



Phil Hager of Taproot Bloodstock

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BLOODHORSE DAILY

One Year In, Taproot Bloodstock Going Strong

Full-service agency was established in 2018 by horseman Phil Hager

By Meredith Daugherty 

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Almost a year to the day since he launched Taproot Bloodstock, agent Phil Hager be found braving the summer heat on the Fasig-Tipton grounds, perusing yearlings and, he hopes, purchasing the next generation of graded stakes winners.

"We've have good results this year, and that's all you can hope for," said Hager, who embarked on a solo career as a bloodstock agent during The July Sale last year. A one-man operation, Hager prefers to work behind the scenes to source the kind of horses that can offer his clients and partnerships the best value proposition for their investment.

"With all the yearlings, private purchases, 2-year-olds, mares, and weanlings, I think I've helped buy about 30 or 40 horses this year," he said. "Some of those I've bought into myself, but I've been fortunate to do as well as I have. Every horse you buy won't be a good one. You hope they will be, and you do your homework, but that's part of growing as an agent.

"When I started, my mission statement was 'Quality, Value, Integrity.' Obviously, everyone wants good horses, and it's easy to pick out the best horse at any sale. I'm trying to find what makes a great racehorse and then find the kind of angles that allow us to buy that horse for less."

A third-generation horseman, Hager grew up working on his family's Idle Hour Farm in Paris, Ky. From 2011-18, he worked for Crestwood Farm in bloodstock services, stallions, and sales recruitment, a position that he credits with helping him form the necessary foundation to build a successful bloodstock agency.

"I had some clients I built up while at Crestwood, so they've been supportive as far as buying. There are a lot of agents out there, and it's definitely competitive and can be cutthroat. I've been fortunate to start this process while I was at Crestwood, so I had a bit of a safety net while I was building this.

"I feel like I had a strong enough base, and I did get a lot of new clients when I decided to go out on my own, but a lot of that was because of word of mouth from people I respect and/or worked for. I think also having realistic expectations and knowing you aren't going to be buying 20 horses in September the first year you go out on your own. You do the best with what you have and hope to build. We've done a lot of pinhooking, mostly weanling to yearling. This year we did some yearling to 2-year-olds. We had one we bought for \$25,000 that sold for \$410,000, so that helped. It's been a good, solid year so far."

But while he may be a one-man band, Hager has found some of his best success working as part of a team. His group efforts bore fruit most notably in the form of **Carrick**, a son of the late Giant's Causeway who picked up his first grade 1 win in the Secretariat Stakes (G1T) in August at **Arlington International Racecourse**. Hager worked with Donegal Racing to help identify the talented colt as a yearling in 2016.

"I'm pretty fortunate to work with some bigger partnerships," Hager said. "I've worked with Donegal for a few years now. It's a team that involves me, Oracle Bloodstock, Frank Smith of Elloree (Training Center) who breaks all the horses and Clay Scherer. We inspect them all together and give Jerry (Crawford) our notes separately. Based on his pedigree research, he then sets a price for each horse after vetting and buys them.

"It's an interesting system because, for example, Carrick was a very pretty horse, but, vet-wise, he had a couple little things, and we bought him for \$75,000. Obviously he paid off really well, but that might not happen in other organizations."

In addition to his partnership with Donegal and other clientele, Hager has recently struck up working partnerships with Little Red Feather Racing and Ironhorse Racing Stable.

"Partnerships are great because they bring a lot of new people in," Hager said. "There is such a huge learning curve, sometimes it's a great way for people to get in and learn without having to own the whole horse. I think it's the future of the game, really."

For the moment, Hager is pleased with the progress Taproot has made, preferring to remain the sole, hands-on liaison for his clients. But while future success is bound to bring new demands, he remains open to the idea of expanding his full-service agency if and when the situation commands a change.

"Bloodstock is a great challenge, and it's a lot of fun. I enjoy being able to pick something out, track it, and be close to the horse in their career. I also like being close to the owners because they're neat people. They have cool stories, and they come from all different backgrounds. I want to associate myself with good horses, good trainers, and good operations.

"I think for now I'd like to keep it like this—more boutique. I want to work for the people I really enjoy working for, and they're good people. Eventually, I may grow it down the road. We will see. I'll take it year by year."

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