

Water working wonders

By [AIDAN RODLEY](#) - Waikato Times | Monday, 09 February 2009

Water is the new grass.

Just as fashions change from year to year and from season to season, it seems racehorse training methods are changing too. More and more trainers are opting to use swimming and aqua walking for cross-training and sometimes even the basis of their training regimes.

Soon after the Japanese quinella in the 2006 Melbourne Cup, when both Delta Blues and Pop Rock's connections revealed aqua walking was a key training tool, Sir Slick became a high-profile transformation from battler into champion through his time on Jane Bennett's water treadmill. The six-time Gr I winner revelled with his return to the water treadmill after a disappointing international campaign to regain his best form and win last month's Thorndon Mile. In the past three years, it has become commonplace for horses to either use a water treadmill or a water walker. Matamata trainer John Sargent says the aqua walker at Russell and Robyn Rogers' Kedayla Park has been a key part of his training for smart mare Ruud Van Slaats.

The Van Nistelrooy four-year-old is not blessed with the best legs for racing and Sargent has taken advantage of taking the weight off her legs in training as much as possible. Just as star sportsmen take to the pool to aid their recovery after a big game, Ruud Van Slaats headed straight for the aqua walker on her return from Trentham, where she ran a game third to Mufhasa and Atapi in last month's Gr I \$1 million Telegraph Handicap (1200m). Sargent can only get one track gallop out of Ruud Van Slaats a week and, having done her main trackwork at Matamata on Tuesday in preparation for tomorrow's Gr I \$1 million Waikato Draught Sprint (1400m), she was restricted to swimming on Thursday morning.

"She's been on the water walker at the Rogers since Trentham but she was back for a gallop this week," Sargent said.

"She's nice and tight and ready to go for Saturday. She's a big mare but with her bad legs we can't ride her too much and that's where the water walker has been so good.



"It keeps her fit without putting pressure on her legs."

Sargent has become a fan of using swimming and aqua walking for cross-training and said he had noticed a trend towards water as a key training tool.

"I use it a lot for horses which are shin sore, like our good two-year-old Mr Thorpedo," he said.

"I want to get him ready for the Manawatu Sires' [Produce Stakes in March]. He was shin sore and I had to put him out for a break but instead of six weeks in the paddock, he's had three weeks and three weeks on the water walker, and you wouldn't know the difference. It's especially good this time of year with the hard tracks, and with horses with any injuries.

"And it's great for the horses with this hot weather now."

The Heckler was the latest big race winner confined to swimming as he prepared to win last month's \$1 million Karaka Million and Sargent is now hoping Ruud Van Slaats can produce a career-best win in tomorrow's weight-for-age sprint.

"Obviously the mare is right on form. She's done really well since Wellington," Sargent said.

"She's drawn wide but she'll roll over from there. She can run on the speed or just behind it but she does race forward and she'll be in the first three or four coming to the turn.

"She loves the track and she keeps fighting there. She's suited because it's not a real backrunners track.

"Mufhasa is again the one to beat, but she's fit and well and I'm happy with her."

Ruud Van Slaats has won five of her 13 starts, with a sequence of three victories leading into her Telegraph third in a Rating 80 1200m race at Te Rapa in November, the Gr II Auckland Thoroughbred Breeders' Stakes (1400m) at Pukekohe later that month and the Gr II Cal Isuzu 1600 Stakes at Te Rapa in December. She has raced at Te Rapa on four occasions for three wins and a placing and she is reunited tomorrow with jockey Jason Waddell, who was aboard for both her Gr II victories. Craig Grylls will ride her stablemate Red Ruler, a winner of four from 16 who ran second in the \$2 million Kelt Capital Stakes under weight-for-age conditions earlier this season.

His last start resulted in a third placing in the Gr II Sandown Classic in Melbourne and has returned to the stables in excellent condition, according to Sargent.



"He's only had three gallops and he'll definitely need the run but he's a good horse and he'll go a good race. He's come through quarantine really well," Sargent said. "I wouldn't think he's ready to win at this stage of the preparation but he's drawn one and he'll be three or four back on the fence and if the split came he could run into it."

Sargent said Red Ruler would probably head to Ellerslie for his second run in the Gr I weight-for-age New Zealand Stakes (2000m) on March 7 before heading to Sydney, where he would contest the Gr I Ranvet Stakes (2000m) at Rosehill on March 21 and the Gr I A\$2.25 million The BMW (2400m) at Rosehill on April 4.