

## First Time Plucky

Last year, Dr. Chris Ruhnke had the chance to buy a small share in a Team Valor homebred that was being offered to newcomers to the business. A fan of the sport since high school, Ruhnke decided to take the plunge on then-yearling **Pluck** (More Than Ready). You can call it Beginner's Luck if you like, but Pluck will be taking the first-time owner to the Breeders' Cup, competing in the GII BC Juvenile Turf. Better still, the good doctor believes he could find himself in the winner's circle Saturday.



“Obviously, the European horses are going to be tough,” Ruhnke said. “But, my take on it is that every race out, Pluck has improved. If he can improve a little more and get a perfect ride from Garrett Gomez, we have a chance. It’s a hard race to win, and we’re going to need a little racing luck to get there, but, realistically, I think we can get there.”



**Pluck** *Adam Coglianesse*

Ruhnke, an orthopedic surgeon based in Cincinnati, has seemingly risen to a lofty spot in a very short span, but he is far from an overnight success.

“I’ve been following horses for a very long time,” he remarked. Al grew up in New Jersey, so I grew up going to Monmouth Park. Then one of my good friends (fellow orthopedic surgeon Dr. Tony Infante) — he’s my son’s godfather--invested in horses with Team Valor, and I’ve been following him along. He put me on to Team Valor and, when the opportunity came up last year to buy into Pluck, I decided it was the right time for me and my family to get involved. I

decided to pull the trigger and invest in my first horse.”

Pluck is out of Secret Heart (SAf) (Fort Wood), a mare acquired by Team Valor from her native South Africa, where she was a listed winner and three times Group 1 placed. The dark bay started four times in the U.S., running second in allowance company twice, then headed to the breeding shed. Pluck is her first foal.

According to Team Valor International CEO and founder Barry Irwin, the decision was made to make the colt part of a program introduced last year that targeted owners new to racing. The first horse offered was the ill-fated Sailor’s Cap (Distant View), who enjoyed solid success, winning the GIII Colonial Turf Cup in 2008 and the GIII Poker S. in 2009, and earning \$616,970.

Explained Irwin, “Both Sailor’s Cap and Pluck are home-breds. They were both bred nicely enough, and were well conformed and athletic. We knew them from birth, knew they had no problems and felt they would do us proud. Team Valor owned a majority interest in each of these colts, so we had equity interests available to market.

“Our idea was to offer five-percent interests in the colts, and include as part of the deal a four-payment installment opportunity, in order to make participating as painless as possible,” he concluded.

The deal suited Ruhnke, who had decided he would rather be involved in a partnership than try to buy a horse on his own. “There were multiple factors for that,” he stated.

“Number one, Team Valor gave me the opportunity to invest in a better class of horse than I could afford on my own. As a novice, they also offer much more knowledge--about the horses that they buy, the breeding of these horses, and everything else that needs to be done in the horse racing business. There are probably about 50 corporations like Team Valor and, after doing some research, I found they had the best track record, and the longest, of doing it with success. I just thought it was the right opportunity for me.”



**Dr. Chris Ruhnke (grey shirt), with J.T. (cap), Kevin (striped shirt) and Melissa (to his left).**

*Adam Coglianese photo*

Team Valor will offer yet another homebred colt in the newcomers' program this year.

“Our third is Thursby, a current yearling Mr. Greeley colt who is the second foal of the German group winner Dalicia (Ger) Acatenango {Ger},” Irwin said. “Her first foal, Animal Kingdom (Leroidesanimaux {Brz}) broke his maiden impressively two weeks ago going long on Poly at Keeneland.”

A busy schedule keeps Ruhnke from getting to every race, but he heads to the track to watch Pluck run as often as possible.

“Pluck’s run four times, and I’ve seen him run twice -- when he won his first race at Belmont [a maiden special weight on the turf July 11], and when he ran at Monmouth [in the Continental Mile S. Aug. 14, where he finished second, but was DQ’d and placed fourth],” he said. “Unfortunately I didn’t have the chance to see him up at Woodbine [winning the GIII Summer S. last time out Sept. 18], but, obviously, I’ll be there at the Breeders’ Cup. You don’t miss that one.”

The Ruhnke family -- wife Melissa and sons J.T., 10, and Kevin, 8, have been able to attend some of the races as well. “They were with me when Pluck won his first race at Belmont,” the doctor remarked. “That was a thrill for them. We were all in the winner’s circle together, which was fun for them. They enjoyed that.”

But it will be Dr. Infante, who has shared the love of horses since the two met in seventh grade, and owns a share in Pluck as well, who will share the Breeders’ Cup experience. “He and I are meeting up [in Louisville],” Ruhnke offered. “Thursday night, there is Pluck owners’ gettogether, and we will be out at the races Friday and Saturday.”

Unfortunately, prior commitments will prevent the rest of the Ruhnke clan from being at Churchill. “My boys have basketball practice, baseball trials, so it wasn’t going to work out for them to come down, Ruhnke said. They opted to do their stuff, so I said, “all right, Daddy’s gone for the weekend then.”

Still, Ruhnke said he believes the kids will develop an interest in racing as deep as his own. With the amount of time that horse racing is on the TV at home, it would be hard for them not to, he laughed.