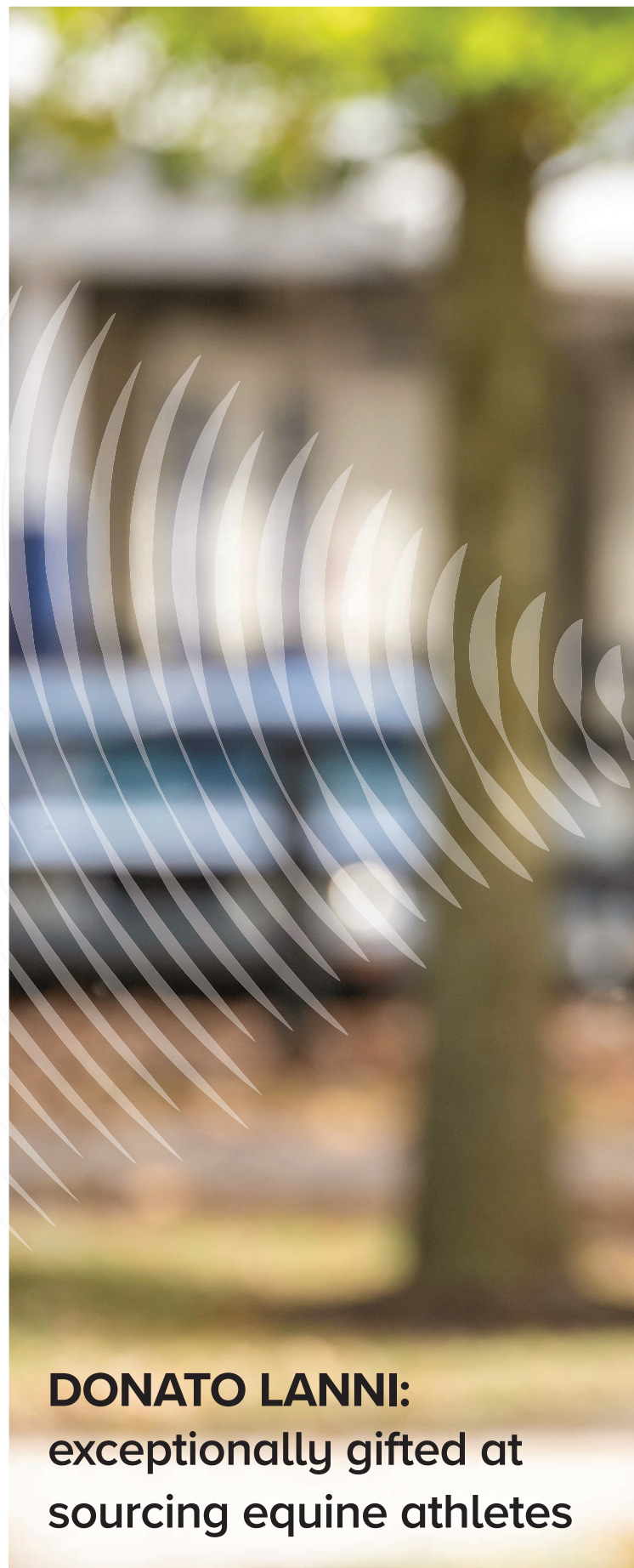



# RARE FOR TALENT

*By* **LENNY SHULMAN**  
*Photos by* **ANNE M. EBERHARDT**



**DONATO LANNI:**  
exceptionally gifted at  
sourcing equine athletes





Freshly graduated from university, Canadian-born Donato Lanni packed up his car and headed to Kentucky in search of work with horses. Today the 56-year-old is one of the most revered bloodstock agents in North America



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## **BLOODSTOCK AGENTS AREN'T**

often called upon to accept an Eclipse Award, so when Donato Lanni was beckoned to the podium in January to receive the trophy for champion Moira, he was unsure what to say. Lanni, though, handled the assignment with his customary humility and generosity, and shared his always-present passion for the horse.

Lanni's high profile in the Thoroughbred world comes not only through accomplishment, but also the manner in which he achieves it. In the past few years alone, he collaborated on the decisions to purchase stars-to-be Authentic, National Treasure, Muth, Barnes, Tenma, War Like Goddess, and Citizen Bull. And that is just a short list.

They were preceded by Arrogate, Executiveprivilege, Starrer, Hollywood Story, Marketing Mix, Lookin At Lucky, Secret Circle, Eden's Moon, Contested, Drill, Banned...you get the idea. But in addition to his obvious skill in selecting horses, his clients just as readily point to Lanni's honesty and loyalty when describing why they are comfortable spending potentially large sums of money on his say-so.



Lanni (center) with Jack Wolf (left) of Starlight Racing and Tom Ryan of SF Racing, co-owners of Citizen Bull





One of the latest examples of Lanni's artistry in selecting horses at auction is last year's champion 2-year-old male and winner of the Breeders' Cup Juvenile, Citizen Bull

Maira, though, represents something entirely different for the 56-year-old native of Montreal. Wanting to engage a coterie of childhood friends—many from the Canadian Standardbred world—in Thoroughbred ownership, Lanni hatched a plan to buy some Canadian-bred fillies to race on the synthetic and grass courses at Woodbine near Toronto. The buddies formed X-Men Racing with the aim of having fun and enjoying their shared experience with these horses. They got more than they bargained for. From their first batch of yearling purchases, they wound up with Maira, the winner of the 2024 Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf (G1T)

who was crowned the best grass female on the continent.

Surprising, yes, for a \$150,000 Canadian-bred yearling. Given Lanni's involvement, however, not shocking. Since his arrival in Kentucky nearly 30 years ago, Lanni has proved himself to be among the savviest judges of horseflesh in North America. His track record speaks for itself, and it must, because the soft-spoken Lanni is habitually hesitant to take credit. It is evident, however, that his success is a product of a strong work ethic that has seen him rise up from the ground floor by paying attention and putting in the requisite hours.

At age 10, Lanni began working at a

Standardbred stable, answering a call he felt from horses. His father owned trotters at Blue Bonnets, and the youngster found employment with trainer Andre Lachance. There, he learned about legs, feet, and general horsemanship.

Hailing from a traditional Italian family that believed in hard work, Lanni tried to figure out a way to combine his love of horses with making a living at it. The night he graduated university with a business degree, he announced to his parents he was leaving the following morning for Kentucky.

"They thought I was crazy, and looking back at it now, they were right," said Lanni, who parked his Volkswagen Golf and tent-camped at the Kentucky Horse Park while searching for a job. He found his first one at Castleton Farms, a Standardbred operation managed by John Cashman. Cashman advised Lanni to go see John T.L. Jones Jr. at Walmac International to enter the Thoroughbred world. Jones didn't have an opening, but Lanni refused to leave, so Jones gave him a pad, pencil, and phone and told him to try to sell stallion seasons.

"I pinched myself that I was working there," Lanni recalled. "I got there before the sun came up and stayed till night. I didn't see daylight for a long time."

When Jones stepped down, Lanni landed at John Sikura's Hill 'n' Dale Farms, where he was involved in all manner of bloodstock work. Through years of looking at weanlings and yearlings with Jones, Sikura, and others, he sharpened his eye for identifying athletes. While still at Walmac, he cold-called George Krikorian after the California-based owner's Box Office Girl breezed to victory in her first start.

"Donato came out to Del Mar, we spoke, and I told him if he finds a nice horse, to give me a call. I was new in the game and





**Moir**, last year's champion turf female and winner of the Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf, represents a different kind of experience for Lanni who bought and co-owned the daughter of Ghostzapper



**Lanni embraces Moira's rider, Flavien Prat, after the mare's final start for Lanni and the partnership he put together of X-Men Racing, Madaket Stables, and SF Racing**

didn't know anything, so I let him buy me a horse," Krikorian said, laughing.

A Dynaformer filly in the 1999 Fasig-Tipton Kentucky Fall Yearling Sale two months after their meeting prompted Lanni to call Krikorian. "Donato went on and on about this filly who was about to enter the ring, and I finally said, 'How much is she going to bring?' The way he was carrying on, it seemed like she'd be expensive," Krikorian recalled. "Donato said she wasn't going to be more than \$30,000. I said, '\$30,000? Just buy the f#\$%\* horse.'"

"I was stunned," said Lanni. "That

was the first time somebody believed in me enough to let me buy a horse. So, I bought her for \$35,000."

That was Starrer, who became a multiple grade 1 winner and millionaire for Krikorian, and also the second dam of his homebred champion Just F Y I. Lanni went on to select Hollywood Story, another multiple grade 1 winner and millionaire for Krikorian.

"When I accepted the Eclipse Award for Just F Y I, I said that Donato had gone full circle, beginning with Starrer and ending up with Just F Y I," Krikorian said. "He is on top of the world. How

many horses has he picked out over the last 10 years that have become major stakes winners? Nobody has a better eye for a horse."

Just as a cherry on top, Lanni selected an immature filly out of a 2-year-old sale in 2019 for Krikorian named War Like Goddess. She became a three-time grade 1 winner and earner of \$3 million for the owner, who wound up selling her as a broodmare prospect for \$1.8 million.

**B**ut Lanni is most noted for his collaborations with trainer Bob Baffert. The pair became acquainted during Lanni's time at Hill 'n' Dale, as several graduates of Baffert's program ended up standing at stud, or being boarded there. The bloodstock agent over time developed an understanding of what Baffert looks for in an auction horse.

Secret Circle, Executiveprivilege, Lookin At Lucky, Arrogate, National Treasure, Authentic, Muth, Barnes, Citizen Bull, and Tenma are all products of that collaboration.

"All these horses, it's a team effort," said Lanni. "Bob and I work the sales hard. We do a lot of it together. Bob's bull's-eye is so small—he may land on five yearlings out of 1,000. He knows what will work in his program. To be clear, there is no magic without Bob and his sense of horses."

Several of Baffert's top dirt colts in recent years are owned by the so-called "Avengers," which is a partnership among SF Racing, Madaket Stables, and Starlight Racing. The goal of this group every year is to come up with colts that can go on to become stallion prospects. That's not an easy task, but thus far it has worked out most seasons. Lanni is quick to credit SF manager Tom Ryan and bloodstock agent John Moynihan for their involvement in selecting these colts as well.

"It's an all-or-nothing deal, trying to make stallions," Lanni said. "But it is fun working together with some of the best minds in the horse business."

Said Ryan, who oversees the

TOP: EDWARD WHITAKER/RACING POST



Working for John Sikura of Hill 'n' Dale Farms was one of Lanni's first jobs in the industry

global dealings of SF Bloodstock and serves as racing manager of SF Racing, “Donato is unique in that he’s almost part-horse. He has such a strong sense of the animal. He can watch a race and know where the horse wants to be and how it wants to be ridden. Plus, he’s a brilliant judge of horseflesh. He can see the speed

they will take a chance buying a horse that an owner won’t accept because it doesn’t vet, and that horse will wind up with them. But Lanni decided to go deeper than that.

Over time he’d had discussions with Canadian friends who wanted to see what owning Thoroughbreds was all about.

***“The grand idea with X-Men was to someday win the Oaks, and the dream was the Queen’s Plate. But that’s all it was. And it turned out that way. The Plate was the ultimate. My family was all there, and the X-Men. It was the way (Moira) did it. The roar of the crowd when she turned for home was electric. To get on that ride—from just taking baby steps to test the waters to what we experienced as a group. There are just no words to express it.”***

—DONATO LANNI

in a horse while it’s standing still. Other people just don’t have that. And then you add in his honesty and loyalty, and you have a very rare commodity.”

His talents as a bloodstock agent well-established, Lanni in the past five years has taken up the challenge of ownership. An agent usually ends up with a couple of horses here and there. Sometimes

So, in 2019, Lanni hatched a plan to put Robert LeBlanc, Clay Horner, Alexandra Verret, Daniel Plouffe, Gabriel Dimiele, Nick Pelligreen, David Anderson, and John Fielding (Anderson and Fielding were already active in the Thoroughbred world) together and buy a group of Canadian-breds to run at Woodbine. That Toronto-area track boasts quality

training and racing surfaces, and Lanni sought to take advantage of Woodbine’s turf and synthetic courses.

Thus was born X-Men Racing. “I have a lot of family and friends in Canada, and I wanted to spend more time there,” Lanni noted. “This is a different avenue, a different side of the business separate from my usual purchases as an agent. The plan was to run strictly in Canada, so I didn’t compete against other clients.”

Each of the partners, including Lanni, owns a small piece of the horses, which are bought mostly at Canadian sales. Lanni asked if Ryan would bring SF Racing in as a partner to provide seed money for the initiative, and asked the same of Sol Kumin and his Madaket Stables. Both entities co-own the stock with X-Men Racing.

“It was a 30-second phone call,” Kumin said. “I told Donato I was in for whatever he needed. The thing is, I trust him. He’s honest, and he works his butt off. If he calls me and says he’s got a horse he likes, I don’t think I’ve ever said ‘no’ to him.”

**L**anni selected Woodbine-based Kevin Attard to train the stock. The two had known each other for 20 years, and Lanni was impressed with Attard’s ability to treat each horse as an individual, which would become key over the next few years.

Lanni purchased 10 yearling fillies in 2020 to get X-Men off and running. Good fortune smiled upon the group right off jump street.

In the COVID-19 year of 2020, very few Canadians ventured across the border to attend yearling sales in the United States. As a result, Lanni was able to land a Ghostzapper filly, out of an Unbridled’s Song mare, for \$150,000. Bred in Ontario by Adena Springs, the filly would have likely sold for double that amount with more Canadian participation and would have gone to another buyer. As it was, the price was by far the most that Lanni paid for a horse in the first year of the X-Men partnership.

“She looked intelligent; like she had a





Lanni's initial buy for movie theater mogul George Krikorian was Starrer. The \$35,000 purchase became a grade 1 winner and millionaire and is the second dam of Krikorian's homebred champion Just F Y I

lot of class. She looked like a racehorse. There was something about her," said Lanni.

That filly was named Moira, after a character in the hit Canadian television show "Schitt's Creek."

"I'd say 80% of our intention was to have fun," said X-Men's Clay Horner, an attorney who has owned several Canadian Standardbred champions. "Winning huge races was not our main objective. Donato had a dream of winning the Queen's Plate, but I don't think any of us thought Moira would be the one to get us there."

Moira, in fact, was the last of that inaugural group of purchases to make it to the races. While Lanni was shopping at the 2021 Fasig-Tipton Kentucky Yearling Sale, Attard called him to ask if he could enter Moira first-out in the two-turn Princess Elizabeth Stakes, an ambitious placing by any account.

"I didn't understand why Kevin didn't just run her in a maiden race; make it easy on her," Lanni recalled. "I told him not to embarrass us, and he told me not

to worry. I didn't know what to expect."

Moira charged from the back of the field to win the Princess Elizabeth by 4¼ lengths. Things were about to get interesting.

In her first start at 3, she won the Fury Stakes, and Attard entered her in the Woodbine Oaks, Canada's equivalent of the Kentucky Oaks (G1). Moira clearly had talent, but mentally she was very much a work in progress. Before the Oaks, she threw a temper tantrum and reared up in the paddock. She lost one shoe, and a second one sprang half off. While the blacksmith attempted to get that one removed, she kicked him and put him out of commission, leaving the outrider to finish the job. She then went out on the racetrack and prevailed by 10¼ lengths.

"Participating in those big races is always stressful, but she took it to another gear," said Attard. "From the get-go, she was a talented individual. And as she went on, she continued to blossom and develop."

In Moira's next start, she took on the

boys in the Queen's Plate—Canada's most prestigious race—and won it by seven.

"The grand idea with X-Men was to someday win the Oaks, and the dream was the Queen's Plate," said Lanni. "But that's all it was. And it turned out that way. The Plate was the ultimate. My family was all there, and the X-Men. It was the way she did it. The roar of the crowd when she turned for home was electric. To get on that ride—from just taking baby steps to test the waters to what we experienced as a group. There are just no words to express it."

Although it was not their original intention, Lanni and Attard decided to send Moira to the U.S. at the end of her sophomore season to contest the 2022 Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf at Keeneland, where she finished a respectable fifth.

"We wanted to see how she'd respond, running against the best competition," said Lanni. "The more we threw at her, the more she wanted. It was a crazy ride. It was never even in the back of my mind that we would go and run in the States. But she took us there."

Although Moira won just once in five graded stakes starts at Woodbine as a 4-year-old, her connections sent her back to the Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf at Santa Anita in 2023. There, she checked in third behind European stars Inspirial and Warm Heart, beaten just 1¼ lengths.

"She ran maybe her best race, behind two of the best fillies in the world, and some of the guys thought we should cash out, so we ran her through the November sale at Fasig-Tipton," Lanni said. "I really didn't want to sell her, because she was just developing mentally to the point where I thought there might be more there. She was very tough when she was younger. If mares can stay sound, they often get better as they get older, so I decided to buy her back at \$3 million rather than sell her. Ultimately, everybody stayed in on her."

"I went home that night, and after the

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emotions died down, I said to my wife, 'What did I just do?' I was very stressed from then on with her, hoping she could get there again, but you don't know what's going to happen."

Said Horner, "When Donato bought her back, he plotted out the four races for Moira to run in to get back to the Breeders' Cup. And he executed that strategy as well as I've ever seen in my careers in law or horses."

Moira did win the Beverly D. Stakes (G2T) at 5, but finished second in both the Diana and E. P. Taylor stakes (both G1T) before shipping to Del Mar and her third crack at the Breeders' Cup Filly and Mare Turf. Turns out the third time really is the charm. Moira outkicked Cinderella's Dream to win, sealing a championship and memories that will never diminish in the minds of her owners. After earning just shy of \$3 million in her racing career, Moira also nailed down the Eclipse Award for champion turf female.

If one could package the joyous emotion of the X-Men that lit up that Del Mar winner's circle, horse racing would have a most effective marketing tool. Perhaps Lanni's involvement upgraded their journey with Moira from impossible to improbable, but for the X-Men to own this good of a racehorse over four seasons is undoubtedly an answer to dreams.

"I still feel very proud of it all," Attard said four months after the Breeders' Cup. "What Moira accomplished was huge for all of us. I'm happy she fell into my lap because it started what is a great journey with X-Men. Being associated with someone with Donato's expertise and skill makes my job that much easier. More than that, he is a great human being."

Two days after her Breeders' Cup triumph, Moira was sold at the 2024 Fasig-Tipton Kentucky November Sale. The owners asked Korina McLean, who had been Moira's exercise rider for her entire race career, to fly back to Kentucky with them and accompany the mare into the ring.



Lanni tabbed one of Canada's most respected trainers, Kevin Attard (center), to condition Moira and the other runners that comprise X-Men Racing, Madaket Stables, and SF Racing



Lanni with Gainesway's general manager, Brian Graves, at the 2024 Keeneland September Yearling Sale

"It was very emotional because Moira brought so much joy into everybody's life, and that is very powerful," Lanni stated.

Yuesheng Zhang's Yulong Investments made the winning bid of \$4.3 million for Moira, and the plan is to campaign her in Australia this season. Meanwhile, X-Men Racing continues, and is currently in its sixth year of buying prospective racehorses. In 2022, out

of the second batch of purchases, Last Call won the grade 1 Natalma Stakes on the Woodbine lawn for X-Men.

"This is a great story of something wonderful happening, and friends having such a good time together," said Horner. "We saw each other through the experience of having such a good horse, and that became a collective experience that was so much more than any of us expected." **BH**