

Breeder of the Month: Team Valor strikes right mix with Animal Kingdom

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When Team Valor International's Animal Kingdom took the [May 7 Kentucky Derby](#), he continued to validate the partnership's worldwide approach to racing. The Versailles-based operation bred and races the chestnut colt, who is Bluegrass-born but sports an international pedigree.

"I've only won a couple of really big ones and when it happens, it's just surreal, is all I can tell you," said Barry Irwin, CEO of Team Valor. "You see it and you know what happened, you're there, but it's just hard to process."



(Photo above: The members of Team Valor celebrate with John Velazquez (riding Animal Kingdom) in the Kentucky Derby winner's circle.)

Animal Kingdom, who will try to win the second leg of the Triple Crown on Saturday, was born and raised at Craig and Holly Bendoroff's Denali Stud in Paris, Ky. However, both of his parents were imported from different countries. His sire, Leroidesanimaux, was bred in Brazil and his dam, Dalicia, was bred in Germany.

"I brokered the deal to buy the stallion and I bought the mare," Irwin said. "So we have had a hand in the whole thing."

Team Valor is one of racing's most successful partnership groups. In the Animal Kingdom's case, he was bred by one Team Valor partnership and races for another. That is why he was offered at the 2009 Keeneland September yearling sale, where he sold for \$100,000.

Leroidesanimaux, which is "king of the animals" in French, raced in his homeland three times before coming to the United States. While racing in North America, he became a multiple Grade 1 winner and was named champion male turf horse in 2005.

Dalicia's biggest victory came in the Group 3 Preis der Sparkassen-Finanzgruppe, where she beat German Horse of the Year Soldier Hollow. Irwin bought Dalicia at auction in Baden-Baden and brought her to America. Upon her retirement, she was sent to Denali and bred to Leroidesanimaux. Her first foal was Animal Kingdom.

"We haven't done enough importing of horses and bloodlines from other places where horses don't run on drugs," Irwin said. "In Germany you are not allowed to breed a mare who has ever raced on drugs. When you buy stock from there, you know you are getting something good."

Historically, the United States has been one of the more liberal racing jurisdictions when it comes to medications. However, federal legislation to ban the use of performance-enhancing drugs was introduced this month.



Animal Kingdom is the latest successful homebred with international ties for Team Valor. Last November, the operation won the Grade 2 Breeders' Cup Juvenile Turf with Pluck (shown at left), a homebred who is out of the South African-bred mare Secret Heart.

The Bandoroffs, who were part of the partnership that raced Dalicia, were members of the partnership that bred Animal Kingdom as well as the partnership that currently owns him. Their Denali Stud prepared him for the Keeneland sale and is home to all of Team Valor's breeding stock that is boarded in Kentucky.

"Animal Kingdom was a nice foal from the beginning," said Craig Bandoroff. "It means a lot that he was raised here and came out of our program. You hope that something you did along the way made a difference, but we are just the supporting actors. This is about the horse, (trainer) Graham Motion, and Barry Irwin."

Neither Leroidesanimaux nor Dalicia remain in the Bluegrass.

Leroidesanimaux retired to stud at Richard and Audrey Haisfield's Stonewall Stallions in Kentucky, and Irwin helped broker the deal. In return, he was paid in breeding rights to the stallion, Irwin said.

However, that operation has since had well-documented financial issues and relocated to Florida.

Dalicia was sold to Shadai Stud in Japan at the 2009 Tattersalls December sale. Irwin said Team Valor tries to keep its broodmare band at around 20 members. Only eight of those mares are permanent fixtures, while the rest are being bred to sell, making the operation's success as a breeder on racing's biggest days all that more impressive.

"We deal with guys that really are neophytes in racing," Irwin said. "They are not interested in breeding. If we have a horse that didn't quite prove itself in America and I like it, I will either buy the horse from the partners or we will keep it and try to prove it."

"In this instance we kept the mare, and I wanted to keep her forever, but Haisfield had some financial difficulties, so we had to sell her."

Team Valor still owns Animal Kingdom's half-brother, Thursby. The unraced 2-year-old colt is by Mr. Greeley.

"Dalicia was a big, pretty mare," Bandoroff said. "She had quality. Animal Kingdom's younger brother was also born and raised here, and he was the same way. She put a lot of size and quality into her foals."