

TONY MORRIS FAMILY MATTERS

PEDIGREE FOCUS

VIRGINIA WATERS

It is often said that there are no magic formulae leading to success in Thoroughbred breeding. But that has never deterred horsemen from looking for one, and occasionally convincing themselves that they have found one, virtually since the dawn of the breed.

“Put your **Herod** mares to **Eclipse**” was the advice bandied about in the 1770s, and a decade later it became the fashion to send daughters of Eclipse to **Highflyer**. Both schemes resulted in superior racehorses. Sometimes.

In what was surely the first handbook for breeders, *The Genealogy of the English Racehorse*, published in 1810, Thomas Hornby Morland divided the Thoroughbred population into what he called three “classes” – the descendants (in the male line) of **Herod**, **Matchem** and Eclipse. And his researches, over a long period, encouraged him to make two key observations, the first being that “*stallions and mares of the same class should not be permitted to copulate,*” and the second that “*the descendants of Matchem and Eclipse cross better with the Herod blood than with each other.*”

It would represent a major research job now, even with today’s technology, to determine whether Morland’s views were statistically sound. It is quite possible that his recommendations merely reflected what had become standard practice among breeders. If breeders habitually followed such supposed “nicks,” as seems likely, yes, there would have been good results. And he wouldn’t be the last pundit to ignore the bad results bred on the same pattern. Similarly, if it was rare for stallions and mares “*of the same class*” to be mated, as also seems likely, there would be no reason to recommend the practice.

Still, Morland did not just preach; he also practised. In 1811 he sent his mare **Mrs Barnet** (of the Eclipse class) to **Haphazard** (of the Herod class), and the outcome was **Filho da Puta**, winner of the 1815 St Leger. If he was not exactly setting a trend, he at least provided some evidence to back up his theory.

The notion of the “nick” is just about as old as the hills, and it is renewed on a regular basis, as breeders seize on something that might be construed as evidence. **Bend Or** on **Macaroni** mares was a favourite one in the 1880s, **Phalaris** on **Chaucer** mares nearly half a century later. In the early 1970s, long after both horses were dead, came a fad for linking **Nasrullah** and **Princequillo** in pedigrees.

Are any of these supposed affinities really credible? The trouble is, we are generally struck by the positive

results and tend not to notice the negatives. And when we separate these pairs, and consider what they achieved without the “help” of the other, we rarely find a clear-cut argument for a nick.

It’s true that several of the best runners by Phalaris were out of Chaucer mares, like **Pharos**, **Colorado** and **Fairway**, and I have even seen it asserted that, but for one exception, we would never have heard of Chaucer as a broodmare sire if it were not for Phalaris. That’s all well and fine, but the exception was **Hyperion** (by **Gainsborough**), a far better racehorse than any Phalaris ever sired.

As it happens, **Virginia Waters**, impressive winner of Sunday’s 1,000 Guineas, descends in the male line from **Sickle**, a son of Phalaris out of the very Chaucer mare (**Selene**) who produced Hyperion. And in the bottom quarter of her pedigree sits **Mill Reef**, by a son of Nasrullah (**Never Bend**) out of **Milan Mill**, a daughter of Princequillo.

But if we want to cite nicks in the case of Virginia Waters, it is scarcely necessary to delve so deeply into her background. Her dam **Legend Maker** was a Group 3 winner in France and is one of 11 European Pattern winners delivered by daughters of **Shirley Heights** as a result of matings with **Sadler’s Wells**. We can go further, and note that eight daughters of **Darshaan**, the best son of Shirley Heights, have also produced Pattern winners by Sadler’s Wells, seven of them at Group 1 level, including four successful in Classics.

It is tempting to believe that some kind of affinity exists, and some yield to the temptation so far as to suggest that it is all about their closest common ancestor – in fact, ancestress – **Lalun**, who features in the third generation of both Sadler’s Wells and Shirley Heights. There is not a shred of evidence to indicate that she was the source of critical genes in the make-up of those two descendants, but when they appear together she appears twice, so a fanciful idea is interpreted as fact.

But that nick is rather old hat, when we consider **Kingmambo**’s great Sunday treble at Newmarket. All three of his winners were out of mares from the **Northern Dancer** line, and that makes a total of 13 among those to have scored in Pattern or Graded company, between Europe, America and Japan. We will try not to notice that 16 others have come from different lines.

Anyway, isn’t the real nick between Kingmambo and Sadler’s Wells? First **El Condor Pasa**, then **Divine Proportions**, now Virginia Waters, all produced on the same cross.

Better bring on the failures before we start believing it.