

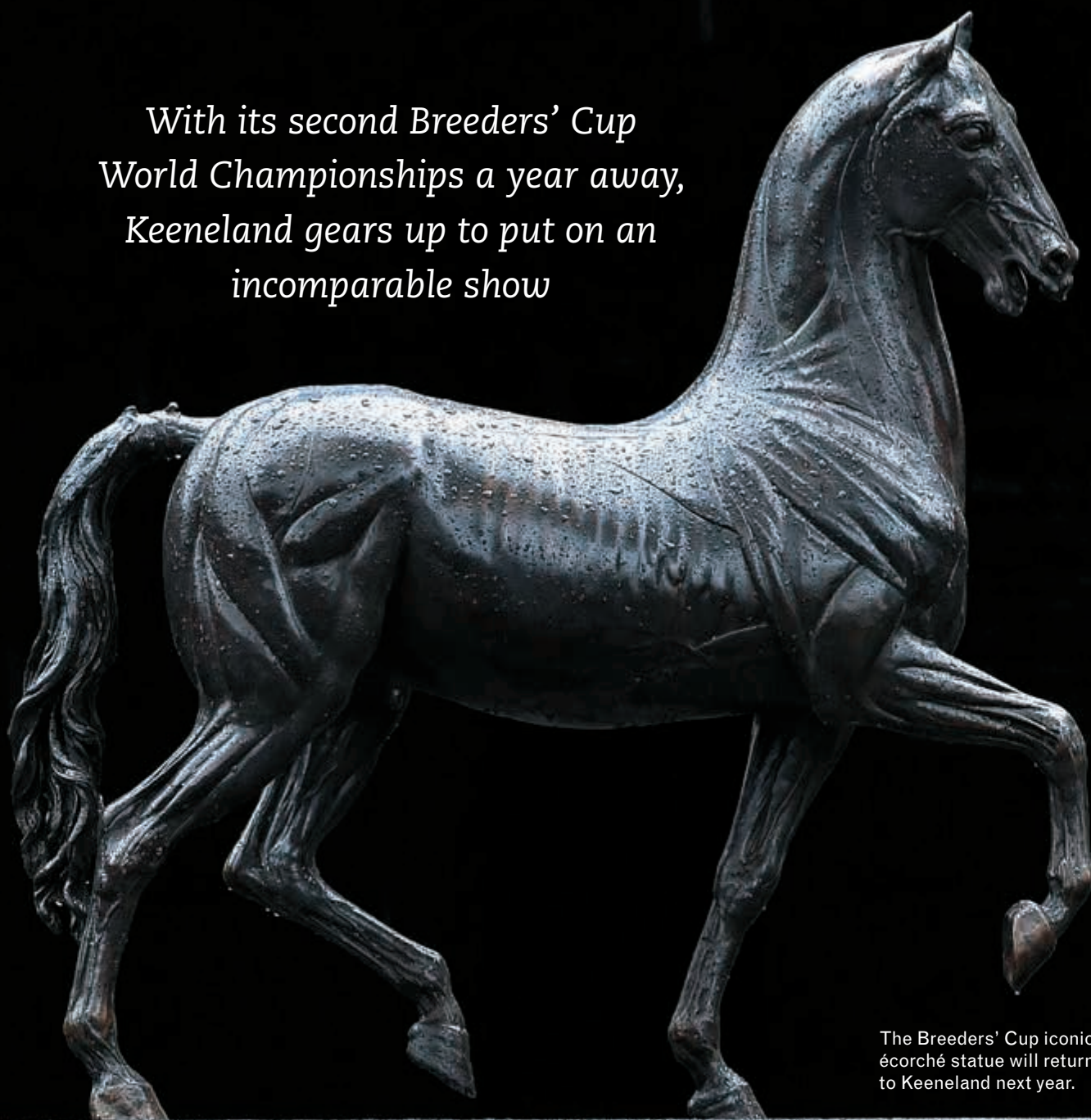


CHAMPIONSHIP FORM

By Tom Pedulla



*With its second Breeders' Cup
World Championships a year away,
Keeneland gears up to put on an
incomparable show*



The Breeders' Cup iconic écorché statue will return to Keeneland next year.

BREEDERS' CUP



JOHN SWELL

The 2015 Breeders' Cup marked the first time a three-story luxury chalet was used at a sporting event in North America. More chalet space will be added for 2020.

The Breeders' Cup World Championships strayed from its origins for the first 32 years of its existence, meandering to California, New York, Florida, nearby Louisville, Illinois, Texas, New Jersey, and crossing the border into Canada before finally returning home in 2015 for its first staging in the Bluegrass.

Home, of course, is Lexington, where John Gaines of prestigious Gainesway Farm thought an international event to culminate the racing season had a puncher's chance of surviving, if not thriving.

Home is Central Kentucky, where the majority of Thoroughbred foals in North America are produced to carry the hopes and dreams of breeders and their eventual owners, trainers, and jockeys.

Home is Keeneland Race Course, where management and staff stay remarkably true to the wonderful vision its founders laid out in 1936 — racing as it was meant to be.

The 2015 homecoming was such a resounding success, espe-

cially given Keeneland's relative lack of venue size and potential issues with traffic control, that Breeders' Cup Limited barely took a breath before committing to an encore in 2020.

"The great thing is, instead of trying to figure out how to do the Breeders' Cup, we get to figure out how to make it better," said Bill Thomason, Keeneland's president and chief executive officer. The countdown to next Nov. 6 and 7 cannot begin soon enough for those who live and work nearby.

The even greater news is that Breeders' Cup officials, following the eye-opening success of 2015, intend to come home again and again.

"I think that their trial subscription ended in 2015," said Dora Delgado, Breeders' Cup executive vice president for racing and nominations. "They are definitely in the permanent rotation."

After years of deliberation about whether Keeneland could accommodate the grand international event, a swift return became a no-brainer.

"First and foremost, Keeneland delivered. It was a fantastic event in 2015," said Drew Fleming, executive vice president and chief operating officer at Breeders' Cup Limited. "The world wit-



JONATHAN PALMER

The Saddling Paddock Chalet, which gave guests a bird's-eye view of pre-race action, returns as well next year.

nessed how great a place Kentucky is, the passion for the Thoroughbred industry, and the hospitality that Keeneland can showcase. It was absolutely, without a doubt, one of the most successful Breeders' Cups we've ever had."

The first Breeders' Cup at Keeneland offered a testament to how innovative thinking can solve most problems. The second coming can be expected to be more of the same.

Keeneland successfully addressed the shortage of permanent seating while preserving the racetrack's treasured space.

Luxury chalets were, and will again be, the answer. The Trackside Chalet, part of a village of five luxury chalets, marked the first time a three-story luxury chalet was used at a sporting event in North America. The Saddling Paddock Chalet all but



DAVID COYLE

Keeneland's chalets accommodated 10,000 each day, and the spacious interiors afforded fans a comfortable, upscale experience.



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allowed those guests to hear pre-race instructions delivered by trainers to their jockeys.

Chalets in 2015 accommodated 10,000 fans each day, leading to a record attendance of 44,947 on Friday. That total was immediately surpassed by the 50,155 fans who poured in to watch American Pharoah become the only Triple Crown champion to complete the “Grand Slam” by winning the Breeders’ Cup Classic.

In anticipation of still greater demand, more chalet space is being added. With fans mindful the inaugural running sold out in three days, there is every expectation tickets will again be hot commodities with more attendance marks likely to fall.

The issue of access and egress proved to be a non-issue due to what then Breeders’ Cup President and CEO Craig Fravel described as “the most amazing traffic control in Breeders’ Cup history.” Although the plan will be tweaked, it largely bears repeating.

Even as Keeneland’s best minds strive for improvement, Thomason wants to be sure not to attempt to fix something that is hardly broken.

“We did an enormous after-action report after the Breeders’ Cup,” he said. “We came up with very, very few changes that we’re going to do in 2020.”

The strength of the community at-large can again be expected to flex its muscle. Price Bell of Mill Ridge Farm said in reflecting on 2015, “It was, to me, the first time I remember in my life where VisitLex and community leaders had really come together to put on a show elevating horse racing and horse breeding on a global stage. The pride I felt at that time was the power of our community coming together. It showed that we can accomplish something great.”

Bell added, “We have these two tremendous products — the city of Lexington and the Thoroughbred industry — that we



As it does during the spring and fall meets, Keeneland’s toteboard enhanced the visuals of the Breeders’ Cup races.

can really celebrate to the world. I think that was the great takeaway in the week leading up to it, and one we hope to replicate next year.”

In certain respects, success will be measured as much by the Breeders’ Cup Festival that will run from Oct. 31 through Nov. 7 as it will be by the two days of competition. Kip Cornett, who heads festival planning, envisions a groundbreaking event unlike anything the Breeders’ Cup has seen before.

“Even though we want to showcase the horse capital of the world and what it has to offer to all of our guests, we have the mantra inside the festival committee of ‘Let’s put the world into the world championships,’ ” said Cornett. “We felt this could be something not only good for Lexington in 2020 but for



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*First and foremost,
Keeneland delivered. It was a
fantastic event in 2015.”*

**—Drew Fleming, Breeders’ Cup executive
vice president and COO**

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TODD BUCHANAN

Fans of American Pharoah crowded the paddock as the Triple Crown winner and eventual Breeders' Cup Classic victor made his way to the track.

SPECTACULAR SHOW

The 2015 homecoming of the Breeders' Cup featured horsepower not seen before or since at the world championships.

American Pharoah was, indeed, one of a kind. He became the first Triple Crown champion to earn the Grand Slam by capturing the Breeders' Cup Classic that same year. And he did it in style, settling into his ethereal stride and dusting the competition by 6½ lengths.

As the roar of the crowd all but carried Pharoah home, every fan who was part of the electrifying atmosphere at Keeneland understood that he embodied the Thoroughbred at its absolute best.

Hall of Fame trainer Bob Baffert has had a long line of champions parade through his powerhouse barn. In some respects Pharoah will always stand alone.

"They have a small window of greatness," Baffert said of most equine stars, "where Pharoah, he had a window all year long."

Jockey Victor Espinoza recalled he was merely a passenger for most of the Classic. "I knew it was his last race, and I was prepared to ride him really hard," he said. "I didn't need to."

After securing the Triple Crown, Pharoah became the first to win two subsequent grade 1 races as a 3-year-old, taking the Haskell Invitational, and later adding the Classic. His highly anticipated career finale produced NBC's highest television ratings for the Classic in 20 years.

The racing world will always appreciate owner Ahmed Zayat for using the homecoming of the Breeders' Cup to showcase his unforgettable champion one last time.

"Wherever he was, they all saw something in him

that they loved," Zayat said. "When he started on the racetrack, he gave you goose bumps."

American Pharoah was hardly the only star to take Keeneland's grand stage. Tepin showed how far she had come in her development for trainer Mark Casse by dispatching the boys, including 2014 Mile winner Karakontie.

Casse recalled watching with a mix of pride and disbelief.

"When you win a race like that, you're really competing against the world," he said. "I knew she was good. But, in all honesty, I wasn't sure she was that good." Tepin used the Mile as a springboard to another resounding victory against males in the Queen Anne Stakes at Royal Ascot the following June.

Two-year-olds Nyquist and Songbird established their credentials for stardom by winning the Juvenile and the Juvenile Fillies, respectively. Nyquist, of course, went on to bring home the roses in the Kentucky Derby. Songbird would win 13 races in all, nine of them grade 1s, and amass almost \$4.7 million in earnings for owner Rick Porter's Fox Hill Farm.

Then there was the wild winner's circle scene triggered by 16-1 Mongolian Saturday's upset victory in the Turf Sprint. The 5-year-old gelded son of Any Given Saturday overcame the extreme outside post with the help of a masterful ride from Florent Geroux.

Mongolian Saturday was the first Breeders' Cup starter owned by connections from Mongolia. They wore traditional gowns and headdresses as they jumped for joy, a colorful reminder that the world had truly come to Keeneland to celebrate the Thoroughbred and racing at its best.



KEENELAND PHOTO



CHAD B. HARRISON



SKIP DICKESTEIN

Top, Keeneland President and CEO Bill Thomason announces the return of the Breeders' Cup. The 2020 edition will feature all the pageantry and color of the first Breeders' Cup and more.

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DAN DRY

Many special events are in the works for 2020, such as Breakfast at the Breeders' Cup, and fans can expect the same emphasis on excellence Keeneland delivered in 2015.

the Breeders' Cup moving forward. We want to get everybody excited about the fact that this is an international competition and that Thoroughbred racing is global."

Keeneland's bustling September 2019 yearling sale drove home his point. Horses were sold to buyers from 28 different countries.

Cornett hopes to raise \$1 million in sponsorships and private donations to see what he describes as their "new big idea" come to fruition. Ireland became the first to commit to participating in what is being described as an international village where nations will be able to showcase their culture and racing programs.

In addition, there will be an array of ticketed and free events, with more of the action indoors or under tents. Some early days of the 2015 Festival were marred by poor weather. Those unable to obtain Breeders' Cup tickets will still be able to feel part of it all with the community at-large via jumbo TVs that will show all of the action at downtown locations.

The economic impact of the Breeders' Cup on Lexington

was estimated to be as much as \$65 million in 2015. The downtown area has only grown since then. An additional 1,000 hotel rooms are set to open by 2020, increasing overall capacity to more than 8,000. New restaurants, breweries, and bars are being introduced all the time. The Distillery District has never been more vibrant.

When everything is considered, expectations for 2020 are through-the-roof high. "We're definitely looking to have our best event ever," Fleming said.

Above all, the return of the Breeders' Cup to Keeneland will be all about extending Southern hospitality once more. "We decided instead of trying to be like Santa Anita or Del Mar or even Louisville, we were going to be authentically Lexington in the way we delivered that hospitality experience," said Mary Quinn Ramer, president of VisitLex. "And it was very well received."

In what often appears to be an increasingly impersonal world, a welcoming smile, an offer to help, and gracious service continue to mean everything at Keeneland. **KM**