

Turkish delight



📷 JESSICA OWERS

Strapping a famous racehorse has, at times, brought fame and future to humble horse-folk. Not so Umut Odemislioglu who, at the centre of the Winx whirlwind, is happiest in the background.

There was a point in 2016 when the fleet-footed, chocolate-coated, plain but dazzling Winx sailed into the Australian ego. Exactly when is unclear: after her second Cox Plate, or just before it. But it's a circle in which few thoroughbreds move. Winx is a conversation in taxis, a trend on social media. She is bigger than the sports pages now. She has assaulted expectations in a 22-race streak that has sat down even the nimblest turf wits. She is a folktale.

Like every racehorse around her, she moves one leg after the other to cover ground. She is not physically gifted. Winx does not own a cook's rear-end, and she does not break the measuring stick at 16 hands off the ground. But she is unordinary in her disposal of group-one fields. Her sectionals are bewildering, and the clocks don't lie. Is it lungs or heart, or rare talent? You'd sooner nail mist to the fence than explain it.

"She is a simple horse. Actually, you wouldn't know it was her if she wasn't famous," says Umut Odemislioglu, the mild, azure-eyed Turkish strapper who has tended to Winx since 2014.

"I can't say she is 100 percent perfect in her conformation, but she is athletic. She has a big heart and big lungs, and she wants to win."

Stoic, reflective, like a calm parent, Umut recalls how much Winx has changed.

"From yearling to now, every year she has changed," he says. "She was a little bit crazy when she was a baby. She would be very energetic and fresh, and she'd pay attention to every noise. That's why we put the earmuffs on. She's still similar, but more mature now. But she has to watch and analyse everything. She can look at things for a long time."

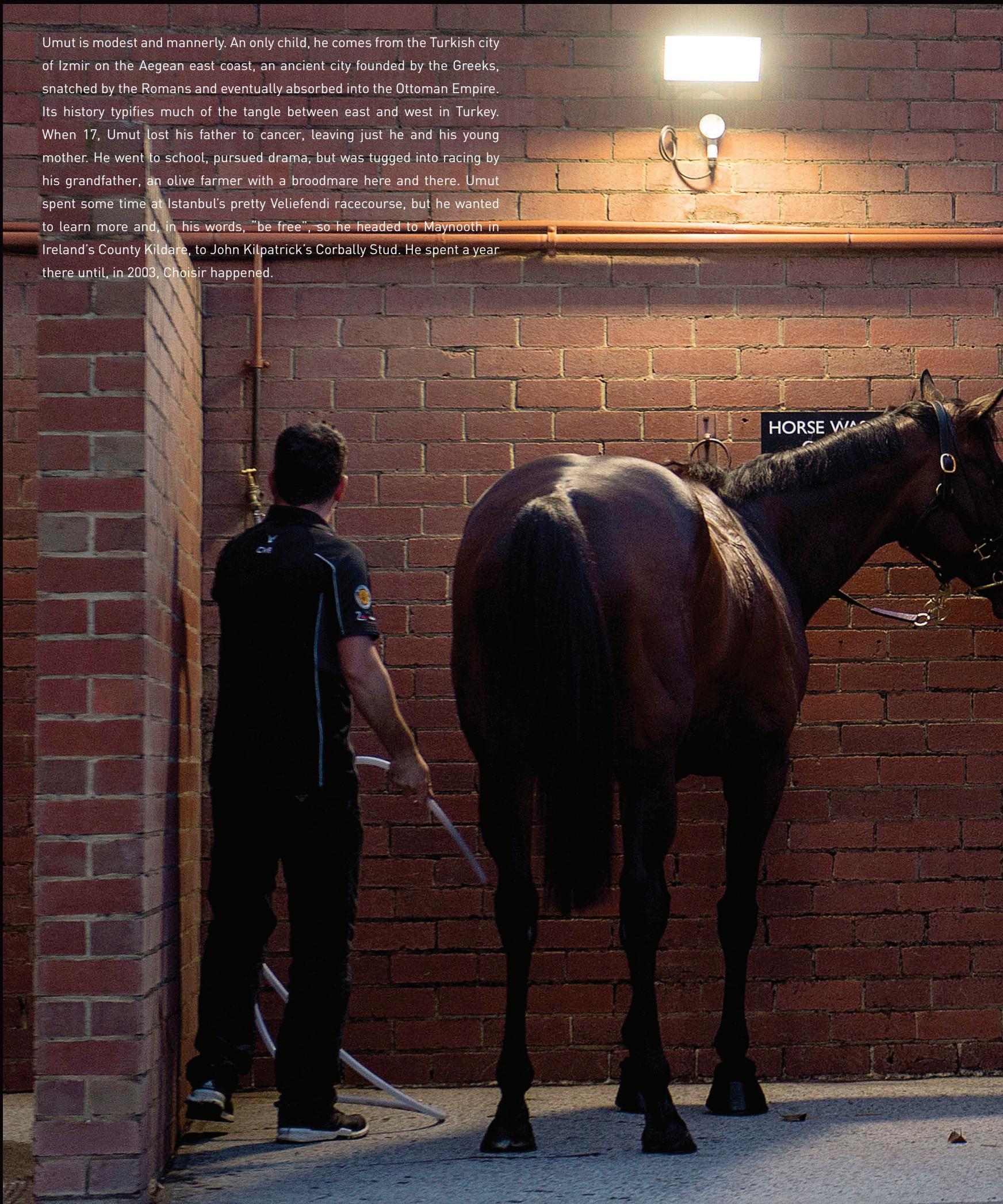
It might be the hallmark of a superior thoroughbred, because in 2009 Mick Kinane said similar of Sea The Stars. "When I walk this horse onto the Curragh he counts every sheep he passes, and I swear he could tell you if one was missing." Umut says, "Winx will always stop and look at the track. If she sees other horses, she wants to run. Any horse passing next to her, she is hard to hold. So we still use the earmuffs most of the time".

At 35 years old, Umut Odemislioglu's star has risen with his famous brown horse. There have been interviews on Turkish television, and a handful of press appearances. By Winx's shoulder, he has been photographed and published the world over, but unlike Chris Waller, or owners Debbie Keptis, Peter Tighe and Richard Treweeke, he is rarely thrust into the spotlight. "It's not my place there," he says. "I'm here in the background. That's my job."

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Umut is modest and mannerly. An only child, he comes from the Turkish city of Izmir on the Aegean east coast, an ancient city founded by the Greeks, snatched by the Romans and eventually absorbed into the Ottoman Empire. Its history typifies much of the tangle between east and west in Turkey. When 17, Umut lost his father to cancer, leaving just he and his young mother. He went to school, pursued drama, but was tugged into racing by his grandfather, an olive farmer with a broodmare here and there. Umut spent some time at Istanbul's pretty Veliefendi racecourse, but he wanted to learn more and, in his words, "be free", so he headed to Maynooth in Ireland's County Kildare, to John Kilpatrick's Corbally Stud. He spent a year there until, in 2003, Choisir happened.



"It was Choisir who made me think about Australia," Umut says.

"Before that I had known about the Melbourne Cup, but that was all I knew about Australia. Choisir at Royal Ascot, he made me want to come here."

He arrived in Sydney in 2006 and went to work for trainer Tim Martin at Rosehill, a man he describes as a good person and a very good horseman. "I saw Chris Waller at that time when he had 14 horses, and he was working very hard. He is still working hard. I actually knew that he would be top, but you couldn't imagine he would be number one like this today."

In 2011, Umut started working for Waller as foreman. He admits the trainer's young age made for more of a connection, and for the first time he was able to strap a few horses, something he had not been able to do with Martin. "I wasn't looking for a champion," he says. "I wanted only to strap a group-one winner once, to be able to tick that box."

He tells the tale of landing Winx.

"In this job, not everyone is into the racing. Some people just love the horses, but a few of us, we love the racing and new horses coming in, and we are always talking about which one could be better. So we ask the riders, and they often tell us different things, and then we ask for particular horses to strap."

When Winx arrived at Rosehill for the first time, "nothing special, small and immature", she was put into box 101, housed in one of the two barns overseen by Umut. He had 40 horses in his care – feeding, rugging, medicines – but he put his name down to strap two youngsters, a colt called Waltzing Willie, and a filly called Winx. "I really liked Street Cry as a stallion because of Zenyatta," he says. "I thought after Zenyatta that Street Cry was going to give one more champion. I thought he was a bit disappointing with the colts, and after Zenyatta he was a bit quiet. But because of him, I put my name down for these two horses. Waltzing Willie and Winx, both by Street Cry."



JOHN CAMILLERI & PETER O'BRIEN

Winx's breeding is almost unremarkable, forgettable even, except that she is now a turf immortal. Bred by John Camilleri under the banner of Fairway Thoroughbreds (hence the 'F' on her near shoulder), she is by the late Street Cry out of the plain but very interesting New Zealand mare Vegas Showgirl, whom John picked up at the Magic Millions Broodmare Sale in June 2008.

"She wasn't even on my list," John says, casting his thoughts back to that Gold Coast sale. "She didn't have that deep pedigree I would ideally like in a broodmare. But it is very hard to find mares that have her looks, outstanding quality, a gorgeous head and terrific action. So although her pedigree was very light and her sire hadn't set the world on fire, she was a reasonably performed race mare and had won at Listed level."

As Lot 1486 on account of Dormello Stud, Vegas Showgirl was the only mare by Al Akbar at that sale. She had raced 23 times in New Zealand under trainers Graeme Rogerson and Stephen Autridge, and a further 12 times when Rogerson relocated to Sydney, but she seemed adept on any footing, something she handed down to her famous daughter. John and his bloodstock advisor Peter O'Brien, an outstanding Irishman formerly of Coolmore and now at Segenhoe, thought she would be a nice pick-up at \$250,000.

WINX

6yo b m Street Cry-Vegas Showgirl (NZ) (Al Akbar AUS)

SOLD: Magic Millions 2013 Gold Coast Yearling Sale
\$230,000

RECORD: 36:26w-3-0

Winning strike-rate: 81%

PRIZEMONEY: \$15,547,925

RANK ON ALL-TIME AUSTRALIAN EARNERS: 1

RANK ON ALL-TIME WORLDWIDE EARNERS: 9

GROUP 1S: 15

GROUP 2S: 8

GROUP 3S: 1

WIN STREAK: 22

DAYS UNDEFEATED: 926

COX PLATES: 3 (the only mare to achieve this, and the only horse alongside Kingston Town to achieve it in 95 years of Cox Plate history)

GROUP 1 WINNERS DEFEATED: 49

NOTABLE VICTIMS: Hartnell, Humidor, Black Heart Bart, Criterion, Highland Reel, Vadamos, Gailo Chop

LAST DEFEAT: April 2015

WINS: 1100m – 2200m

Won on 8 different tracks in 3 Australian states

"We certainly got that wrong," John says. "She made nearly double this."

He describes Vegas Showgirl as a quiet, kind mare, ideal in every way. She spends much of her time with fellow Fairway mares Calvinia, dam of crack New Zealander Calveen, and Procrastinate, who got Foreplay, A Time For Julia and so on. When it comes to stallion selection, John says she tends to throw big foals, so he has concentrated on smaller stallions – Encosta de Lago, Street Cry, Fastnet Rock, Snitzel, Exceed And Excel. "This is the reason she was mated to Snitzel three years in succession," he says. "The Snitzels she has produced (El Divino, a colt and a filly) are also fairly big horses, so it is a significant issue in our deliberations."



VEGAS SHOWGIRL & EXCEED AND EXCEL FILLY

In the bigger picture of horse breeding, Vegas Showgirl is yet to join the shelf on which sits Hasili, Eight Carat, Urban Sea or Circles Of Gold. John doesn't know if she will again produce anything remotely as brilliant as Winx, but it's a measure of the man that he doesn't really care. "She has already produced a horse of a lifetime," he says. "Regardless of where she sits in the pecking order, I don't think I will ever have a mare like her, and the pride she has given me is beyond financial gain."



UMUT ODEMISLIOGLU, PATTY & PETER TIGHE, RICHARD TREWEEKE, DEBBIE & PAUL KEPITIS, DOROTHY NELSON



Twenty-two wins without defeat, a ransacking of Cox Plate history, the humans in the Winx story are overwhelmed. Waller's quivering emotions on television, Kepitis's bouncing, and Umut Odemislioglu quietly bottles his nerves.

"I am nervous, I am very nervous," he said before the third Cox Plate. "All eyes are on us. I try not to make mistakes or miss something, but I feel the pressure. We take it step by step and don't think too far ahead with horses, because you never know. But Winx, she puts us under pressure because she has done too much already."



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Peter Moody will tell you how hard it is to keep a racehorse in winning form for 20-plus races. Almost none achieve it. When a horse is this good, inevitably the world comes calling. "I'm 50/50 about going overseas," Umut says. "We don't have to go. If she's sound we can try for a fourth Cox Plate, but if she has to go overseas, she has to go to the best races. Royal Ascot, then maybe the Arc."

Umut lights up at mention of the Arc, perhaps because he is European. At 2400 metres, it is not ideal for Winx, but he explains this away. "Serena Williams can play tennis on any court," he says. "Superstars have one gear up on the others, maybe two, and Winx is a superstar. People criticise her and ask, who did she beat? But it's not about who she beats. Hartnell, Humidor. It's about her sectionals. She is fast, and if she is fast here she will be fast there too. If your horse cannot break 32 seconds (for the last 600 metres), it's hard to beat Winx. There are not many horses in the UK that are breaking 32 seconds at the moment."

John Camilleri agrees. "Based on her Timeform rating alone, she would certainly acquit herself very well."

Time offshore would have to be one of the final chapters in the phenomenal Winx fable. As a rising seven-year-old, she is edging closer to green fields, but Umut is pragmatic. "She will finish, we all know she will finish. But I hope she will finish at the top, not after losing one or two." If you ask him how the horse has changed his life, he will tell you she hasn't changed it much. "She proved to me that I was right to stay in this business, because many times I was thinking to run away from it," he says. "I was thinking of changing the country, of going back home, doing some writing. Now I feel special, and I feel lucky that I didn't walk away and give up. So I can't say she changed my life, but she affected my thinking in the right way."

Winx has encouraged everyone, human and equine, to pursue excellence on her behalf. Champions do that, blowing away the ordinary in their yomp through the record books. People will hold Winx up to the light long after she's done, crossing her name with others that came before her, and others that will come after, debating her place among the greats. But Teddy Grimthorpe of Juddmonte said it best of Frankel in 2012:

"If you haven't made your mind up about him now, I don't think you've been watching."

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