



CTBA Member
PROFILE

TWO
HEMISPHERES,
TWO
DISCIPLINES:
A LOVE STORY

GRAEME AND LU THOMAS

BY EMILY SHIELDS

Graeme and Lu Thomas have the unique ability to lead multiple lives, seamlessly weaving them into one. They run breeding operations in both New Zealand and California, and they delve equally into the worlds of horse racing and show jumping. They keep everything balanced despite doing a majority of the work themselves—from foaling mares to selling yearlings—and logging extensive air miles.

Born in Thames, New Zealand, Graeme Thomas was introduced to horses at just 4 years old. He became renowned for his skill and rode for the New Zealand Olympic Equestrian Team from 1966-71. But the United States beckoned, as Thomas fell in love with Lu, a New York-born, FEI World Cup-level rider he had met at a clinic in 1963.

“I came over for two weeks in 1971, and I’m still trying to get back to New Zealand,” Thomas joked about the marriage.

Now their time is divided, with October

through December spent in New Zealand and the rest of the year spent either in California or traveling to horse shows out of state. Although retired from competition, Lu Thomas used to show a Grand Prix jumper named Native Code. The strong-willed California-bred by Pocketful in Vail gave the Thomases a run for their money.

“We took him to Bay Meadows for training, and he kept throwing riders off and running around the track,” Graeme said. “He eventually got ruled off the track until we could control him. I was going to geld him, but a lady named Signe Ostby said he was too pretty to go back to the track. She bought him from us, and he never went back to the track again. Instead, he became one of the best show jumpers in the country.”

That experience didn’t deter the Thomases from the racetrack.

“We always had the odd racehorse,” Graeme said. “I have my trainer’s license in New Zealand, and we have someone there who gets the babies ready for us.”

The couple buys mares in Kentucky to foal



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LU THOMAS

Graeme and Lu Thomas raise California-breds at their Willow Tree Farm

and be bred back to California stallions, thus producing more California-breds.

"This California breeders incentive thing is fantastic," Graeme said. "It's really the best thing there is. We get paid all the time."

With an even split of 50% racehorses and 50% show jumpers, the Thomases look for success in both arenas.

"I usually have the idea I'm going to sell my homebreds," said Graeme, who regularly has horses for sale in California's yearling auctions. "But I had three that didn't sell and they've all won."

Count Hu, a Cal-bred by Vronsky, broke his maiden second out at Golden Gate Fields in May, then ran third in an allowance optional claiming race at the Oak Tree at Pleasanton meet.

Other top performers over the last few years include multiple stakes-placed winner Oh Molly Brannigan (a homebred), stakes-placed Crown the King, and four-time winner Justcruise. All are Cal-breds.

"My mares are decent enough," Graeme said. "I have a Storm Cat mare, a Tale of the Cat mare, a Vindication mare. I bought four in Kentucky, and they foaled babies this year by Tonalist, Palace, Mucho Macho Man, and Summer Front, which is a fantastic-looking colt. Some of them are in foal to Acclamation now, so I'll have a whole herd of horses for next year."

The Storm Cat mare is Lady From Shanghai, who has had six winners from nine starters. All six were bred under the Thomases' banner, Willow Tree Farm. Her Lemon Drop Kid colt, born in 1999, was named Shanghai Kid, a one-time winner in five starts. The Thomases brought him home when he was unruly on the track.



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"He was very talented but a little bit stupid," said Graeme. "He wouldn't train quietly and wanted to breeze every day. We couldn't convince him that he didn't need to do that. So he is standing in our front paddock to this day."

They had an unraced Cozzene mare, Cozzekiki, whom Thomas said, "had melanomas all over. I bred them together, just to see."

The resulting foal, Shanghai Kid's only offspring, is Cozze Kid, who sold at the 2017 California Thoroughbred Breeders Association Northern California yearling sale at Pleasanton for \$4,500.

"She had no pedigree to speak of," Graeme admitted. But Cozze Kid broke her maiden first out at Golden Gate by 8¾ lengths, finishing just short of tying the track record.

"I got a call from someone looking for Shanghai Kid," Graeme said. "I said, 'Well, he's standing in the paddock here.'"

The guy said he's the sire of the fastest horse at Golden Gate. So I bred another mare to him. I guess he'll have two foals now."

Cozze Kid finished fourth in this year's Everett Nevin Stakes and has earned \$26,625 in three starts.

Watching horses he raised do well for others doesn't bother Thomas in the slightest.

"I like to sell them and have them go well," he said.

Moonless Sky, by Bold Chieftain, was sold for \$6,500 and has earned \$276,310 in 17 starts. Thermopolis, by Acclamation, was a \$10,000 yearling purchase who has gone on to earn \$70,450. Willow Tree Farm sold a Boisterous colt at the Pleasanton sale in 2018 for \$15,000.

The Thomases have 20 horses in New Zealand and closing in on 60 in California.

"I love a nice horse, no matter if it is a racehorse or a jumper," Graeme said. "I get along with the babies great and like working with them. If they get put on the ground properly, they develop a great brain. Lu and I do everything ourselves, but it's time to start thinking about getting some help. We're getting older."

After all this time, one of their favorite memories is winning the NCTA Sales Stakes for Males in 1985 with All the Bucks, a Washington-bred.

"We won that division, and Tom Bachman won the female division," Thomas said. "We are both hunter-jumper people, and there we were, both winning stakes races at Bay Meadows. What were the odds of that?"

It's about as likely as two show horse riders falling in love in New Zealand and becoming successful racehorse breeders in California. **CTB**