



Humble

JOE DIORIO PHOTOS

Newlyweds Brandon Rice and Alexandra de Meric have enjoyed early success under their new RiceHorse Stables banner

and Hungry

By MICHAEL COMPTON

As far as industry pedigrees go, they don't come much more established than Brandon Rice and Alexandra de Meric of RiceHorse Stables.

Both Rice and de Meric have deep roots in Florida's Thoroughbred business. Brandon, son of Bryan and Holley Rice of Woodside Ranch and a grandson of Clyde and Jean Rice, is a third-generation horseman. Alexandra, better known as Ali, is a daughter of Nick and Jacqui de Meric of Manuden Farm.

The young couple is odds-on to follow in the large footsteps of their respective families. Rice and de Meric knew each other as youngsters, but neither one ever imagined the life they have together these days.

"Both of us grew up in Ocala. Ali was raised on the west side of town and I was raised on the east side," said Rice. "As kids those were very different worlds. The sales ground at OBS was our only meeting place. Referring to me, her dad always said there was a flake of hay with legs walking their shedrow. My father always admired the cute little de Meric girl running around barn 12.

"In high school, I asked her out on a date," Brandon added. "She was involved in drama, so I went to her school plays and she went to my football games. We were supportive of each other. Eventually, things would fizzle out for no other reason than distance. It was a 45-minute drive to her place."

Rice and de Meric have successfully bridged the distance gap that kept them separated for much of their childhood. Married at Manuden Farm in June, Brandon and

Ali have refurbished a home on Woodside Ranch near Ft. McCoy and in June at OBS consigned under the RiceHorse Stables banner for the first time.

"It's so natural for us," said de Meric, who graduated from the University of Tampa. "We grew up in this business. It's a natural progression."

Rice, a graduate of Florida State University and the Darley Flying Start program, concurs.

"We both had invested in horses for years with our families," he said. "The decision to go into business together just sounded like a fun endeavor."

Rice and de Meric launched their own pinhooking operation with a \$12,000 budget in 2009. They acquired two yearlings—a Limehouse colt and a filly by Daring. Those initial two horses sold the following year at OBS with the Limehouse colt bringing \$200,000 from Bob Feld, agent for Kevin Plank's Sagamore Farm. The colt, a \$7,000 purchase at the 2009 Fasig-Tipton Kentucky Fall Yearling Sale, worked a quarter in :20 4/5 at the OBS preview as a juvenile.

"We made all the decisions every step of the way," said de Meric. "His good breeze was so liberating. People came up to us and told us what a good job we did with him. It was very gratifying. We had offers before the sale, but we wanted to give everyone a shot and put him through the ring. My Mom and Dad had champagne at the barn at the end of the day. It was a big moment. We won't forget it."

Named Humble and Hungry, the colt went on to win the Commonwealth Turf Stakes (G3) at Churchill

Downs last November in Sagamore's colors. He also finished third in the Hill Prince Stakes (G3) at Belmont Park and the Hall of Fame Stakes (G2) at Saratoga and second in this year's Dixie Stakes (G2) at Pimlico.

"We grew up in this business," said de Meric. "For me, five months out of college we sold a horse for \$200,000. I wanted to call all of my college professors. My papers and speeches in college were about the horse business. Everyone's response was always 'really?' So, after Humble and Hungry sold, I wanted to call them all and say 'yes, the horse business.'"

Selling a homerun horse like Humble and Hungry right off the bat has not changed the way Rice and de Meric approach the business.

"Both sets of parents wanted us to understand the business early on," said Rice. "Ali and I still buy horses modestly. We launched our operation understanding the value of a dollar from the very beginning thanks to our parents. We know what it's like to struggle to pay the feed bills."

De Meric believes the sojourn through their first public offering proved to be a tremendous learning experience.

"It was make or break for us by the time we got to the

sale," she said. "We literally had no money left. It was all hay, oats and water with our horses."

Their family names and reputations mean the world to them. Rice and de Meric are eager to live up to the responsibility entrusted with being part of the next generation but are equally excited about promoting their own sense of identity.

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"Both of us grew up around horses, galloping and breaking horses," said Rice. "Our parents made this shoe to fit us both. Our parents knew they loved the horse business instantly. They wanted us to know the industry completely and then encouraged us to explore on our own. We both got away from it and were introduced to other things in finance and the business world. Being away, we realized how

much we love and appreciate this lifestyle. There is something special about the horse business."

Attitudes and ideals are often passed down from one generation to the next. That is certainly the case with valuable practices and belief systems associated with purchasing young Thoroughbreds. For Rice and de Meric, blending their respective backgrounds has proved

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“It was quite an education to enter a new camp and a new way of thinking,” admitted de Meric. “You have your own methods. My dad taught me how to look at horses. Then I crossed over into the Rice camp and it was a very different system. It has been a lot to learn but I think it makes us better.

“It’s not hard to find horses we love,” she added.” It’s hard to find horses that meet our budget constraints and can provide us the value we are looking for. Once they are here with us on the farm, that’s the easy part. Settling on which horses to choose is the hard part. For every one we buy, we’ve done a lot of leg work on 60 others.

“It can be a challenge to work with your spouse,” de Meric added. “We’re both very talented. We sometimes have different ideas of how to get from point A to point B. As good as we are individually we are 10 times better together.”

Rice takes a similar view of managing their working relationship.

“Our business either thrives or sinks with the horses we choose,” he said. “This has been the biggest thing to learn to work together. We blend what we both know and make the best decisions we can.

“One of the finer lessons we have learned is you can’t lose respect for each other,” he added. “I know Ali is extremely good at showing horses at the sales. She has done it for numerous operations all around the world. I always need to see her in her best light there. Right from the very beginning, we have had disputes and disagreements, but we can gladly say we are stronger three years in. We’re getting better. The relationship and the business are going the right way.”

Both Rice and de Meric are quick to give credit to their parents.

“If it wasn’t for our parents stressing the importance of the purchasing process to us and honing our eyes, it would have been hopeless to have merged as two novices,” Rice said.

“Plus, we do our homework. From the first sale of the year to the last horse in the last sale, you can find those horses that will develop. We are always looking.”

Buyers of two-year-olds are in search of future winners. Owners with horses in training want the same thing. Rice and de Meric expect to deliver much more. Among the clients they have worked with are trainer Ken McPeck and New Mission Bloodstock.





Rice (above right and opposite page) and de Meric are optimistic and confident about engineering a business future.

“The mental burden of your financial future is right in front of you in this business and maintaining client relationships can be a lot of pressure,” said Rice. “We’re a young business with only so many clients. It’s tough to have bad news. Some horses just don’t make it to the level of everyone’s aspirations. We wear that pressure quite a bit. When a horse is sore we feel that emotionally.”

In July, He’s So Fine, a 2-year-old colt by Purge that Rice and de Meric broke and trained for McPeck, captured his career debut at Belmont Park. In the colors of Susan McPeck’s Magdalena Racing, the chestnut colt won that five-furlong event impressively by 3¾ lengths after stalking the early pace.

“He’s a nice horse,” Rice said of He’s So Fine.

“He’s one that we were thinking would be a Saratogatype horse. We’re anxious to see what he becomes.”

Jim McCartan and Willie Browne, successful pinhookers in Europe, are among the principals in New Mission Bloodstock.

“It’s easy to work for clients that know a good horse and are able to supply our stable with nice horses,” Rice said of their relationship with New Mission Bloodstock.

“Two years ago they bought at Keeneland September and wanted a yearling prospect for their endeavor in the U.S.,” he said. “They picked out a War Front filly for \$80,000 and we sold it for \$275,000 last year at OBS April. It was our first client horse and first client

sale horse as well. They came back the following year and this time they asked for our opinion and our short list. They purchased a Malibu Moon from our list for \$85,000. We sold that one at OBS in June for \$145,000. It wasn't as wildly successful as the War Front. He was a May foal and needed a little time. Some insignificant issues led to him selling in June. It was right to wait for him. He needed time and we did right by the horse. He was good looking and ready to go."

Rice and de Meric's international experience and connections abroad propel their business beyond the borders of Ocala. Rice was introduced to the horse business in other countries through Darley's Flying Start Thoroughbred Management program where he studied with industry professionals in Ireland, England, Australia, New Zealand and Dubai. Back at home in the U.S., he worked for trainers D. Wayne Lukas and Todd Pletcher, as well as McPeck.

De Meric spent summers galloping horses in Japan from 2007-2010 and has also worked in England, Ireland, France, Australia and New Zealand. She has worked with Pat Costello at Paramount Sales, Francis and Barbara Vanlangendonck of Summerfield Sales, Ted Voute, Dr. Masataki Iida of Chiyoda Farm and Arthur Hancock at Stone Farm.

"We're both well-traveled," Rice said. "It has really helped us. We understand the markets people are coming from and training techniques and how it relates to us. It helps us better serve them."

With their first offering as RiceHorse Stables in the books and training graduates winning on the racetrack, Rice and de Meric are optimistic and confident about engineering a business future filled with possibilities.

"We are so passionate about what we do," said de Meric. "We could wear suits, sit in large towers all day and visit each other on weekends, but the farm is what we both love. We appreciate the space, the freedom, the horses. This is the life we want. It is what we know. It is natural to us. Traffic congestion and stiff collars is not us. Ocala is our home.

"To remain humble and hungry is important to us," she added. "We want to stay within our bounds. We want to take calculated risks and keep moving forward."

With their disciplined approach to the industry, discerning eyes for talented prospects and a supportive family behind them, Rice and de Meric's star is certain to continue its rise. ■

