

Ottoman Fleet steering the Marinopoulos family into a bright new future

Tom Peacock speaks to a Greek breeder whose French stud has returned to the limelight

Greek ingenuity influences almost every aspect of our lives, from the very concept of democracy to mathematics, mapping and even central heating.

Racing has its own cultural references too, many of which are the work of one particular family whose historic contribution remains equally as relevant to the modern day.

Marina Marinopoulos, who along with her husband Leonidas took over the breeding operation from her late father George Cambanis in the early 80s and has maintained some of the original links at their Haras du Lieu Marmion in Normandy, has savoured several notable developments over the last few weeks.

The most recent came when Ottoman Fleet made an impressive return to Britain for Godolphin in the Earl of Sefton Stakes.

"He's from a very old family because his dam Innevera is the daughter of Loxandra, who is one of our foundation mares," says Marina Marinopoulos.

"She produced a lot of black-type animals for us; Keltos [Lockinge winner], Iridanos, Loxias, Krataios, Kavafi, she had five Group horses. Loxandra was bought with Henry Cecil and basically the colts were good. Innevera won a couple of races, although she was moderate, but, as we've seen, she can produce."

Ottoman Fleet, her first foal, won two Listed events last year, which prompted Marinopoulos to make a decision.

"What happened was that, on the strength of Ottoman Fleet, we put in her in the December sale at Tatts," she says. "She made a lot of money [725,000gns] but we

managed to keep a third, together with the Cumanis and Graham Smith-Bernal [of Newsells Park] has a third.

"She was in foal to Zarak and has had a very nice filly, and because of the partnership we could afford to send her to Frankel this year, which we wouldn't have done on our own."

This epitomises the way that the Marinopouloses have managed to maintain a seat at the top table without being profligate.

"It goes very fast if it's all about yourself," she says.

"They're so expensive these stallions, it's crazy, but with the three of us, she's in foal to Frankel and we're very happy.

We're very close to the Cumanis and I really hate selling mares.

"When you have an opportunity like that, you have to sell, otherwise it's unsustainable and also one must be, I think, reasonable, because it does make your mares, your families, if you can afford to send them to better stallions.

"We sold Innevera's yearling and her foal, I wish we'd been able to keep the others but when you get the opportunity, you must think of all the others that have cost you 50 and you sell for 20!"

Stilvi still present Stilvi still present

The most celebrated family at Lieu Marmion is that of Stilvi, who was second for Cambanis and Bruce Hobbs in the 1972 Nunthorpe. She would produce a quite extraordinary sequence of champion juveniles, from Tachypous and Tolmi, who were both also placed in the Guineas, to Dewhurst winner Tromos and Tyrnavos, who ended up landing the Irish Derby.

They all appear on the page of Aidan O'Brien's Greenland, bound for a Classic test in Monday's Prix Greffulhe following a promising reappearance in France, and

who is out of the Prix Six Perfections winner Aktoria. Along with some of their own mares on the farm, the operation has partnerships with the likes of Lady O'Reilly and Ecurie des Monceaux, while Alain Jathiere has an interest in Aktoria.

"That was very good because Greenland is by Saxon Warrior, he was born in Coolmore and they loved him, so they bought him," says Marinopoulos. "There's a Gleneagles colt in training and we have a Starspangledbanner yearling out of her."

The third piece of good news recently came from even further afield. Skia, a Group 3-winning daughter of Motivator who had been sold to Shadai Farm for €320,000

at Arqana back in 2014, has resurfaced as the dam of the latest Japanese wonder Sol Oriens, a scintillating winner of his domestic 2,000 Guineas.

"She made a lot more than what we thought, the two Japanese Yoshida brothers fought each other for her," Marinopoulos notes. "Skia had another very good horse in Japan called Vin De Garde, so on the strength of that we sent the mare [Light Quest] back to Motivator. "She produced - a miracle - a filly. So we have a full-sister to Skia now. Light Quest is one of the mares we love so much, she's retired in the sunshine with my son in Greece now. We'd really like to hang on to her filly, quite honestly."

The Greek Freak The Greek Freak

This recent upturn in fortune brings Marinopoulos to the name of one of her most unlikely heroes, lalysos. Moved to Luca Cumani as a five-year-old in 2009 after outgrowing his domestic competition, he became the first ever Greek-bred horse to win British Listed and Group races with strikes at Haydock and Sandown.

"The Greek Freak," Marinopoulos laughs at the memory of the nickname coined by the Cumanis.

"These things tend to go round in circles. With lalysos, the whole thing came out again about my father, Stilvi and so on, after years and years. Everything happens like that. Things go quiet, so that's why when things start looking up, you should milk it for all it's worth!"

Although not really contributing to their own breeding story, happily lalysos has been able to prosper elsewhere.

"We tried to get him to be a stallion in France but it's very, very hard," she says. "In the end we gave him to our jockey, Panagiotis Dimitsanis, he and his wife kept him in Cyprus. He has produced some quite nice horses that ran there, but he never had the chance really."

She continues: "He was a very, very good horse. By the time he came to England, he already had a problem with a knee, otherwise he might have won the Abbaye or something like that.

"We didn't want to take him away from our trainer in Greece because he was the best thing he had, but by the time we decided he'd won what he could there it was already [too late].

"But Luca managed to get him to win a Group race and the whole thing was really fun."

The couple, who have long held business interests around Europe in the retail sector, tried for many years to keep their homeland's breeding and racing industry above water, with Marina chairing the Greek Jockey Club. Its continued economic and administrative strife meant that ultimately they conceded defeat and relocated all of their bloodstock interests to France.

For a while the broodmare band was based at Haras du Quesnay, but it is now all incorporated at Lieu Marmion in Normandy, where they now spend most of their time.

"The problem with Greece is the politics," she says. "Nothing gets done. It's such a pity, but there comes a point where you can't stay and think."

Legacy living on Legacy living on

The blue and silver starred silks of Leonidas Marinopoulos, carried by the likes of Cumani's top-level Hong Kong and Dubai winner Presvis, are still seen in France under the couple's Tolmi Racing banner and an Intello filly named Vivify, a half-sister to Willie Mullins' versatile Riven Light and another member of the Loxandra dynasty, will be racing for Jean-Claude Rouget.

Meanwhile, Glafyra, an unraced High Chaparral half-sister to Prix d'Harcourt winner Delfos and to Saeed bin Suroor's useful international campaigner Balias, has proved another promising young broodmare as the dam of Papilio (by Starspangledbanner), the recent winner of Keeneland's Grade 2 Appalachian Stakes for Mark Casse.

More than half a century on from her family's first serious expedition into racing in Britain, Marina Marinopoulos does not close the door on a possible return.

"We've always shared it as a passion," she says. "It came from my father really and when we got married, my husband really got on well with my father and he got into horses, which he wasn't before.

"Luckily our younger son [George] is crazy about it, he's very interested, especially in the breeding. And he lives in London now, so maybe we'll have a few more racing there in the future. Who knows.

"It's nice that he wants to do it, because it's the continuity of it. It makes it all worthwhile, to know it will go on."