

## TEAM VALOR SO AFRICAN RACING ASSOCIATION'S "OWNER OF THE WEEK," THE STABLE WON WITH BOTH STRATOS AND ON HER TOES LAST WEEKEND

From [www.racingassociation.co.za](http://www.racingassociation.co.za) comes the following:

### Team Valor reaps reward with Stratos

Top American owner Team Valor has become an integral part of the South African racing scene. Team kingpin Barry Irwin's astute purchasing of locally bred horses has been a huge boost to the country's breeding and racing industries – in terms of both revenue and profile. So it was fitting reward when his five-year-old mare Stratos landed the R1-million Grade 1 Empress Club at Turffontein on Saturday, March 1.

Stratos, trained by Mike Azzie and ridden by Weichong Marwing, notched Team Valor's second win in two years in the well-endowed, prestigious contest for fillies and mares. Last year, the three-year-old Little Miss Magic won it before being sent to race in France.

Stratos was lead in after her win by Team Valor's SA representative Robin Bruss and his wife Jane, and Mike Azzie and his wife Sharon.

Of Irwin's horses in this country at the moment, one in five runners is a winner – an amazing strike rate for an owner. And no fewer than one in four of those wins is in a stakes race – testimony to a focused strategy of targeting feature contests.



*Stratos being led in by Mike and Sharon Azzie (r) and Robin and Jane Bruss following Grade 1 Empress Club triumph.*



*Weichong Marwing dropped Stratos' head right on the wire to claim victory in the Grade 1 Empress Club at Turffontein race course last week in South Africa.*

Stratos, by Jet Master out of a Golden Thatch mare, was initially bought by Azzie for owner Tasso Christoforo – for a paltry R32 000 on the Cape Vintage Yearling sale. During her two-year-old campaign, her ability caught the eye of bloodstock agent Robin Bruss who alerted Irwin and a deal was struck.

Saturday's race might have been Stratos's last start, although a Durban winter campaign is a possibility.

Bruss says Irwin is inclining towards retiring his charge now and sending her to a top stallion in South Africa.

When the American – a sometime racing journalist – visits South Africa for the Emperor's Palace National Yearling Sale in April he might make some decisions about Stratos – on her future and her first covering.

The mare has had problems. “Wear and tear” in one particular joint has ensured she has been sparingly raced. She has run just 18 times in four seasons, for seven wins and eight places, often with lengthy intervals between appearances. This season has seen just three starts – for three wins.

Saturday's triumph pushed Stratos's her prizemoney tally to more than R1-million - marking a fitting end to a career that is likely to be crowned by being named top filly at the forthcoming Highveld racing awards ceremony.

Bruss says Irwin is “the best judge of a yearling I know”. During his first visit to the NYS, Irwin bought six yearlings to race in SA. All won, and three – Little Miss Magic, Sally Bowles and Stately – won graded races.

Team Valor currently has another graded race-winning filly running in SA – Captain's Lover, which has won five of seven starts, including the Cape Fillies Guineas. She was picked out by Irwin and bought for just R160 000 – on a sale where the top price paid was more than 2-million.

A few months ago, Irwin bought out his American partner and launched Team Valor International as a fully-fledged global operation – with South Africa as a key element.



*Barry Irwin of Kentucky.*

Bruss says Irwin's strategy is to buy and race horses at the highest level. He buys both yearlings and horses-in-training and, in partnership with a string of trainers around the world, develops them to their full potential with the aim of selling them at maximum value.

So, breeding with Stratos will be something of a departure from the regular strategy.



*Well-deserved reinsman Weichong Marwing at post-race trophy celebration with The Azzies and writer Dave Mollett.*

Team Valor's first horse from South Africa was Summer Cup winner Delta Force, which was bought on Bruss's recommendation after he and Irwin met through mutual acquaintances. The gelding went directly to the US and became one of the top handicappers on the West Coast.

Bruss then steered Irwin in the direction of July winner Ipi Tombe, who performed famous feats in the Valor green and red silks in Dubai before being sold into stud for a gob-smacking amount.

By then Irwin was convinced of South Africa's value as a source of inexpensive but classy horses.

Team Valor's other important South African horses have been Iridescence, Crimson Palace and Carnadore.

Irwin, who along with Robin Bruss is a Racing Association member, pays very close attention to his international string – as evidenced by the Team Valor website, which is well worth a visit.