

HOLLYWOOD

Revival

story by Dave Briggs | photos by Claus Andersen

Anthony Perretti left Hollywood to take the helm of Perretti Farms and in the process revived New Jersey's biggest breeding operation, rekindled his love of horses and strengthened his relationship with his father.

On the surface, Anthony Perretti's nice-guy demeanour and Hollywood pedigree is the antithesis of his father Bill, a sometimes-volcanic, self-made-man never at a loss to express himself.

But check the black type and you'll find the son is more like his father than appearances and first impressions suggest.

Exhibit A is, of course, a shared love of standardbreds reflected in the splendid Perretti Farms in Cream Ridge, NJ which Bill built and Anthony now runs. Exhibit B is the indication that Anthony has his father's gift for sales — as in selling, not horse sales. It's a bit of a stretch to say Anthony is a master salesman and businessman in his father's league. Bill, now 80, pulled himself up from the hardscrabble of the Great Depression to become the world's largest Chrysler and Dodge dealer. But Anthony, who turns 48 in January, is pretty darn convincing in his own right as he lobbies hard to improve the lot of New Jersey's standardbred industry, all while fighting to preserve the rapidly-disappearing farmland in the most densely-populated state in the union.

To that end, on the Tuesday before the Hambletonian, Perretti Farms played host to 30 New Jersey state legislators. The political visit was timed to coincide with a couple busloads of harness racing tourists, mostly from Europe, visiting the farm as part of a pilgrimage to the Hambletonian.

"We did emphasize that this was a worldwide business. Many other years, (the politicians) have not been here. They're unaware of the impact of the operation. For



Anthony Perretti (left) and his father, Bill, the founder of Perretti Farms.



A former potato farm, Perretti rivals Kentucky for its beauty.

them to come out and smell and taste and see it, that's what they really have to understand," Anthony said.

"There were Swedes. There were Norwegians. There were Italians. There were people from all over the world here and (the politicians) realized that there's busloads and busloads of people coming here looking at our operation, looking at the stallions."

Key to the survival of harness racing in New Jersey, now that neighbouring states New York, Pennsylvania and Delaware all have received a cash infusion from race-track slot machines, is securing, at the very least, a renewal of the purse subsidy from the folks running Atlantic City's casinos. The four-year, \$86 million deal to boost both thoroughbred and standardbred purses expired in October.

On Nov. 28, Mike Farrell of the *Bergen Record* wrote that "talks among the governor's office, legislative leaders, horsemen and track officials have not yet produced a time frame or a budget line for a 2008 purse subsidy."

If one fails to arrive, purses at the Meadowlands will be cut nearly in half next year — a devastating blow while purses in bordering jurisdic-

tions flourish.

Anthony is the chair of the board of trustees of the New Jersey Sires Stakes program. He sees more than declining purses at stake in a state that at its peak in the 1980s played host to 104 standardbred stallions and now has fewer than 16.

"It's not about down the line getting a significant subsidy and we get our VLTs, it's about using that money to reinvent the product called harness racing and make (tracks) more of an entertainment venue, than just a gambling venue. And, of course, we have to improve the gambling product."

Anthony was part of a working group of leaders from the horse racing industry, led by New Jersey's secretary of agriculture Charles Kuperus, that produced a document for governor Jon Corzine outlining ways the industry could be improved and what help was needed from the state.

Anthony also has worked with the state's Standardbred Breeders and Owners Association (SBOA) and Rutgers University on a 2007 economic impact study that found New Jersey's horse racing sector is, annually, a \$1.1 billion industry.

Meanwhile, Perretti Farms,

which was heading for closure just a few years ago, is booming under the management team of Anthony and long-time marketing director Bob Marks. The farm was home to nearly 500 horses prior to this year's yearling sales — including some 200 mares and six stallions (McArdle, a seventh Perretti stud, stands in Pennsylvania; an eighth, Dream Vacation, stands for Perretti at Winbak's New York location). The 1,100-acre operation, the largest standardbred farm in the state, is the third leading breeder in North America this year by total progeny earnings (over \$9.2 million) behind Hanover Shoe Farms (over \$23 million) and Winbak Farms (over \$18.2 million), with two-thirds fewer starters than either of the other two farms.

All this in just six years since Anthony left Hollywood in January of 2002 to return to the east coast and take the reins of the farm.

"Dad had already dispersed his pacing mares in 2001," Anthony said. "The following year, he was going to disperse the trotting mares. He came to me and he said, 'Listen, why don't you come to the farm. I don't know what I want to do at this point. The following year, we're

going to finish the dispersal and let's see how it goes and see if you want to get involved back in the horse business.' So, I came back from Los Angeles, put my film career in hiatus."

Anthony spent seven years in Hollywood. He studied at the UCLA's School of Film and Television and then earned a masters degree in film production at the American Film Institute. He went on to help produce a couple of small movies.

When he moved to Perretti Farms, it wasn't long before he became general manager.

"We had a farm manager here looking to leave. She left and so, all of a sudden, I was in the position of trying to run a farm," Anthony said. "I know horses, but I've never run a commercial breeding operation. Everybody here has been very cooperative, very helpful and very collaborative in assisting me in doing that, including my dad."

"Bob Marks, basically, put me in training and gave me a masters degree in pedigree and the farm. He'd give me assignments every night to look this up and look that up."

Running a major breeding operation was new, but Anthony is anything but a neophyte when it





The farm has recovered from a heartbreaking barn fire in March of 2006 that claimed 11 broodmares.

comes to horses. It was his passion for riding as a kid which spurred the family to get involved with horses in the first place. At the time, his father was working 90-100 hours a week building his car dealership empire. He started with a small, unpaved gas station and tiny Plymouth dealership in Hackensack, NJ and grew to locations in New Jersey, New York and Texas. Bill spent so much time working that his first wife was looking for an activity the family could do together on the weekends.

"My mom said, 'You always liked horses when we lived in Brooklyn. You used to go to the riding academy and ride and rent horses.' So we could decide to either have a boat or have horses," Anthony said. "My dad got seasick with the boat, so he wound up getting horses. We started out in Pocono, Pennsylvania with \$200 hack horses or cheap riding horses. He enjoyed himself. We rode as a family. Then we bought a small place up in the Poconos and we built indoor arenas and barns and so forth."

That led the Perrettis to own quarter horses, then cutting horses for cattle. When the family moved to Texas, Bill bought a cattle ranch.

"It was a horse world," Anthony said.

In the late-1970s, when Anthony was in high school, the family moved back to the New York area. Soon he was off to pursue a business administration degree at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, NJ, while his dad became interested in a new breed of horses — standardbreds.

The story of how Bill Perretti became involved in harness racing is well known, but worth the retelling. In the late-1970s, the Meadowlands was hopping as a chic, new playpen for New Yorkers. Especially popular was the track's Pegasus dining room. One night, Bill tried to get a table and was turned away.

"He couldn't get in," Anthony said. "He saw the healthiness of the business and decided to buy some racehorses."

Bill soon met trainer George Berkner and bought some horses. Before Anthony knew it, he was working in the barn for Berkner during the morning, going to school in the afternoons and then working for Berkner at night at the Meadowlands.

"That was my introduction. I was warming up horses at night at

the Meadowlands with George. After that, George was no longer our trainer and I trained with Jim Campbell the first year Jim had a training place. I worked with Jim Campbell and John Campbell for about a year or so. John was my boss," Anthony said.

From there, Anthony worked with his father in the car business for 10 years before heading for Hollywood, initially to sell cars.

At the same time, Bill Perretti was beginning to build what would become Perretti Farms.

"Dad started with racehorses and then went with Bart Glass and bought some top race fillies and needed a place to put the fillies after they retired from racing. All of a sudden, he was in the broodmare business," Anthony said. "He came down to Cream Ridge, New Jersey, and looked for a farm in the mid-1980s, 20 years ago exactly. There was an old potato farm and he converted it over to a horse farm."

Stallions were soon added and the operation grew exponentially from there, particularly on the strength of veteran stallion Matts Scooter, who is still breeding mares at the age of 22. Lifetime, Matts Scooter's progeny have earned nearly \$70 million combined, with average earnings per starter of some \$71,000.

The star of the Perretti stallion roster today is Muscles Yankee, the leading sire of two-year-old trotters in 2007 (\$3.2 million combined) and third overall counting all progeny (\$7.8 million).

The recent rebirth of the farm has included the addition of McArdle and Red River Hanover in 2004, European trotter Revenue and trotting Triple Crown winner Windsongs Legacy in 2005 and U.S. horse of the year Rocknroll Hanover in 2006.

Standing Red River Hanover helped the farm establish a relationship with owner Jeffrey Snyder of New York City which led to Snyder's decision to stand Rocknroll Hanover at the farm.

Meanwhile, Anthony's continuing education into running a breeding farm led to Revenue ending up at Perretti Farms. While on a trip to Scandinavia — part of a world harness racing tour that has included Australia and New Zealand — Anthony spotted Revenue at the Elitlopp in Sweden.

"I called up Bob and dad and said, 'I've only been in the business a couple of years now, but I've never seen a horse like this race and I think we

should really look at him,'" Anthony said. "I talked to the connections of Revenue and said, 'Please bring him here, campaign the horse in the States and people will see what a spectacular horse he is.' That was our plan and we did that. Then we did a purchase agreement. I believe Revenue could be the key to the future, the genetic diversity that we're looking for in the harness industry. We're very enthusiastic about that."

Perretti's mare roster has also been particularly prolific of late, despite a devastating barn fire in March of 2006 which claimed the lives of 11 mares.

"That probably was the most horrific experience that I've ever been through," Anthony said of the early-morning blaze which gutted one of the barns. "It was like family for people here that lost these horses. To the people that work here, those horses are family."

Yet, the farm took that kick to the solar plexus and carried on.

"Bob Marks looked back at our past records and he said this is the best year in 12 years for Perrettibreds, ever, that we have on the farm," Anthony said.

It all owes much to a shared love of horses between Bill and Anthony Perretti nurtured when the latter was just a boy and the former was Wild Bill, ruler of a car dealership empire.

"My fondest memories as a child and young teenager come from spending the weekends with my dad, riding horses, showing horses, rounding up cattle, going to the training centres in the horse business, going to horse shows before that," Anthony said. "That's the time that I've personally spent with my dad the most. That's the part I remember the most. Obviously, we were partners in the car business, but that's more of a business relationship. I think the horse business is more of a personal relationship."

It's a relationship that's been rekindled since Bill pulled the farm back from the brink of closure, saving New Jersey's biggest standardbred nursery.

"The decision was made with Bob Marks and my dad to disperse the entire inventory. That decision was a legitimate dispersal," Anthony said.

"For a man that was basically dispersing and getting out of the business, he has jumped in with two feet forward.

"If there wasn't a relationship between my dad and myself, I assume the farm would not be here." ❁

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