

Racing Post Bloodstock The Bloodstock Big Read



France correspondent **Scott Burton** chats to Haras de Grandcamp's Eric Lhermite about Zagrey and Big Rock

THE HANDS-ON STALLION MASTER BACK IN THE GAME WITH TWO EXCITING NEW SIRES

THE hill on which Haras de Grandcamp is perched ensures there is nearly always a breeze, yet somehow the design of the stallion yard offers protection from whichever direction it comes, while the welcome is always warm during the annual Normandy stallion parade, the Route des Etalons.

When I last pitched up at Eric Lhermite's (*below*) front door, he was standing Lawman, Dream Ahead and Dabirsim among others, while the newcomer that year was Martinborough.

Since that visit in 2019, it's the winds of change which have been blowing through Grandcamp, which waved goodbye to the last of those venerable servants at the end of the 2022 covering season, as Lhermite focused all his attention on the other aspects of his breeding business.

But after two years away, Grandcamp will make a major statement in returning to the scene with two of the most exciting newcomers to France's stallion ranks in Grosser Preis von Baden winner Zagrey and QEII Stakes hero Big Rock.

So what prompted Lhermite to quit the sire business after 18 consecutive seasons? And, just as importantly, what has tempted him back so soon?

"We had some trouble in terms of getting the right staff and while that isn't completely sorted out, we're in much better shape than two years ago and I'm less worried on that front," says Lhermite, who founded Grandcamp with wife Isabelle in 2004.

"We reduced our services temporarily and I also wanted to focus on attracting better stallions. I wanted to start over with some young sires and hopefully with some better ones."

It was Zagrey who proved an irresistible lure for Lhermite, who consigned the son of Zarak on behalf of his breeder in September 2020.

"I know Zagrey's part-owner and breeder Jean-Paul Challet very well," says Lhermite.

"We've worked together for many years and we're good friends."

Recounting the chain of events, Lhermite says: "After he won the [2023] Grosser Preis von Baden, Zagrey came back here to the farm because he sustained a haematoma to his leg after being struck into."

"There were some complications and he was here for several months before heading back to join trainer Yann Barberot. He never suffered from any tendonitis but after a while Yann decided he didn't want to persist with him, given there was a risk of serious injury."

"So he came back again to Grandcamp while he waited to begin his stallion career, and after a while Jean-Paul absolutely insisted he stand here."

Lhermite adds: "I had no interest in working with only one horse so I set about looking for a second, which I always feel is the minimum for a stallion farm. The opportunity arose with Big Rock, who to me seems to have an excellent profile."

Both horses, available to view at Grandcamp between 9.30am and 5.30pm local time tomorrow and Saturday as part of the Route des Etalons, are one season removed from their finest hours, though the memory of standing beside Barberot as he roared Zagrey in pursuit of the mighty Equinox in the 2023 Dubai Sheema Classic is still fresh.

Nor is it anything other than a propitious moment to be launching a stallion son of Zarak, especially one who boasts a maternal grandsire beloved of French breeders in Linamix, whose grey coat Zagrey has inherited.

"Linamix is a horse who really left his mark on French breeding," says Lhermite. "Jean-Luc Lagardere took a huge risk in sending an enormous number of his own mares to him and everyone said he was wrong and that it would never work. But he was proved absolutely correct and Linamix became a great

stallion, as well as a great broodmare sire."

"That makes it a very interesting female line, while, for me, Zarak is the best stallion in France today. He just gets better and better and he is dual purpose, because he was sent jumping mares right from the start."

"All of that makes standing Zagrey a great opportunity for us."

ZAGREY, who makes his debut at a fee of €6,000, is out of Grey Anatomy, a daughter of Linamix's stallion son Slickly, whose best offspring before Zagrey were effective at well short of a mile and a half and whose own damsire is another potent influence in Nureyev.

"Zagrey put up some excellent times in both victory and defeat during his career and he was just a very good horse," says Lhermite. "People will think of him as a horse who excelled over 2,400 metres [mile and a half], but you have to remember that there's a lot of speed on the dam's side of his pedigree."

"Gaignes was very sharp over 1,400 metres and his sister by Dariyan, Anatiya, was also very fast. Zarak brings some stamina in, but Zagrey had to work progressively to stay 2,400 metres."

At a fee of €12,000, Big Rock is the third most expensive cover among the newcomers in France for 2025 behind Charyn and Metropolitan, though his owner Leopoldo Fernandez Pujals will forego plenty of potential income in prioritising his own efforts to establish the son of Rock Of Gibraltar, who is from the immediate family of the Aga Khan's 2016 dual Derby winner Harzand.

"His owner is planning to send him up to 60 mares, which is a massive boost," says Lhermite. "He's determined to give him every chance imaginable to succeed."

Former trainer Christopher Head referred to Big Rock as having "the heart of a nuclear reactor", while Lhermite reaches for another incendiary metaphor.

"Big Rock was a bomb!" he says. "He was a brilliant racehorse who backed up



Zagrey: son of Zarak's maternal grandsire is Linamix, beloved of all French breeders



Big Rock: "His owner is planning to send him up to 60 mares"

good performance after good performance.

"I look back at his Prix du Jockey Club and maybe with slightly different tactics things might have been different. For me, he was as good as the winner [Ace Impact] that day. First or second changes nothing as far as I'm concerned, they're

both very good horses.

"And at Ascot he was phenomenal, with some very good horses strung out a long way behind him. He never confronted anything other than very good fields in all his Group 1s, and I think €12,000 is a really attractive price." Pujals may well take up a

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chunk of Big Rock's first book, but Lhermite will also continue the house policy of supporting the stallions he stands, one which has paid off in the past.

"We've always backed the stallions we stand and it's notable that with a horse like Dabirsim, we bred Coeur De

CHRISTIAN PUBERT

Beaute and Horizon Dore," he says.

"Dabirsim was a good example of a horse we took to market as a yearling and then stood as a stallion. Zagrey is exactly the same profile and I think that's important. We did it with Vision D'Etat as well.

"Big Rock is all new to us but, in general, we like to use the horses we have here for our broodmare band and it's worked well, even if sometimes people have thought we were swimming against the tide."

THERE isn't a major breeder who would say otherwise, but there is a quiet determination in his voice when Lhermite stresses what he is looking for when drawing up plans for his own mares.

"I don't really follow fashion and, in my experience, fashion doesn't always breed good racehorses," he says. "In any case, it can change very quickly from year to year.

"I make all my matings with the hope of breeding racehorses first and foremost and, while we might not be turning out a huge number of 'cracks', they can usually run. That's much more important to me than fetching huge sums at the sales."

We began our conversation on the subject of attracting the right human resources and Lhermite is keen to point out what a family affair the modern Grandcamp has become, with daughter Sarah responsible for yearling preparation, while her husband Romain is in charge of stallion operations, and her brother Gael looks after breaking, pre-training and breeze-up prep.

Still, the fact he calls me at nine in the evening bears testimony to the fact he remains extremely hands on around the farm.

In the two years he was without stallions at Grandcamp, Lhermite enjoyed playing the tourist during the Route des Etalons, although he was clearly less enamoured with some of his experiences when it came to sending his mares away to be covered.

"We used a few stallions based abroad in the last couple of years, but I've come away with the belief that horses who stand at a higher price don't necessarily guarantee results," he says. "Winning four Group 1s doesn't mean you'll automatically become a good sire. You try to see what happens."

Of his return to the business of being a stallion master, he adds: "I think it's natural for a stud farm to work on the entire cycle, from conception through foaling, sales preparation and breaking; even keeping a few to race occasionally."

New sires galore and plenty else to see on annual Route des Etalons

Abiding Crowns

The annual Route des Etalons - French Stallion Trail - attracts plenty of British and Irish visitors and takes place tomorrow and Saturday, incorporating 20 studs and around 50 stallions.

If it's new sires you're in for part of it in Normandy, there's a route just for you taking in picturesque farms and their equine hospitality.

Start off at the stud farm of Haras de Bouquefort to see the Group 1 Prix Guillaume d'Orléans winner **Al Bahrein**, who was also fourth in Valérien in the Prix du Jockey Club.

At Shaggy's son of Symon - Valérien's studmate at Haras de Bouquefort and France's most expensive sire - is bred on the same cross as St Mark's Stud.

Then head south towards Haras de Monthot et Pressat, which is home to the Sumbie stallions.

You can make a detour to Lisieux, where, if you're a breeder in need of some direct inspiration for mating plans this year, you can pop into the Bastille de Sainte-Thérèse, before picking up a delicious pair of chocolate and cake as left at one of the town's pretty patisseries.

Sumbie's stud is the base of Group 1 winners Angel Bleu and Mitchell, but the star



Charyn, star attraction at Haras de Monthot et Pressat

attraction tomorrow and Saturday will be **Charyn**.

The Group 1 Queen Elizabeth II and Queen Anne Stakes winner, who after competing in Japan in November was retired to Normandy, sired one of his Prix du Jockey Club winners, in one of the most exciting new stallions in Europe this year.

He is also one of the priced at €15,000 but, as a single Group 1 winner by Britain and Ireland's champion sire Dark Angel, Charyn boasts an impressive profile.

Another of the Group 1 winners at Sumbie is Belleek, while just south-east of Monthot et Pressat is Haras de Tullis, where **Gambusino**, who was runner-up to the son of Showcasing in the Jean-Luc

Legendier, begins his stallion career.

Bred and raced by the Northons, he is the first son of Lope De Vega at stud in France.

Make your way across to Haras de Grandcamp, where there are two new Group 1-winning stallions awaiting your arrival, namely Queen Elizabeth II Stakes winner **Big Rock** and **Zagrey**, successful in the Grosser Preis von Baden.

Zagrey was the first Group 1 winner by Zarak and was also third to Equinox in the Dubai Sheema Classic, while Big Rock, who at €12,000 stands for double the fee of Zagrey, chased home Ace Impact in the Prix du Jockey Club and was runner-up in two other top-level races.

Then head a little south in the direction of Argentan, for in close proximity lies one of France's leading farms, Haras de Montigny, where this year **Nineteen Nin** joins a line-up that is headed by No Risk At All.

Fresh from his impressive victory in Charyn's Foudra Inevitable Hurdle, the son of Zarak is out of a Mareilise full-sister to Grade 1 winner and young sire Nevada Du Berlais.

After making his acquisition, there's a quick ping in the selling at Karswin Farm, where you can see the debutly named Listed winner by Symon, **God Blessing**.

There's a little bit of cross-country driving, so make the most of the scenery and consider stopping off to purchase some of the

delectable Normandy cider or Calvados as you head towards Bayeux.

Before getting to the pretty town, which was the first secured by the Allies after D-Day and is the home of the eponymous tapestry, you'll come across Haras de la Herminie, which has three new stallions for this year.

Kingman's Grand Prix de Paris winner **Feed The Flame** is the star recruit from the flat, while Grade 3 winner and Grade 1-placed **Laura De Berlais** was announced as a new addition only last week. The son of Authorized joins **Blissness**, by the late Pommery, on the National Hunt-oriented roster.

Next up and close to Bayeux is the beautiful Haras d'Ercebois, which this year welcomes Group 1 Poule d'Essai des Poulains winner **Metropolitain**, yet another son of Zarak to enter the stud.

We're on the home stretch now and the car is pointing towards Dreuxville, where **Packline**, the Group 1 Prix Jean Prat winner by Stangon-gledhann, has taken up residence at Haras de Bouquefort.

Finally, it's on to Haras de la Houllerie to see German L200 Guineas winner **Wyllibis**, by Adlerflug, and Wootton Bassett's Coventry Stakes winner **River Tiger**.

FRENCH STALLION TRAIL 2025

- 1 **Haras d'Ardenneville** Affaire Solitaire, Kurashiki, Lacroix, Spanish Main
- 2 **Haras de Beaumont** Ace Impact, Inello, Puchère, Seaford, Starring Spirit
- 3 **Haras du Blot** Delaysan, Knight To Behold
- 4 **Haras de Bouquefort** Evanes, Spirit, Valeri, Zarak
- 5 **Haras de Bouquefort** Al Bahrein, Amos Just, Romanised, Thunder Moon, Wonderful Moon
- 6 **Haras de Colleville** Gateway, Giken, Kerdargent, Soft Light
- 7 **Haras des Elmouches** Guendal's Star, Inevitable Army
- 8 **Haras d'Ercebois** City Light, Hello Youssan, Metropolitain, Orestis, Pender King, Victor Ludorum
- 9 **Haras de Grandcamp** Big Rock, Zagrey
- 10 **Haras de la Halle Neuve** Arcadi, Star River, Lucky Team, Montmarie, Mizamar, Rubin Vendôme, Yalla
- 11 **Haras de la Herminie** Satisfaction, Feed The Flame, Great Pretender, Headman, Leon Du Berlais, Mare Australis, Nevada Du Berlais, Reconnu
- 12 **Haras de Haguemont** Duke Dream, Jigne, Magic Dream, Moses Has, Mubawir, Penny's Place, Texas
- 13 **Haras de la Houllerie** Richwood, Wyllibis, River Tiger
- 14 **Karswin Farm** God Blessing, Karel Neufus, Van Beethoven
- 15 **Haras de Mareil** Bay Bridge, Doctor Dico, Telecancer
- 16 **Haras de Montigny** Besoumer, De Houelle, Cloth Of Stars, Dextroga Secret, Pommery, Nineteen Nin, No Risk At All
- 17 **Haras de Monthot et Pressat** Angel Bleu, Belleek, Charyn, Golden Herbs, Marcol
- 18 **Haras du Petit Tailleur** Mulawarr, Reconnu, The Gray Gobby
- 19 **Haras de Tullis** Diapiric, Gambusino, Hey German, Military Style, Savor Vire, Seaford
- 20 **Haras de la Tuilerie** Goshak Du Berlais, Lacroix, Madaket Marcol, Paradox, Wonderful Moon

For stud opening times tomorrow and Saturday, see laroutedesetalons.com

