied. After all, what else could be necessary to produce champion racehorses?

Four years ago, Burness began consulting with Vern Avery of Brooks Performance Horse Feeds, a Kentucky Equine Research Team Member based in Port Perry,

Ontario. Although he was not dissatisfied with his feed program, Burness had heard that Brooks offered consultation on nutrition management, specifically as it related to growth planes in young horses. Avery and Dr. Larry Lawrence, KER's senior equine nutritionist, visited Colebrook, looked at the young horses there and at the racetrack, and talked to farm personnel about current management practices.

"I was favorably impressed with the whole operation," Lawrence said. "At the same time, I knew there were some aspects that we could improve by updating a few things. Research has taught us a lot in the last few years about the effect of nutrition on young growing horses, and also about bone development when horses go to the track. There's a great deal that wasn't known even five or ten years ago. This information can make a huge difference in the way horses develop and perform. You can avoid some problems altogether, and catch other signs early enough to change the program and ward off trouble."

Avery and Lawrence worked out a plan and presented it to Burness. They advised putting all the horses on Brooks Performance Horse Feeds, a range of scientifically formulated products designed specifically to meet the nutritional demands for the age, developmental stage, and type of work (reproduction, growth, racing) that each horse was performing. They offered suggestions related to portion amounts and meal frequency, as many horses derive the best nourishment from several small grain servings spaced throughout the day. Avery also pondered the question of how to provide maximum cold-climate turnout for foals and weanlings, a critical factor in the healthy skeletal development of young horses (facilities at the new farm are designed to allow foals plenty of room to exercise, even when the weather is severe). Finally, a program was implemented to weigh and measure foals on a frequent basis. Figures were then entered into Gro-Trac, a KER program that analyzes the plane of growth for each foal and compares a colt or filly to its peers on the farm, as well as to thousands of other foals across the region. Studies have shown that a smooth growth curve is vitally important in preventing developmental orthopedic disease, a crippling condition that sidelines many young horses before they ever get to the track. Careful monitoring of changes in height and weight can alert managers at the earliest sign of a dangerous growth spurt or slump, allowing minor changes to nutritional management before a problem might be seen by the most expert visual examination.

### **Getting on the right track**

Burness commented, "When we began the Brooks Feeds program, I put all my broodmares on the new feed—that way I knew the babies would get the best start. They stay on the program as yearlings at the farm, and as two-year-

olds when they go into training at the track. By carrying the same program through, I think they do better than if their feed is switched from one type to another. We've been with Brooks for four years now, and I'm pleased with the results. Of course the credit should go not just to the feed, but also to our work at the training center and at the track. Oh, and we're blessed with excellent pasture, too!"


Jon and Margaret Taylor of Brooks dealer H.H. Goode & Son deliver feed to the farm, and horses at the track are supplied by Bob Peadling at Woodbine Raceway. Said Avery, "These dealers make an exemplary effort to make sure products are available when and where they're needed."

"Brooks isn't just in the feed business," Avery explained. "We're in the nutritional management business!" Over the past four years, Avery and Lawrence have spent many hours, both at the farm and at the track, going over records for each horse with managers and trainers.

"I still visit the track every week to look at the horses in training," Avery said. "It's not enough to set up a program and just leave it. You have to follow up, look at the results for the horses, and make adjustments, with support from KER when more input is needed. It takes a lot of training and support, but we've seen good results. The foals and weanlings show fewer skeletal problems, and the two-year-olds that go to the track are bigger and in better condition, so they train well. The work has paid off."

And just how well has it paid off? You would know the answer if you had been standing with John Burness on an October day last fall as Foxy Money swept across the finish line to win the 2005 Bull Page Stakes at Woodbine Raceway in Rexdale, Ontario. Right on Foxy Money's heels to claim second place was Trail Fox, and running in fifth place in the same race was Believer's War. All three were sired by Colebrook stallions and are out of Colebrook mares; all are Colebrook-raised, Passero-trained two-year-olds.

Top stallion Foxtrail stands in first place on the list of leading juvenile sires in Canada, and a second Colebrook stallion, I Can't Believe, is ranked in the top 20 sires by earnings per start for two-year-old get.

Recalling these and other satisfactions, Burness is quick to praise the numerous individuals who have helped bring the operation to its present status. His appreciation is evident as he says, "An operation of this size requires an overwhelming effort by many dedicated workers. Credit should go to everyone who has played a part, large or small, in the farm's success. Winning is the result of lots of people doing their jobs very well over the years." With their collective contributions in mind, he concludes, "I feel we're on the right track!" 



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