The Wizard of Dormello

Signor Federico Tesio is one of the greatest Thoroughbred breeders in the history of the turf. Considered by many as a genius when it comes to breeding Thoroughbred horses, Tesio not only ran his breeding operation but was also the trainer of his exceptional stable. He and his wife Lydia established Dormello Stud in Novara on the banks of Lake Maggiore, Italy in 1898. From here some of the greatest Thoroughbreds were born and raised.

The Wizard of Dormello was not exactly overly wealthy, although he was wealthy enough, and therefore he was not always keen to rush his best mares to the courts of the most expensive stallions. Tesio would breed his mares to sires which he thought were a perfect genetic cross. He studied pedigrees to the seventh generation, sometimes as far back as the twelfth generation,
looking for the characteristics that in his mind suited his broodmares. His theories in breeding were revolutionary and coupled with painstaking research and patience, were quite against the norm of breeding the best to the best and hope for best. He often bred his horses for future generations as opposed to instant success in order to culminate with the one ideal horse which combined all of the characteristics he would look for in a champion.

Tesio, with the help of his wife, kept meticulous records when breeding his mares. Together they would record everything from personality traits to conformation, colour, and racing ability. He famously quoted; “A horse runs with his lungs, preservers with his heart, and wins with his character”. One of his obvious favourite horses in the pedigrees of his champions was St. Simon, a horse he considered to be a possessor of the many attributes he looked for in a champion.

He won the Derby Italiano an astounding twenty-two times with Thoroughbreds he not only bred but also trained. Several of his champions were undefeated in their careers. These include Braque, Botticelli and Cavaliere d’Arpino, who he considered the best he ever bred. Cavaliere d’Arpino sired Bellini, the sire of Tenerani, who in turn sired the great undefeated Ribot, were all Tesio bred champions. Donatello II was another one of his great Thoroughbreds, who was undefeated until his last race, and would go on to become a very influential sire to future generations. The impact of his breeding success would spread throughout the world. One, if not his greatest achievement in breeding, was his undefeated champion, Nearco. From this outstanding horse came the strongest continuing sire lines today, showing no sign of being surpassed.

**Nearco**

Nearco was foaled in 1935 at Dormello from the broodmare Nogara by Havresac II, who was a son of Rabelais, a son of St. Simon. Nearco’s sire was Pharos by Phalaris. Pharos was out of the great broodmare Scapa Flow by Chaucer who was by St. Simon. Thus, Nearco was inbred 4 x 4 to the legendary St. Simon, who is also in his fifth generation twice. Other notable sires in his pedigree were Carbine and Ajax, fourth generation, and Tristan in his fifth generation.
Nearco was a dark bay or brown horse, who looked almost black, standing 16.0 hands at full growth. He was described as a difficult horse to be around, possessing a strong will with a quick temper. He was especially nervous around large crowds and despised being groomed or touched. He won every one of his fourteen races with such ease that one has to wonder what his response to a serious challenge might have been. All but one, his final start, of his races came in Italy. His last race was the Grand Prix de Paris, the most prestigious race in France for three year olds at that time even though it is not considered as one of the classics.

The race was a one and seven eighths miles (fifteen furlongs) test of speed and stamina. The field was stellar including the Epsom Derby winner Bois Roussel, Prix du Jockey Club winner Cillas, and the runner up Canot, the filly Feerie, winner of the Prix du Diane and Poule d'Essai des Pouliches, were all entered. Nearco won the race by one and half lengths under a hand ride. Canot was second and Bois Roussel came in third. He had demonstrated his class and dominance against some of the top three year olds of his generation.

Tesio then sold his prized horse to Martin Benson, owner of Beech House Stud, Newmarket, for stud duty, the price being 60,000 pounds. Tesio was not averse to selling his best sire prospects to other countries in Europe as in his own words; “By keeping every stallion at home there would bring a tendency to breed your own mares to them, just for the sake of convenience, would not be beneficial”. Also with Italy’s alliance to Nazis Germany having been recently announced, Tesio wanted Nearco in a safer environment for his new career. Tesio always kept shares and or breeding rights to his imported stallions anyway. Nearco was the beneficiary of a specially constructed bomb shelter at Beech House when World War II broke out and England came under attack.

During his first year at Beech House, he had gone through ten different grooms in ten months as no one was able to handle his impossible character. Until one day in absolute frustration, his owner called on veteran stud groom Ernie Lee, who was well known as a good handler of difficult stallions. Within a few short weeks, Lee had Nearco not only trusting him but also trained to
enter his bomb shelter at the sound of the air raid siren and stay there until
Ernie would lead him out. Nearco was still mistrusting of others except when
in the company of his beloved friend Ernie he was docile and co-operative.

Nearco’s Legacy

1940 would turn out to be an
important year in Thoroughbred
breeding history as the first crop
of Nearco foals were born that
year. Two years later, these young
sons and daughters of this new
sire came out running and the turf
world would never be the same.
Nearco’s first starter was his filly
Nearly. She appeared in the
Fitzwilliam Stakes at Newmarket
on April 15, 1942. She won.

Nearco exiting his private bomb shelter with Ernie Lee (Photo courtesy of Beech House Stud)

From Nearco’s first crop came other stakes winners as well. Among them,
Lady Sybil, who became the champion filly of 1942, and went on to be a very
highly rated mare. Cimbrone was a speedy sort, and then, there was Nasrullah.

Nasrullah

Nasrullah was a sire of immense
influence and lasting effect to the
Thoroughbred breed. Bred by the Aga
Kahn III, Nasrullah left an indelible
mark in Thoroughbred breeding
history. A grandson, tail female line, of
the Aga Kahn’s great foundation mare
Mumtaz Mahal, Nasrullah was out of
Mumtaz Begum by Blenheim II. He was
brilliantly fast, head strong and

Nasrullah (Photo courtesy of Claiborne Farm)
full of character. He stood his first six breeding seasons in Ireland and later was exported to Claiborne Farm in Kentucky in 1950. Nasrullah led the English/Irish sire list once and the North American sire list five times. Among his most notable offspring of importance in racing and breeding are Nashua, Bold Ruler, Never Bend, Never Say Die, Grey Sovereign, Red God, Bald Eagle, Indian Hemp, Jaipur, Leallah, Noor, Zucchero, Courtesy, Dangerous Dame, Glamour, and Zonah.

**Mossborough**

Mossborough, by Nearco, was a five time winner from fourteen races and was just a slight cut below his top contemporaries on the track. He would, however, sire two very important horses, i.e. the filly Noblesse, winner of the Epsom Oaks by ten lengths. She was the champion two year old in 1962, winning the Blue Seal Stakes and Timeform Gold Cup, the only filly to have won this prestigious race. She is the great grand dam of Rainbow Quest and Commander in Chief.

**Ballymoss**

The other important offspring Mossborough sired was Ballymoss. Trained by the legendary Vincent O’Brien, Ballymoss won the Irish Derby, the St. Leger Stakes, the Prix de l’Arc de Triomphe, the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes, the Coronation Cup and the Eclipse Stakes. He ran second to the very good Crepello in the Epsom Derby. At stud, Ballymoss sired Royal Palace (2000 Guineas and Epsom Derby) and was broodmare sire of Stage Door Johnny, Levmoss, Le Moss and Teenoso.

**Dante**

Dante was another classic winning son of Nearco. Dante was the leading English two year old in 1944, winning all six of his races including the Coventry Stakes and the Middle Park Stakes. As a three year old, he started his campaign by winning the Roseberry Stakes. In the 2000 Guineas, he suffered his only defeat.

*Dante (Photo source unknown)*
finishing second to Court Martial with Royal Charger third. His final race was his crowning achievement where he won the Derby, run at Newmarket due to wartime restrictions, beating Midas and Court Martial.

Dante was retired to Theakston Stud in North Yorkshire. He suffered from an eye condition that would eventually cause complete blindness. However, Dante had a successful career as a stallion until his death at the age of twenty-four. Among his get were Toulouse Lautrec, Darius (2000 Guineas, Champagne Stakes), Carroza (Epsom Oaks racing in the Queen’s silks), and Discorea (Irish Oaks).

**Sayajirao**

Sayajirao was a full brother to Dante. Sayajirao was purchased as a yearling for 28,000 guineas, which was a very large amount for a yearling in 1945. He went on to win the Irish Derby and the St. Leger at Doncaster. At stud, he sired Indiana (St. Leger), Gladness (Ascot Gold Cup), Lynchris, Zenobia, and Dark Issue. All three were winners of the Irish Oaks.

**Amerigo**

Nearco sired Amerigo, who raced in England. where he won the Coventry Stakes as a two year old. Thereafter, he was shipped to the USA. Among his many stakes wins in the USA, were the San Juan Capistrano and the Hialeah Turf Cup. At stud, he would sire Fort Marcy (US Horse of the Year) and the tough mare Politley, winner of twenty-one races from forty-nine starts. His daughter, Grisse Vitesse, a stakes winner in France (Prix Jacques le Marois), would produce the good stakes winner Silver Hawk by Roberto.

**Royal Charger**

Royal Charger would become one of Nearco’s more important sons in continuing the male line for future generations. He was a chestnut colt out of Sun Princess by Solario. Royal Charger’s dam was out of Mumtaz Begum (dam of Nasrullah) who in turn, was out of Mumtaz Mahal. Even though Royal Charger was not of the
top echelon of his generation, he was a good quality race horse. Even though he did not win a race as a two year old, he showed enough promise to be entered in the 2000 Guineas as a three year old, where he finished third to Court Martial and Dante. Later that same year, he won the Challenge Stakes and the Duke of York Stakes. At four, he added the Queen Anne Stakes and the Ayr Gold Cup to his resume.

Royal Charger was sold for 55,000 pounds and stood at the Irish National Stud. While there, he sired Happy Laughter (Irish 1000 Guineas), Royal Palm (Nunthorpe Stakes), Royal Duchy (Phoenix Stakes), and Sea Charger (Irish 2000 Guineas and St. Leger). He also sired Turn-To (Flamingo Stakes, Garden State Futurity) during this time.

In 1951, Royal Charger was sold to Neil McCarthy for $300,000.00 to stand stud at Spendthrift Farm in Kentucky. He would go on to sire Idun (US champion filly at 2 and 3), Mongo (Champion Turf Horse), and Royal Orbit (Preakness Stakes). As a broodmare sire, his daughters produced Crowned Prince (champion two year old in England), Tudor Queen (champion two year old in the US), and Majestic Prince (US Hall of Fame).

It is through Turn-To where Royal Charger takes his place in many of today’s top pedigrees. Turn-To sired Hail to Reason, who in turn sired Roberto and Halo. Also, two other sons of Turn-To, i.e First Landing, who became a successful sire, and Sir Gaylord, who sired Epsom Derby winner, Sir Ivor.

**Nimbus**

A bay colt by Nearco, named Nimbus, won the 2000 Guineas and the Epsom Derby in a very successful racing career. As a two year old, he won two of five races, the Coventry Stakes and the July Stakes. At three, he began his campaign with a victory in the Classic Trial Stakes where he beat favoured, Abernant, in a thrilling close finish, in the 2000 Guineas. His Derby victory was just as close but with Amour Drake and Swallow Tail his victims instead. His final race was a walkover at Haydock Park. He was injured in training shortly thereafter and was retired from racing.

Nimbus was not a big success at stud but he did sire Nagami (Coronation Cup and Italian Derby), Nucleus a multi stakes winning mare, and Stratus, a sire of stakes winners in Canada. He was also the broodmare sire of 1962 Preakness Stakes winner Greek Money. Nimbus was sent to Japan in 1963 and stood stud there until his death in 1972.
Nearctic

Nearco’s son, Nearctic, was conceived in England but foaled in Canada at Windfields Farm in 1954. He was bred by E.P.Taylor and went on to a solid racing career, becoming the Canadian Horse of the Year in 1958. Nearctic looked very much like his sire and possessed much of Nearco’s strong will and blazing speed.

Nearctic became one of his sire’s most important sons at stud, siring many champions and stakes producing broodmares.

Nearctic is remembered as the sire of Northern Dancer, who who won the Kentucky Derby, Preakness Stakes, Queen’s Plate etc and became the pre-eminent sire of the twentieth century.

Nearctic sons, Icecapade, Briartic, and Explodent were successful sires in continuing the line. Many of the daughters of Nearctic became foundation mares to a host of stakes winning families. These include Nangela, Chilly, Lady Known As Lou, and Arctic Fancy, to name a few.

Nearco’s Daughters

Nearco’s daughters are not to be ignored as major contributors to future generations of Thoroughbred stars.

Malindi

Malindi was a stakes placed full sister to Nasrullah. She would then add to the family fortunes by producing Prince Taj by Prince Bio. Bred by The Aga Kahn, Prince Taj won the Prix de Saint-Firmin and was third in the Poule d’Essai des Poulins. He was sent to the USA but did not place in ten starts. He was returned to France where he began his stud career and from modest beginnings he rose to become the leading sire for two years (1967-1968).
Neocracy

Neocracy was one of the better broodmares sired by Nearco. Her dam was Harina by Blandford. Neocracy would win the Princess Elizabeth Stakes. After her retirement from racing, she produced Tulyar by Tehran. Tulyar was bred by the Aga Kahn III and would become his fifth Epsom Derby winner. Tulyar also won the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Stakes, the St. Leger Stakes and the Eclipse Stakes.

A second major stakes winner produced by Neocracy was Saint Crespin by Aureole. Saint Crespin would win the Prix de l’Arc de Triomphe in 1959, as well as the Eclipse Stakes, Prix de Guiche and as a two year old, the Imperial Produce Stakes.

Noble Lassie

Noble Lassie, out of Belle Sauvage by Big Game, would win the Lancashire Oaks on the track and then produce Prix de l’Arc de Triomphe winner, Vaguely Noble by Vienna. Vaguely Noble would also win the Observer Gold Cup, Prix de Chantilly, Grand Prix de Saint-Cloud and the Prix de Guiche. Vaguely Noble had a very solid stud career as he sired Exceller, Dahlia, Gay Mencene, Nobiliary, Lemhi Gold and Empery. He is the dam sire of Dahar, Golden Fleece, River Memories, Touching Wood, Indian Skimmer, and L’Emigrant.

Noorani

Noorani won only one race from twelve starts. That one race was the Duke of York Handicap. However, she produced two stake winning sons. Sheshoon by Precipitation won the Grand Prix de Saint-Cloud, the Ascot Gold Cup and the Grosser Preis Von Baden. He would have a very good career at stud with Sassafras his most notable son.

The other son of Noorani to make an impact was Charlottesville by Prince Chevalier. Charlottesville won the Prix du Jockey Club, Grand Prix de Paris, the Prix Lupin and the Prix du Prince d’Orange. At stud, he lead the British/Irish list in 1966, the same year in which his son, Charlottown, won the Epsom Derby. He also sired stakes winner Nasreen, dam of Sharmeen (dam of Shergar).
**Sybil’s Sister**

Sybil’s Sister is a full sister to Lady Sybil, who was the first stakes winner and champion sired by Nearco. Both are half sisters to Lady Angela, the dam of Nearctic. Sister Sarah is the dam of these three siblings, who was by Abbots Trace. Sybil’s Sister would produce Sybil’s Nephew by Midas, who won the St. Leger Stakes and Sybil’s Niece by Admiral’s Walk, winner of the Queen Mary Stakes. Sybil’s Niece went on to produce Great Nephew by Honeyway. Great Nephew won the Prix du Moulin and Prix Dollar and lead the English/Irish sire list twice. He is the sire of Epsom Derby winners Grundy and Shergar.

These are some, but not all, of Nearco’s notable sons and daughters who spread his considerable influence throughout the Thoroughbred world. Many of them inherited his legendary temperament, as well as his supreme racing ability.

**In closing**

Nearco contracted cancer in his hip which made getting up or down very painful. On June 7, 1957 he was unable to stand on his own. Once Ernie Lee was able to get him up, he walked the horse to the nearby Equine Research Station where Nearco was humanly euthanized. Devastated, Lee walked away and never worked with horses again.

In the history of the Thoroughbred there are exceptional sires and then, there are *breed defining* sires. Nearco is one such *breed defining* sire of the highest influence. The Italian stallion bred by Federico Tesio, *The Wizard of Dormello*, Nearco was a great sire of sires.

**About Colin Nolte**

Colin Nolte is a freelance writer specializing in Thoroughbred racing and breeding history. Born in England, Colin’s family immigrated to Canada when he was a child. Through the influence of his father, he developed a love of horses and the Thoroughbred racing scene in particular, which has become a lifelong passion.
Colin’s web-site, “Thoroughbred Racing Ancestry”, contains his articles about many of the legendary horses of the breed throughout history. The articles are researched with the intention to give as much information about the horse as possible beyond the statistics of their racing and breeding accomplishments. The site can be found at http://thoroughbredancestry.com/. The links to its social media pages can be found on the main website. Colin initiated the website in February 2015. It is devoted to preserving the legends of the sport of Thoroughbred racing. This site is a good way for new fans of the sport to discover the greats of the past that lead to the greats of the present. Veteran racing fans can take a stroll down memory lane and reacquaint themselves with heroes and heroines they grew up admiring.