

# RIP Sacred Falls: Sad loss of such a special horse

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**OUR CLOSE-KNIT TEAM HERE AT WAIKATO STUD IS DEEPLY SADDENED BY  
THE TRAGIC LOSS SACRED FALLS ON SUNDAY.**

A horse that meant so much to many of us for so many reasons, Sacred Falls was lost at such a young age at the beginning of a burgeoning stud career, due to a rare form of hepatitis.

Mark acknowledges the whole Waikato Stud family and community for their support over the past week: "A lot of our team were there on the sad day of our loss, and came the next day and joined in for a few commiserating wines.

"There have been a lot of tears shed over the loss of such a great horse. It's hard not to have favourites, but Sacred Falls was certainly a favourite for a lot of our team. They were involved in his conception, his foaling, his handling, his weaning, his yearling preparation, and afterwards they followed his racing career very closely, and he made us all immensely proud during his racing career.

"And then they've been involved for the past five years, bringing him in and out of the paddock every day, putting him through all his stallion parades, and taking him to and



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Waikato Stud principal  
Mark Chittick

from the breeding shed. He was an incredible horse – a real gentleman with a fantastic personality.”

On the track, Sacred Falls was brilliant as a spring three-year-old, winning the New Zealand 2000 Guineas at Riccarton – the first of his four Group One victories that culminated in back-to-back Gr.1 Doncaster Handicaps in a career that earned \$4.7 million. He retired to stud as the highest ever NZ-bred stakes winner, and the excitement he generated on the track was unique to Mark for both personal and professional reasons.

“We watched him win his first Doncaster Handicap in Waikato Hospital, with Lisa, and then his second Doncaster at UCLA Hospital in

California. It’s great to win any race, but even more so when you have a home-bred colt winning one of Australia’s biggest mile races in successive years. Those wins were very uplifting at a time we badly needed some good, uplifting news.”

That special emotional attachment of Mark’s to Sacred Falls was complemented by a horse with a unique personality. Mark adds: “There wasn’t a bad bone in his body and in the breeding shed we would always talk about his Casanova-like behaviour – he was very much the lover. He was part of our heritage, part of our legacy, and part of our lives.

“George Chittick last season was only 16 when he took Sacred Falls

to the breeding shed – the first such experience for George but not a problem because he was the horse you could do that with.”

Sacred Falls was found to have developed a rare form of severe hepatitis of unknown origin.

“The condition he had – there has been only nine reported similar cases in the world, ever. And only two that were exactly the same. We were very unlucky but the autopsy revealed that nothing was going to correct the problem,” Mark explains.

“He had been in the Matamata Vet Clinic clinic for 10 days, and I can’t say enough about Andrea Ritmeester and

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the team – they were unbelievable and tried incredibly hard. When I rang one of the partners, Dave Keenan, the day after, he told me that the vets are trained not to get emotionally attached to the patients or get upset, but they became so attached to him in just those ten days, and that really sums up the type of horse he was.”

Waikato Stud resident vet Dr Chris Phillips, like everyone at the Stud, has taken the loss of Sacred Falls to heart. He recalls: “He was a very straightforward horse – laid back and chilled. He was also a gentleman but seemed to be a bit quiet and appeared to have very mild colic at the start. But it became evident that something more was happening, and after a scan,

it showed he had a few issues and in particular an enlarged liver and spleen, and we sent him straight down to the clinic.”

The bloods taken at that point were not good. There had been only a handful of similar cases around the world and we consulted some specialists in North America, Europe and Australia to find out what were the best protocols for treatment. There was limited literature on the problem, Chris adds.

“It was pretty much severe hepatitis of unknown origin – an inflammation of the liver – we treated him for it which was supported with monitoring care in the hope the liver would start to function normally again.

“He stabilised for a while but then got progressively worse, and by Saturday night the rest of his body was beginning to shut down with that liver not functioning properly. By the Sunday morning we had to make the terrible call that it was inhumane to keep him going, and sadly the decision was made to put him down.”

**RIP Sacred Falls, you will be missed by us all.**