Winning a Grade 1 stakes race at a track like Keeneland is a special accomplishment for any owner. But the Shadwell Turf Mile (G1) on October 6 offers two other enticing elements. First, the purse has been raised to $750,000 – highest of any race on the Fall Stars Weekend lineup and equal to the spring meet’s signature event, the Toyota Blue Grass (G1). And beyond the added cash is a unique keepsake to mark the achievement for the winning owner.

Race sponsor Shadwell Farm of Lexington commissioned a sculptor to create a one-of-a-kind award to pay tribute to all the winners of the prestigious race. It features a majestic bronze falcon and each year, the victorious owner will get a replica of this perpetual trophy.

Why a falcon? Falconry is a passion for Shadwell owner Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid al Maktoum, and the model for this trophy was a picture of the Sheikh’s prize falcon, Nayef, that hangs in the farm office’s main lobby.

“I looked all over London, in the shops, at old trophies, to try to come up with something. I wanted a falcon of some sort,” said Shadwell Vice President and General Manager Rick Nichols. “That’s one of his (Sheikh Hamdan) biggest loves. He’s got three main loves: horses, camels and falcons. And I’ve never asked him to rank them.

“We wanted something really unique that would capture the Arab culture and sportsmanship and I think we’ve achieved it,” he noted, adding that one of his assistants, Sharon Shepard, took charge of the sculpture project and saw it through to completion.

The base of the trophy will feature plaques commemorating each winner of the race since 1999, when Shadwell signed on as the sponsor. That means you’ll see champion Gio Ponti’s name listed twice, since he became only the second horse in the history of the race to record back-to-back victories. The other one was Dumaani, who carried the Shadwell colors to the winner’s circle in 1995 and ’96. Althir in 2000 gave Shadwell its third win in its own race.

Perfect partner
Dumaani’s success was a part of the reason Shadwell was drawn to the race (formerly known as the Keeneland Breeders’ Cup and the Keeneland Breeders’ Cup Mile) when it decided to look for a race to sponsor. But even greater was the appeal of the surface and the distance. Shadwell horses race primarily in Europe, on the grass.

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Soaring to success

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“We wanted to sponsor a turf race and we wanted it at a distance of a mile,” Nichols explained. “It is Sheikh Hamdan’s belief that most good sires come from the distance of a mile. He prefers to breed to stallions who were at their best at a mile.”

Nichols said Shadwell also liked the idea of a partnership with Keeneland. “We wanted to do something local. The initial idea was to help get our name out, because we were a young farm then,” he said, referring to 1999, when the sponsorship began.

Shadwell, which is located near Blue Grass Airport, was founded in 1985 and with a relatively new stallion operation, Nichols knew the farm needed to get its name out in front of Thoroughbred breeders.

“We looked at other race-tracks, but we thought Keeneland was the best opportunity – especially for advertising,” Nichols said. “You advertise here, this is where the people (who would breed mares to our stallions) are. And Sheikh Hamdan enjoys supporting the industry. We sponsor a lot of races in England and Ireland, and he wanted to do something in America.”

“When you look through Keeneland’s partnerships, (they are with farms and businesses) who are like-minded about the quality we’re trying to create in the race meets and the way it enhances the community. Shadwell is one of those perfect partners,” said Keeneland President and CEO Bill Thomason. “When you see their operation, you see the quality. The way they look at the land and look at the horse, it’s about the love of the horse. They’re wonderful partners for us to have.

“All of the sponsors that we have share the ideals that Keeneland has. We have the community in mind, we have the quality of horses in mind,” Thomason continued. “The people that sponsor those races see the caliber of horses that we’re able to attract.”

Those quality fields earned the Shadwell Turf Mile a Grade 1 designation in 2002.

“We were very happy when it finally got Grade 1 status,” said Nichols, adding that much credit for that achievement goes to former Keeneland Racing Secretary Howard Battle. “He did a wonderful job promoting it and getting it to Grade 1 status. He was a tremendous help, getting the horses there to run in the race and help fortify (the race).”

Bluegrass advantage

The winner of the Shadwell Turf Mile often garners extra publicity for the

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farm and for Keeneland by becoming a leading contender for the $2 million Breeders’ Cup Mile (G1) on turf. Shadwell earned its greatest Breeders’ Cup success in 2006, when Invasor (ARG) carried the farm’s royal blue-and-white silks to victory in the $5 million Breeders’ Cup Classic (G1) and was named Horse of the Year. Still, Nichols believes the horse that holds the most special place in Sheikh Hamdan’s heart is Nashwan, a homebred who came off the bluegrass fields of Shadwell’s Kentucky nursery and in 1989 became the first horse since Nijinsky II in 1970 to win England’s Group 1 Two Thousand Guineas and Epsom Derby.

“We’re fortunate to be able to provide them with absolutely everything they need to become the best athlete they can be,” said Nichols. “Our young horses see fresh ground three times before they leave to be broken. When they’re born, they go onto fresh ground and (then) when they’re weaned, they move to fresh ground. And in their yearling year, we take them to another area of fresh grass. The grass is so important, too.

“Mr. (Nelson Bunker) Hunt had this farm,” he added, “and in this area there’s only one piece of land in Central Kentucky that tests better than this land and that’s the old C.V. Whitney (Farm) land on Paris Pike (now part of Gainesway). And that’s because it’s absolutely flat and so there’s no erosion. This is very, very good land.”

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Soaring to success

While Shadwell focuses primarily on raising its own racing stars, the farm has had success in the Keeneland sales ring, procuring the likes of 1990 English Horse of the Year Dayjur and 2006 Belmont Stakes winner Jazil (above), trained by Kiaran McLaughlin (left) and ridden by Fernando Jara.

Tom Leach is the “Voice of the Kentucky Wildcats.”

Season of big races, top horses

The $750,000 purse of the Shadwell Turf Mile (G1) on Oct. 6 marks a $150,000 boost from last year. The prestigious race now ranks alongside the spring meet’s $750,000 Toyota Blue Grass (G1) as Keeneland’s most valuable race in terms of prize money.

During the fall season from Oct. 5-27, Keeneland has slated 17 stakes – led by five Grade 1 races on opening Fall Stars Weekend – with purse money totaling $4.5 million. The opening-day card includes the oldest stakes race run in the United States and the 61st running of an important race for 2-year-old fillies. The former is the $175,000 Stoll Keenon Ogden Phoenix (G3), which was first run in 1831 at the old Kentucky Association track near downtown Lexington. The latter is the $400,000 Darley Alcibiades (G2), which is named after the great foundation mare Alcibiades. She was owned by one of Keeneland’s founders, Hal Price Headley.

Nine graded stakes worth more than $3 million highlight Keeneland’s opening Fall Stars Weekend. Purses for two other Fall Stars stakes – the Woodford (G3) and the Bourbon (G3) – have each been increased by $50,000 to $150,000.

Horses that win one of eight designated stakes at Keeneland will secure a berth in the 15-race, $26 million Breeders’ Cup World Championships on Nov. 2-3 at Santa Anita. The races are part of the Breeders’ Cup Challenge, a series of 73 automatic qualifying races held in 10 countries.

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