



Totally Tropical

**From the winner's podium
to basking in sunshine.....**

by Catherine Gray

Some of our keener-eyed readers may have spotted the quiet and unassuming news snippet in Horse and Hound last week, announcing that the showjumping stallion Hamilton Tropics has retired from competition and headed off to the south of France for a quieter life in the sun, away from his lifelong home at the Lights' Brendon Stud. Few, however, will know the circumstances for his retirement, or the flurry of activity that resulted in him heading off to live the life of Reilly, so, after catching her breath from the whirlwind last few days, Shirley Light agreed to explain a little more about this special horse, and his new owner Martin Sheach managed to stop polishing his new yard resident just long enough to give me his story.

Hamilton Tropics is known to all his friends as 'Kouros', as Brendon stud chooses a different topic each year for naming foals, and 1998 was the year for perfumes and aftershaves. Standing a majestic and gloriously chestnut 17.2hh, he was sired by Hamilton III, whom Cyril Light bought as a 2 year old, and who competed up to grade A / 1.40m until retiring to stud once it was clear that combining competing with stud duties made for an 'eventful' mix. Kouros' dam Katie [officially Tropicana] was also bred at Brendon Stud by Tropic Star, another colt that Brendon Stud had bought as a 2 year old and competed up to grade A. Katie was out of Annabelle, another home-bred, out of one of Brendon's first ever brood mares Quick Que, by Arctic Que; Katie was also the dam of Mistabit, Lady Tropics, Charleston Esquire and Special To Me, the latter 3 of which have all competed BSJA. Lady Tropics has since had one foal, and Charleston Esquire was sold to Holland, leaving one progeny stallion in the UK in Greenbank Harlequin. Special To Me ('Kourtney') competed until she started breeding and she is the mother of Sussex Caretino ('Klarins') who is currently performing extremely successfully under saddle. For those spotting the recurring initial 'K', Brendon Stud like to continue using the initial of a homebred's stable name from its dam.

Shirley Light, Brendon Stud's manager, was the one to pull Kouros into the world late in the evening of the 26th March 1998. His dam Katie was only 15.1hh, so Kouros was a big push for her, even though his sire was a very reasonable 16.2hh. For all his huge size, Shirley describes him as being "one of the most timid foals I have ever had." Sadly, Katie only had one more foal after Kouros, which is Kourtney, and she ruptured badly and died; the hunt to find a foster mare over the Easter holidays was luckily successful, but nevertheless gave rise to Kourtney's proper name Special To Me. Shirley went on to say that "as a weanling and yearling, Kouros actually had to winter by himself as he refused point blank to share his feed! He still dearly loves his grub now! In the field, however, he was always the gentle giant he is now."

Having a keen eye for spotting talent at an early age, Shirley saw that Kouros had fantastic technique over a fence from an early age, demonstrating carefulness and bravery – indeed, it was only much later that the Lights discovered quite how brave he actually is.



Kouros loose jumping as a 3 year old

Licensed with the AES as a 4 year old, Kouros then returned as a 5 year old in November where he was awarded Full Approval. This is when he suffered a freak accident whilst being trotted up on a bit of tarmac. As Guy Williams gently brought him back to a walk, Kouros slipped and lost his footing, ending up on his belly, completely spread-eagled on the ground. Scrabbling desperately to stand, Kouros went for about 20 yards like this until he heard Shirley frantically telling him to stop, at which point he then sat and stayed like a dog, now only inches from numerous parked cars. He stayed quietly down while Shirley and helpers rushed to put vetwrap round his feet for grip and numerous rugs under him (from the other waiting stallions) and then he was helped up. Shirley says "I have never before nor since seen anything so frightening - I really thought he'd broken numerous legs. His front legs had also been ripped wide open as he was crawling and he was bleeding on all four legs - fetlocks, knees, hocks and a big gash on his near hind stifle. The haematomas started coming up immediately between his front legs, across his belly and all over his legs. We had the vet make him comfortable and took him home to recover." The swellings



Who this on board ???!!

apparently took several weeks to go down but he was never actually lame, so was kept in light work to help with the swelling, but after a couple of shows in January 2004 he was clearly still sore and had a few haematomas left, so it was decided to give him 6 months in the field, coming back to competition later that year. With hindsight, Shirley now realises that this accident was when he first damaged the meniscus ligament in his near hind that was to prove the primary factor in curtailing his career, but because he was such a brave and stoical sort, says Shirley, "he never told us."

As a young horse, Kouros was competed by Joe Clee and Guy Williams, and Guy won at Hickstead and Lanaken on him as a 5 year old. Kouros continued winning and in 2006, Damien Charles (Peter Charles' nephew)



Kouros with Guy Williams at Lanaken

took over the ride, as Guy was away competing abroad a lot more. Kouros' most prolific achievement was coming 4th in the Hickstead Derby in 2007, ridden by Damien.

It was at the end of 2007 that Louise Pavitt started riding for Brendon Stud as their main rider, so in 2008 Louise took over the ride. While jumping at the area trial at Oxford show in 2008, Kouros had a bad slip on a turn in the first round, but went on to jump a clear in the jump off. It was not until Shirley watched the video replay that she saw how bent back his near hind had gone on that slip. He was lame the next day and when Ed Lyall the vet examined him, his stifle was fairly swollen and with ultrasound scanning, damage to the meniscus ligament



Kouros at the Hickstead Derby

was discovered. Kouros had 9 months off but went lame again shortly after he returned to jumping in 2009, so then had more box rest and it was agreed that the best option was surgery. He went to Liphook for the operation, which went well, but the damage was described by the surgeon as being "the most spectacular meniscus tear" he had ever seen – hardly the most uplifting, positive comment an owner could wish to hear. After a long recuperation, Kouros came back into to competition in summer 2010 and was good for a while, winning in fine style with Louise at 1.30/1.40m.



Kouros with Louise Pavitt at ???



However, just before the Welsh Masters in April 2011, he went lame again, but after 4 weeks box rest he was a hundred per cent sound so was brought back into work. Careful visual assessment showed that whilst sound, he was not pushing off the ground totally evenly, so Shirley decided to have the stifle joint medicated, and also to compete him only at 1.20/1.30m level, to see how we went. He was back in competition again for August and was in flying form! Shirley went on to tell me “One thing about Kouros is, that at 17.3hh, he is naturally quick, probably the fastest horse we ever had! In late October this year, we took him to Bury Farm for a 3 day show and he duly won on the first day by 3 and a half seconds, and we had taken the long route to the last line!”

Sadly, Bury Farm was where Kouros was to jump his last in competition. He had been jumping superbly on day two of the show until Louise had a slight mishap at the last fence, and then on the third day, he had a unusual stop at the third fence so Lou retired him, as he had hadn't felt quite right on the turn. The next day (the Saturday) he trotted up a little lame, but on the Monday [31st October] he was lamer, and so Shirley had a long and very difficult conversation with vet Ed Lyall, and they agreed that Kouros' jumping days were over. Shirley says very candidly, “For 2 days, I thought long and hard.... and cried. On Wednesday, I told my parents, Cyril and Valerie, that I thought we should put Kou to sleep and we were all agreed. He's a very special person is my Kou, and the one thing he would absolutely hate is to live out in the field and spend 2 minutes a day with people. I have well over a hundred horses here and I knew I couldn't give him the time and attention he would be happy with, or deserved. I also have to add that I have regretted parting with a stallion in the past, and that was a sound one. So, with many more tears shed, on Thursday I rang Ed to arrange for him to come Friday afternoon, and I had to call the knackerman. He was booked in for 3 o'clock Friday afternoon.” Explaining to her niece Ruby, one of Kouros' most ardent fans, that Kouros would be leaving them was no easy task, but in the way that children so often surprise us, Ruby's response that it would take many angels to lift a big boy like Kouros upwards.



Ruby with Kouros

At this point, Shirley also contacted everyone who had a connection to Kouros and many people came to say their goodbyes. She admits that she and Louise were both “a complete mess” and found it impossible to talk to anyone. Later on, on Thursday, Shirley sent a friend, Martin Sheach, a message on Facebook to tell him. Martin was far away in the south of France, but Shirley knew he'd want to be told, as he was a huge fan of Kouros and has a youngster by him, having first met Shirley when enquiring about one of Shirley's other stallions, Unbelievable Darco [Fred] to use on Sanbucca Baby, a 15hh International Grade A mare who jumped throughout Great Britain with her owner Aileen Craig with BSJA winnings over £10,000. Subsequently, Martin had used Kouros on his lovely Royal Renown showjumping mare Inishmore, resulting in Jack [Hamish du Pouquet], foaled in 2008. Martin had long followed Fred's and Kouros' careers and had called in several times on his way between Scotland and France, always good for a bottle of her favourite tipple, Jamieson's, apparently!

Later that Thursday night, Martin rang Shirley to offer Kouros a home for life. Shirley recalls that she was still so upset about the events of the previous few days that she could barely speak, so Martin spoke to her sister, Caz, and emailed photos of his home in the south-west of France. The night of Thursday was a very difficult time for Shirley, and early Friday morning she took herself off to think long and hard what to do. Despite the stallions at Brendon Stud being competition horses and a part of a large commercially-grounded stud, they are not treated as commodities, and their welfare is always paramount. Shirley knew she had a duty to make the right choice for Kouros and decided that as long as Martin signed a contract saying Kouros would never be competed or sold, that she would give Kouros over to him, and let him emigrate to France. Martin took no time to commit to this and Kouros' future was secured.

And so a day that had dawned in doom and despair became a day of profound relief and widespread delight, albeit tinged with the sadness of Kouros' departure to pastures new. But... the rush was now on, as Martin already had a lorry from LOC Transport going out to him en route to Spain, booked to leave in 2 days' time, with a considerably less exciting cargo of sugar beet (which Martin has trouble sourcing in France). All the stops had to be pulled out to meet the necessary legal requirements for exporting a live horse, and luckily, Martin already had all Kouros' vital statistics to give to Liz O'Connor from LOC, who was then charged with pestering DEFRA for the necessary paperwork she needed, along with what Shirley would be providing in the UK, to ensure that Kouros would be on that south-bound sunshine bus.



Travelling in style with LOC Transport.....

Most people had already said their goodbyes, but on Sunday, Shirley loaded Kouros, and admits that she nearly fell up the ramp due to the tears. Cyril, Valerie, Nancy [one of his old grooms] and Karl his dentist looked on. Shirley had already done her part of the paperwork, put on his stable rug and packed 5 large boxes of Polos in the lorry – essential tuck box content for Kouros – and whilst it was inevitably upsetting to wave goodbye to such a lovely horse, Shirley, her family and friends were clearly reassured to know that Kouros has found in his new home with Martin an ~~adoring slave~~ attentive new owner who, in the run-up to Kouros' arrival, was as excited as a small child at Christmas by the prospect of welcoming Kouros into his new home. Martin had his 40th birthday, and in his own words, this was to be the “best birthday present EVER”!

And so, where exactly is “there”, where this precious cargo has gone to? Well, after years of owning and breeding horses in the West of Scotland, Martin and his wife Ann had become tired and fed up with the constant wind and rain, and decided to start the house hunt for a suitable property in the South of France, where they knew they would enjoy a much better climate. Having looked at around 20 properties - some that they hadn't dared even get out of the car to look at - they moved to their new home at Du Pouquet Stud, Coudures near Pau, in March 2008 and have bred a few foals each year to their young Lauriston stallion Auriston Elite. They now offer an AI station and livery yard with a facility to accommodate mares and mares and foals, and also work with equine transport companies offering lairage services for them en route to Spain. Martin is also the South of France representative for Bluegrass Horse Feeds. With 50 acres of land that is well suited to horses, and with weather that is much drier and temperatures even in November in the mid twenties degrees, horses can be turned out more or less all year round. They have 19 boxes in total, 5 of which measure 18ft x 14ft, so they certainly have plenty of room to accommodate Kouros.



Martin's photos on Facebook show how unruffled Kouros was when he arrived, having travelled in quite some style, albeit with only some sugar beet for company. Top of his 'Things To Do' list, however, was to get his head down to grass, and Martin duly obliged. After a few days settling in, Martin says “You would think he has been here all his life. He is stabled next to his son, now standing at 16.3hh and very much looks his father's son. We can only hope Jack has half the talent of his father. It has to be the first time that the vet has come to visit and we have not been charged a call out fee! The vet previously jumped to Grand Prix level in France and thought that Kouros was amazing.” Martin says that the first priority is to get Kouros back to being comfortably sound and to keep him that way; he hopes to do some gentle hacking, and perhaps some low-key jumping at home later next year.



Martin also hopes to promote Kouros as a stallion at stud and in the future to collect from him for freezing, so that Kouros is still available in the UK. In the UK, Kouros had an assortment of mares and his progeny are mostly competing

in Eventing. Gemma Tattersall has Tropique, and there is also Be Tropical and Maestro Tropics. Shirley has bred Guidam Tropics who competed in showjumping and is now breeding, but there are not very many Kouros progeny about because, as Shirley puts it, Kouros “....doesn’t like sex! In fact he thinks it’s a dirty filthy job that someone else should do!” As a 5 or 6 year old, Shirley says that he decided to become celibate, and after spending just under 3 hours trying to entice him with 5 different mares, they gave up and took him off the stud cards. The stud soon moved over to working with AI only, and the ever resourceful Ed Lyall suggested trying valium for Kouros. In Shirley’s words “I thought we had Buckley’s chance but, sure enough, after 50 minutes, we had take off and Kou got on the dummy mare! With a bit of trial and error I got it down to a valium shot, 20 minutes in stable and 15 minutes teasing. The funniest thing, though, is that when he is teasing, he has to lick the mare all over, then when he’s ready [to collect] he runs backwards to get on the dummy! I’ve had a bit of sport over the years with a new groom holding the mare, as I always forget to tell them he runs away at the end!”

Whatever happens, we can be sure that Shirley and family will be keeping in regular touch with Martin, and updates and photographs are ‘givens’. Martin will clearly be putting his new stallion’s well-being at the forefront, and visitors are always welcome. In Martin’s own words “[I] just feel so lucky!” Further testament to this is that the Sheach’s recently had a few friends over to celebrate Martin’s forthcoming birthday and the present Martin got from them was a brand new grooming box with the name “KOUROS” printed on it filled with new brushes, combs etc. so I think we can safely say he has his own fanclub out there already.



One final note for anyone who plans on visiting Kouros – take Polos, and plenty of them as they’re a rare commodity in France!