

THE NEW DEAL

BY TERESA GENARO



Robin Malatino mixes things up while marketing War Dancer

SKIP DICKSTEIN

NEVER LET IT BE SAID that Robin Malatino shies from a challenge.

Twenty-five years ago she was part of a group of investors who purchased Saratoga Mineral Water, the Saratoga Springs company that had been in operation for a century before Evian shut it down in the early 1990s. The man who became her husband, Capital Region native Anthony Malatino, couldn't bear to see the local institution perish, so he initiated the sale estimated to be between \$4 and \$5 million.

Under Robin's leadership as CEO and chairperson of the Saratoga Beverage Group, Saratoga Spring Water became a national brand and a Nasdaq-traded company with annual sales of \$10 million, and eight years after purchasing the company, she sold it for \$58.5 million.

Speaking by phone recently from Florida, where she and her husband spend

half the year, Malatino recalled a pivotal moment in the company's growth.

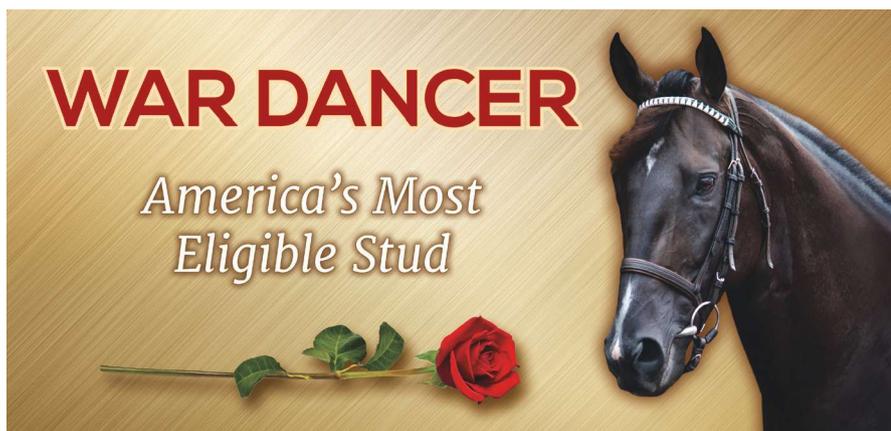
"I was in a meeting at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan with their food and beverage manager," she said. "We were competing against Poland Springs for a contract, and our bid was more expensive than theirs. He said to me, 'You know, Robin, it's just water in a bottle.'"

"I thought, 'Jeez, he's right.'"

So she reenvisioned the product. The company created the distinctive deep blue bottle with gold script, a design still in use and immediately recognizable, and she went back to the Plaza.

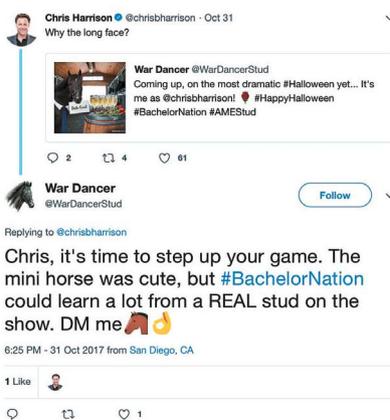
"We increased our price because the cost was higher to produce it," she said, "and he took it. It was still the same water, but it was about marketing and packaging."

Now the senior vice president of Malatino and Associates at Morgan Stanley in Celebration, Fla., and the owner with Anthony of an 80-acre horse farm near Saratoga Springs, she entered the racing business about a decade ago with the same intrepidity, creativity,



IMAGES COURTESY ROBIN MALATINO

Name recognition is the goal of the marketing campaign for War Dancer



Screen shots from Twitter that showcase War Dancer and his career as a stallion

and single-mindedness with which she won that Plaza contract, meeting its challenges with equal success.

After the Malatinos began buying horses, Robin insisted that they needed a farm, initially envisioned as a place to retire them safely. Anthony was less convinced, but he agreed, provided she could find one within the limits of the city of Saratoga Springs, which is not exactly known for its open spaces.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Robin found one, less than two miles from Saratoga Race Course. That it was owned and inhabited was no deterrent.

“I knocked on the owner’s door,” said Robin, “and I said, ‘I need to buy your property. I have horses and I need a farm. He said, ‘It’s not for sale.’”

Eight months later the farm was theirs.

But now, as the Malatinos enter the stallion business, Robin is facing a challenge that even she acknowledges is a little daunting. A year ago, when their multiple graded stakes winner War Dancer was set to begin his stud career at Rockridge Stud near Hudson, Malatino spoke confidently of a first-year book of 100 mares.

“I ate those words,” she admitted. “I was much more naïve than I am now. This whole making of a stallion is a tough, tough business.”

Drawing on her experience with Saratoga Water, she realized she needed to do something to make War

Dancer stand out. Sure, he’s a millionaire son of War Front out of a graded stakes-placed mare, but that wasn’t bringing mares to New York to breed to him, so Malatino regrouped and launched a multi-pronged campaign.

When she talks about War Dancer, she talks about him much as she would talk about a person, delighting in his personality, and she knew that she needed to bring that personality to life. She hired Grand Slam Social to create a War Dancer Instagram account, and



The social media campaign for War Dancer, which places the stallion in different situations, was created by Grand Slam Social

she put out a press release announcing a parody on the romance reality show “The Bachelor,” “America’s Most Eligible Stud.”

“You don’t know how people in the industry are going to react,” she acknowledged. “But you get a huge bang for your buck with social media. One of our social media team was doing a farm tour in Florida, and she mentioned that she works with War Dancer. The farm manager was an older gentleman, and he said, ‘Oh, I know him. He’s the Bachelor Stud.’

“It was like, ‘Bingo.’ That was the goal.”

In conjunction with the social media campaign, the Malatinos also ran the New York breeding numbers, and realized they’d have to be able to get mares from out of state. They knew that the lucrative New York breeding program could be a draw, but to be part of it for an out-of-state mare would entail high shipping and boarding costs.

“So we thought,” said Malatino, “what if we were to shift the risk of those expenses from them to us?”

They established criteria for the sort of mares to which they’d breed War Dancer—stakes performer or stakes producer, crosses through body type



Robin Malatino

or nicking, age—and offered to pay the travel expenses and 90 days' board, continuing the reality show theme by calling it "Breeding with the Stars."

They built it and the mares came, from a half dozen states and Canada, 40 of them that shipped in and bred to War Dancer at his \$5,000 stud fee.

their New York-bred Honor Up (To Honor and Serve—Unobstructed View, by Yes It's True), a \$65,000 purchase at the 2016 Fasig-Tipton Saratoga sale of preferred New York-bred yearlings, broke his maiden at Aqueduct Dec. 9 by 11¾ lengths. At the recent Keeneland November sale of breeding stock,

locals, the last-named in the hope of bringing new people into the racing industry.

"I think it will be a blast," she said. "People will have a chance to show off the baby in a wonderful, gentle environment, not the stress of a sale. Seeing the mother and the baby is different from seeing the baby alone, and I want people to see how beautiful that is."

As she embarks on a new endeavor with horses at the beginning of their lives, she continues to think about what happens to them when their careers are at an end, recalling her experience at Parx when War Dancer won the listed PTHA President's Cup Stakes.

"We were in a room for people with horses in stakes races," she recounted. "There's a buffet, the bar's open, and set up in the room is a booth for Parx's aftercare program Turning for Home.

"They engaged me in conversation; they noticed that we were the favorite. We were excited and I said, 'If we win this race, you meet me in the winner's circle.'"

They did win the \$200,000 race, and, said Malatino, "They were in the winner's circle before we got there. It was very smart: I wrote them a check. You've got to get people in this business in that moment of happiness and excitement—not when they've got a horse that's about to retire.

"People spend silly money for yearlings and 2-year-olds," she continued. "If you just ding them a little bit at that point, they don't feel it. We need to all do our part. You can't have the 5% carrying the 95%. Those numbers don't work."

Malatino would love, at some point, to take an official role in Thoroughbred aftercare, but with a full-time job and her War Dancer enterprise, there's not a lot of time left in the day to take on yet another time-consuming project. Plus, she's got a lot to get ready for in early 2018, when War Dancer's first foals hit the ground.

"I'm not going to be able to breathe," she said. "I'm going to be a grandmother!" 🐾



ADAM COGLIANESE/NYRA

The Malatinos' state-bred Honor Up breaking his maiden Dec. 9 at Aqueduct

"We had people who'd never set foot in New York State," she said. "They're excited about the New York-bred program. Think about it: If you sell your baby, you continue to get paid an annuity. When you sell a baby in Kentucky, that's it. Here, it's just the beginning."

The program was so successful the Malatinos will limit the 2018 crop of new out-of-state mares to 25, with the expectation that many of this year's breedings will be repeated.

Continuing the romance, the War Dancer team sends out cards, love notes, and candy to the mares bred to him, leading one mare owner to comment, "I've been doing this for 45 years, and you're the first person to send us gifts. Usually, we just get a bill."

Despite the focus on establishing War Dancer as a stallion, the Malatinos continue to buy and race horses;

they bought six mares to breed to War Dancer next year, signing the ticket in the name of "War Dancer's Ladies," adding to the 15 mares they already have. They run horses in the name of Saratoga Seven, Diamond M Stable, and Double M Thoroughbreds, owning in partnership about a dozen runners.

Next summer the Malatinos' Sugar Plum Farm will host a showcase day for War Dancer's foals. Malatino envisions it as a mare/foal runway show, inspired by a similar event at Vivien Malloy's Edition Farm. "We'll have War Dancer there, too, so there will be a family photo op: mom, dad, baby," she said. "You never see that."

In preparation for next year's Fasig-Tipton Horses of All Ages in October and the 2019 Fasig-Tipton New York-bred sale, she'll invite pinhookers, other interested industry people, and