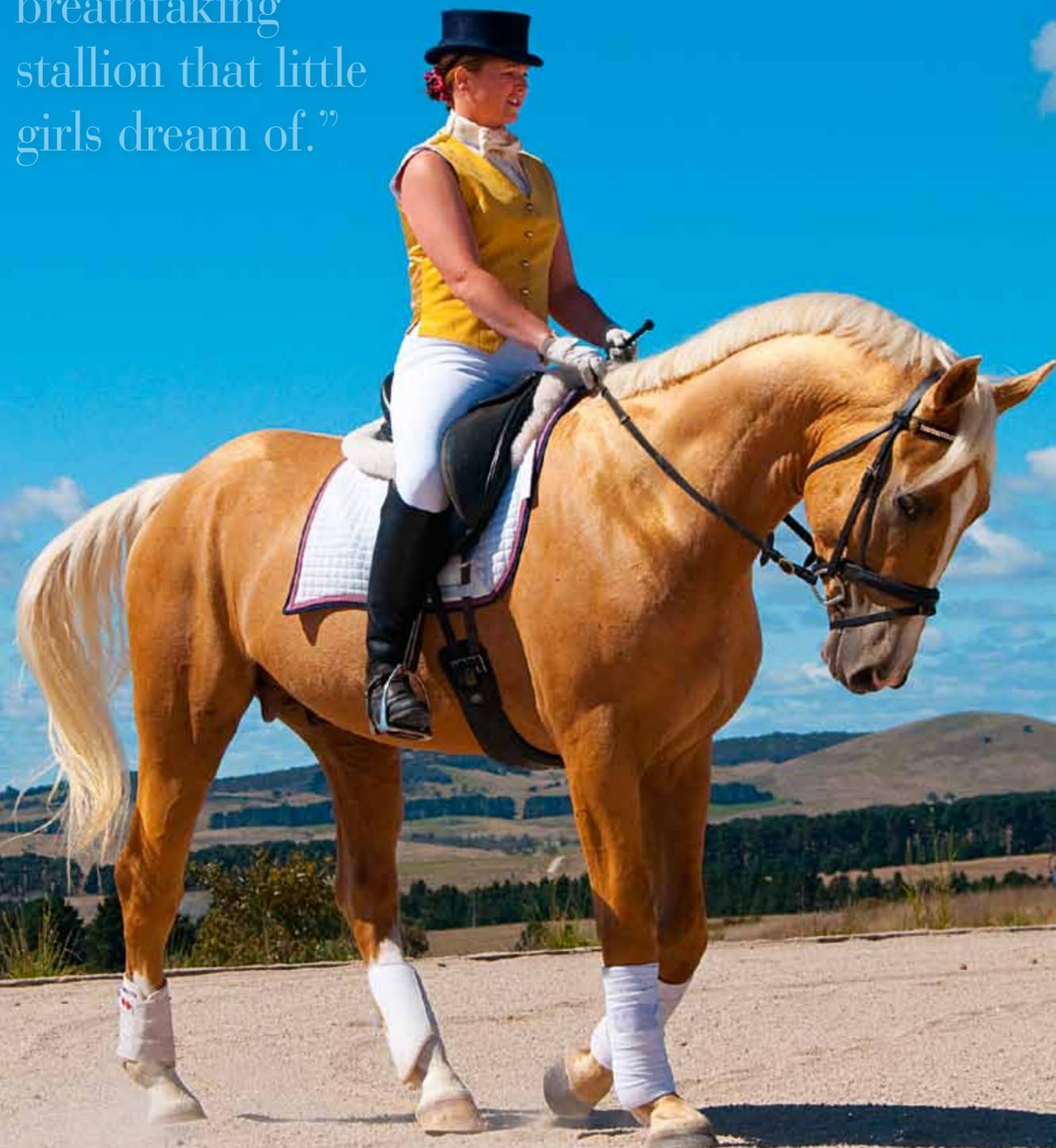


“He is just the horse the Karjas need ... a talented, breathtaking stallion that little girls dream of.”



The Karja family's star Tori colt 'Omadeus' is put through his paces under local rider Kylie Woodyatt.

Rare breed

FOUR YEARS AGO THE KARJA FAMILY IMPORTED THE FIRST NATIVE ESTONIAN TORI HORSE INTO AUSTRALIA – THEY ARE NOW THE PROUD OWNERS OF A UNIQUE STUD.

STORY + PHOTOS JESSICA OWERS

THE MOUNTAINS roll away at the end of the paddock, and a colt the colour of gunmetal grazes towards them. He is a curious horse, a two-year-old stallion with space between his shoulders and the hindquarters of a sport horse. His tail is high set, his legs thick and robust. He is a curious cocktail of something, perhaps a medley of local farm horse and thoroughbred. Or, he is of blood never seen in these parts before. Gazing at him from the paddock fence, Lorna Karja knows well that he is the latter.

The horse is called 'Carrero' and is purebred Tori. An endangered breed, the Tori is the native horse of Estonia and, until recently, it had never set foot in Australia. In fact, the breed had never before appeared in the Southern Hemisphere. A massive, imposing but genteel horse, it has grace that defies its size and surprising agility, and the Tori has climbed the equestrian ladders in northern Europe, from showjumping in Sweden to dressage in Finland. It was with this in mind, early in 2008, that Lorna and her husband Victor brought the first Tori horse to Australia.

The Karjas' property "Dundee" is perched over Cutmore Creek high in the Snowy Mountains, 53 kilometres north-east of Cooma in south-east New South Wales, nearly 1100 metres above sea level on terrain that dips and rises as far as the eye can see. The air is cool here, thinned by space and height and distance, and it suits these Baltic horses. "We'd gone to Estonia to find out about Vic's heritage," Lorna says, recounting her first visit there in 2004. "It was just an accident that we found these horses. Vic was looking for information about his mother and I was getting a bit sick of going to cemeteries, so I was looking through the travel guide and I saw that on our way back to Pärnu one day, which was the little seaside town we were staying at, we could go a back way and visit the Tori Stud. We must have been the first Australians to visit the stud because they were really excited to have us."

Tori Stud is the official home of the Tori breed, nestled in the countryside 26km outside of Pärnu in western Estonia. The day that Lorna and Vic visited, they were shuffled around to meet the mares and stallions, and were immediately impressed by the kindness and docility of the breed. One horse in particular caught their eye. "There was one mare I really liked that day but we didn't have the money to buy her at the time," Lorna says. "When we got home, Vic said we'd try and import a frozen embryo, but that was off the cards when we discovered that Australia won't import frozen embryo from Estonia." Vic and Lorna had stumbled upon a very inconvenient piece of Australian legislation.

Estonia, though a member state of the European Union (EU)

since 2004, is excluded from a list of 15 EU nations from which Australia will accept frozen equine genetic material. Officially, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) states that veterinary services in countries that were welcomed into the EU after 1995 have not been assessed for the purpose of importing such materials. When Vic pressed the government for a change in the law, years of frustrating correspondence followed.

He was advised that a risk assessment of Estonian systems would take years to begin, and that they were undertaken on a priority basis. He was also told that he needed support for his cause. It left the Karjas with few options. If they wanted a Tori horse of their own anytime soon, they would have to import a live animal from Estonia.

Lorna and Vic returned to the Tori Stud to buy the mare they had seen on their first visit. Named 'Leary', she was just what the couple wanted. She was sweet and typical of the breed, but she was not for sale, so the Karjas settled on a striking liver-chestnut mare called 'Amadora'. Late in 2007, Amadora set off on her landmark journey to Australia. "Her handlers at Gatwick Airport were just staggered by her," Lorna says. "They'd never seen a horse like her." After four months in transit, delayed time and again by the outbreak of equine influenza, Amadora arrived at Dundee.

"When we first thought about bringing these horses here, we were thinking about pleasure, not business," Lorna says. "Vic loved the idea of having a piece of his heritage living and breathing around him." But with their son Karl and Karl's long-time girlfriend Amy Kilpatrick, excited by Amadora and the pale colt she dropped not three weeks after her arrival, the Karjas began to think big. They approached the Estonians once again with an offer for Leary, and this time they were successful. Tori Stud, excited by the Karjas' breeding operations, felt Leary was a perfect representative of their breed for Australia, and she arrived in Australia, in foal, six months after Amadora.

"We began to think about a business just before we got Leary, after Amadora produced a colt," Karl says. When Leary also dropped a colt, the youngster Carrero, and both foals proved to be imprints of their sires back in Estonia, the Karjas suddenly had a small stud. They now possessed two fertile mares and two stallion possibilities with the potency to breed true-to-type.

The importation of Amadora and Leary, and the associated costs of quarantine, insurance and foaling, set the Karjas back more than \$100,000. They had brought two horses across the world in testing times and now had four Toris on Dundee. But they were still short of options. They wanted to breed competition horses, animals that



LEFT: The late Victor Karja dreamed of breeding a Tori horse that would compete in the Olympics.
OPPOSITE: Tori mare 'Leary' with (l-r) Karl Karja and girlfriend Amy Kilpatrick, neighbour Bob Leech and stud owner Lorna Karja.

would infiltrate the Australian showjumping scene, but without frozen genetic material from Estonia, their gene pool was limited. They could not afford to import live animals every year, so each week Vic tapped away at his keyboard, arguing his plight with the DAFF and chipping away at the patience of Biosecurity Australia's scientists. Then, on August 17, 2010, as he arranged showjumping poles for Lorna in one of the paddocks, Vic suffered heart failure. He died on the grass as Lorna, a nurse, tried to resuscitate him.

The sting of Victor's passing has not left the Karjas. Lorna, an elegant, calm woman, cannot speak of her husband without breaking down. Everywhere on Dundee, Lorna, Karl and Amy see a Tori dream that was spurred by Vic's enthusiasm, by his love for Estonia and his bullish ambition to breed a Tori horse for the Olympics. "He wanted to go straight to the top," Amy says. "It was typical Vic. He didn't do anything in halves." His death

shattered them, knocked them sideways, and they have been getting onto their feet ever since.

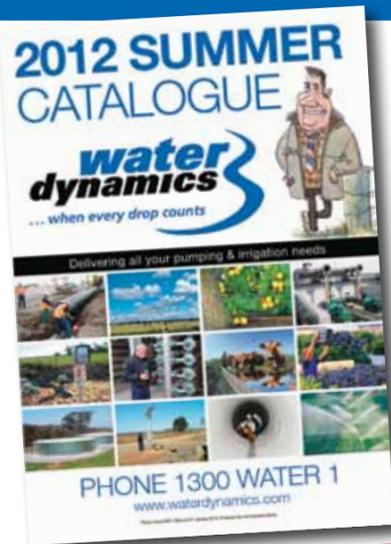
Karl's sensible business acumen has nudged the Tori enterprise forward again. When he is not working as an aviation engineer in Malaysia, he and Amy tap into online marketing tools and advertising that will grow the exposure of their horses. Amadora's colt Omadeus, now a stunning three-year-old palomino, is in training with local rider Kylie Woodyatt. In time, he will join the showjumping circuit with Canberra-based professional rider Grant Hughes. He is just the horse the Karjas need for their business, a talented, breathtaking stallion that little girls dream of. He will turn heads, hopefully towards Dundee. "I want Omadeus to go as far as he can go and from the feedback we've received, that might be far," Lorna says. Leary's colt Carrero, willowy and patient, waits his turn. Amy adds that the Tori horses are like nothing Australians have seen before. "They're a big, powerful horse, but not a big, ugly horse," she says. "For Australia, they are very exciting." She adds that Dundee Toris are not just horses; they are connecting countries and cultures.

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