



In Kentucky, Don Alberto is investing in high-quality breeding stock.





# BOLD AMBITIONS

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Don Alberto Corporation poised for global influence  
with fateful Bluegrass acquisition

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By Maryjean Wall / Photos by Kirk Schlea

**A**t Don Alberto Farm, the scene unfolds like a postcard extolling Kentucky. Venerable trees and curving shrubs line the entrance drive to a horse barn constructed in the old style. Pastures unfurl like a carpet of dense green extending on both sides of this barn and surrounding a lake where Canada geese stopped over during fall migration.

Carlos Alberto Heller Solari (call him Carlos Heller), whose mother, Liliana Solari, is the principal in the farm's ownership of Don Alberto Corporation, was speaking during Keeneland's November breeding stock sale of a different migration — stallions shuttling to South America.

With Liliana as the guiding light, involved in all aspects of the equine enterprise, the family for years has bred mares in Chile to international stallions spending time in South America for that hemisphere's breeding season. The migration has worked both ways, for the family also has bred mares in Kentucky on a schedule to suit this mirror-opposite calendar, sending the offspring to Chile to race.

Now, events developing in North American racing could lead to a greater presence for Don Alberto Corp. in the United States. The family's 3-year-old filly Unique Bella (by Tapit out of Unrivaled Belle) was being compared this past winter to champion Songbird. She had Santa Anita buzzing following dominating wins this winter in the Santa Ynez, Las Virgenes, and Santa Ysabel stakes. Unique Bella was a \$400,000 purchase at the 2015 Keeneland September yearling sale and could take the Solari-Heller family beyond its previous racing success.

The family has been building a North American presence over the past four years while hoping to pursue more extensive global am-

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bitions. Heller said the family recently opened a racing stable across the spine of the Andes Mountains in Argentina. Dreams of perhaps expanding one day to Europe and Australia led the family to purchase property three years ago in Lexington on Spurr Road. These 400-plus acres formerly were known as Vinery.

The farm came into the family's ownership almost by fate. Heller was making a quick stopover in the Bluegrass during September 2013 while on his way to Wisconsin, where as the principal of Chilean dairy operations he had business in the dairy state. Since he was already in the United States, he thought, why not stop and take a look at the two fillies Don Alberto Corp. had acquired and bred on the Southern Hemisphere schedule.

The fillies were at Hill 'n' Dale Farms. Across the road Heller spied a "for sale" sign calling like a siren from Vinery's stone gates. This happened on a Friday night, and Heller was due to leave for Wisconsin on Sunday morning. Not much time remained for a real estate deal — if a deal could be had. Heller soon learned a major problem stood in the way.

The problem was the property already was under contract for sale. This meant Heller's family could not have bought the farm even if he did have the greatest urge to rush inside those stone gates with his checkbook wide open. All he could do was ask to be next in line should something happen. And something did.

Some weeks later Heller received word that the other contract had fallen through. He still had his checkbook open to a blank page. Don Alberto Corp. bought Vinery and later added 400 acres from adjoining Crestwood Farm.

"I liked the farm, the land," said Heller, whose home is Santiago, Chile. "I love Kentucky. It was always a dream."

Heller and Liliana quickly followed the farm purchase with making the family's intentions known to the internation-



Top, Carlos Heller is deeply involved in all aspects of the Thoroughbred operation. Above, Unique Bella is the family's latest racing sensation with three graded stakes wins so far in 2017.



*I love Kentucky. It was always a dream."*

—CARLOS HELLER

al horse industry. They began by buying quality breeding stock in large numbers. As Heller explained, he had to do something in a hurry to fill those green pastures because the only horse on the farm when he bought it was the teaser.

The result was that Don Alberto Corp. seemed to burst on the American scene in the weeks following the purchase of the farm. The corporation bought heavily at Keeneland, leading all other buyers by gross expenditures at the 2013 and 2014 November breeding stock sales. The buying has continued at Keeneland, and at the January 2017 horses of all ages sale, Don Alberto purchased the sale-topper, paying \$1.025 million for Siren Serenade, a mare in foal to leading sire Tapit.

A few weeks following their initial foray into the Keeneland sale in 2013, Heller and his mother went to England to buy more mares at Tattersalls and elsewhere. Among purchases the duo sent from England to the United States were 10 mares bred to the sought-after sire Frankel. These mares foaled their offspring at the new Kentucky farm, producing five fillies and five colts. The mares were sent to Chile, where their offspring, now 2-year-olds, were to begin racing in 2017.

But before the purchases began in Kentucky and England, Heller had a huge surprise waiting for Liliana when he brought her to Lexington for the November 2013 sales. She was unaware when traveling to Lexington that her dream of owning a Kentucky horse farm had become a reality.

Heller brought his mother to Kentucky under what could only be called a magnificent ruse. He told her that they had received an invitation from Dr. George Mundy, a Kentucky veterinarian who had visited the family's Haras Don Alberto near Los Angeles, Chile. Liliana and Mundy had formed a friendship in Chile, so she was happy to accept the invitation.

Heller and his mother drove up the entrance drive of the farm. They walked into the main house, which she mistakenly assumed belonged to Mundy, and saw the catering staff dressed in the Solari racing colors, passing champagne flutes. Nice touch on Dr. Mundy's part, she thought.



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Then Heller broke the happy news.

“And I said, ‘That’s for you,’ ” Heller tells the story.

“We had to call the emergency 911,” interspersed Fernando Diaz-Valdes, bloodstock adviser to Heller. He was laughing as he recalled Liliana’s surprise. “She couldn’t believe it. She started crying. That was always her dream, to have a Kentucky farm, because she has run horses in America (winning the 2004 Hollywood Gold Cup as a partner in her homebred Total Impact, who later became a successful sire in Chile).”

“She was ecstatic,” said Mundy, consultant and veterinarian at Don Alberto Farm. “She really kept saying it was her dream. She loves her horses — and her dogs.”

And to think if Heller had flown straight to Wisconsin as he’d planned, he might never have bought a farm or been leading buyer in subsequent weeks at the November sales. “We don’t know,” said Diaz-Valdes, pondering this fateful turn.

### Embracing the family passion

An even larger story of fate has been Heller’s history with horses, which came close to being no history at all. At one time he was enamored of nothing but cows. He had founded a vast robotic dairy operation in Chile and built his herd to some 7,000 cattle, give or take a cow. His grandfather Alberto Solari (whom the family references as Don Alberto) bred and raced Thoroughbreds. Heller’s mother liked horses. But Heller saw no use for equines.

Heller was a dairyman to the core. If Heller did not actually hear poetry in the chorus of mooing from his army of cows, he did hear the jingle of money hitting the coffers of his dairy. Financial success represented vindication of his decision years earlier to turn partly away from easy access to his birthright, the family’s retail shopping empire called Falabella, to go his own way into agriculture. In making this decision, he chose the more difficult path.

Heller has maintained a prominence in



Don Alberto has invested in such grade 1 winners as Sarah Lynx, top, and Angela Renee, above, to add to an impressive broodmare roster. Right, Liliana Solari, pictured with Carlos Heller

after winning a race in Chile, is the driving force behind the family’s breeding and racing successes.



COURTESY OF DON ALBERTO CORP.

family business ventures, including Falabella, but his major achievement, of which he is particularly proud, was founding the dairy operations — as well as acquiring ownership in a prominent South American soccer team. No doubt he inherited his adventuresome spirit from generations of his family’s entrepreneurship.

An Italian immigrant to Chile founded the family’s empire when he opened a tai-

lor shop in Santiago in 1889. His name was Salvatore Falabella. In the 1930s the husband of one of his granddaughters — the same Don Alberto Solari who later owned racehorses — joined the business. According to Bloomberg, with Don Alberto’s help the enterprise expanded into women’s clothing and housewares. In 1958 more change arrived, with the family altering the business to turn it into a department store, expanding with additional locations.

Today Falabella is publicly traded, generating at least \$11.5 billion in sales, and consists of department stores, supermarkets, and home improvement outlets spread throughout South America. The Solari family, again according to Bloomberg, controls the operation through holding companies. Heller is president of one of these holding companies, Bethia, one of the largest economic enterprises in Chile.

Quite naturally, Heller was expected to transition into this family business when he finished school. He did sell sewing machines in Falabella and was given a store manager’s job. But Heller’s instinctive desire was to live and work in the countryside. Heller was not rebelling against his family’s wishes, as he once explained. He said he was just different from what the family had expected. As a young man, he had handled tractors in the field for his grandfather. Rural life appealed to Heller.

His grandfather greatly influenced Heller in turning to horses. Don Alberto had founded Haras Tarapaca, a horse farm in Chile. He was a director at one of Santiago’s two major racecourses, Hipodromo Chile. “He loved horses,” Heller said, while making it clear he had rather drive his grandfather’s tractors than look at a horse.

This all changed in 1985. Heller was working for Falabella when his grandfather called to invite him to the racecourse. With only one weekend off each month, Heller said he was not inclined to spend his free time dressing in a tie and jacket to take lunch at the hippodrome.

But Heller's mother insisted. And so Heller acquiesced. Grandfather Solari won a stakes race with Heller in attendance, the track photographer snapped the win photo, and Heller's life struck out down a new path, just like that.

Soon he and his mother became partners in a racehorse. Without revealing their presence at a horse sale, they purchased two fillies — from none other than Don Alberto Solari. One filly never raced, due to injury. But the other filly — well, there lies another story in this interlocking tale of fate. Folks at the hippodrome whispered to Solari that his daughter and grandson had won a race — as owners of a horse the grandfather had bred. Solari was stunned. Perhaps when he got over his surprise, he even was pleased that they

at least picked one of his sales offerings for their nascent racing stable. But Don Alberto died too soon, in 1985, to witness the prominent presence in the sport that mother and son were to assume.

Two years later, in 1987, Liliana Solari founded Haras Don Alberto, naming the farm for her father. That year a product of Alberto Solari's breeding, a filly named Bethia, became a group 1 winner in Chile. Later she won a stakes in the United States. Bethia Holding is named for the filly. More recently, the family's homebred Bronzo ran fourth in the 2014 Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile.

Back in Chile, Heller assumed a position as president of Club Hipico de Santiago racecourse, a property owned by Bethia Holding. In 2016 he was elected to


membership in The Jockey Club, a sure acknowledgment of Heller's increasing influence in the horse community in the United States and beyond.

### Investing in quality


Heller's grandfather had owned about 80 mares in his lifetime. When Heller joined his mother in operating Haras Don Alberto, he suggested they downsize to about 30-35 mares to start, although that aspiration was short-lived. The number of mares has grown to around 350 on what is undoubtedly the largest haras in Chile. About 2,400 acres of a 20,000-acre operation are devoted to Thoroughbreds.

The Thoroughbred operation is divided into four divisions: Mirador, 406 acres devoted to breeding, foaling, and sales


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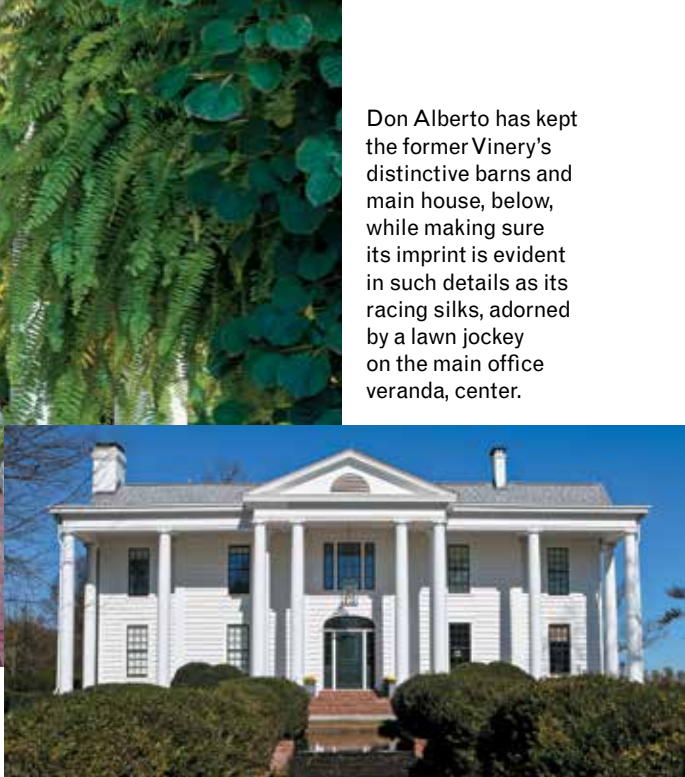
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Don Alberto has kept the former Vinery's distinctive barns and main house, below, while making sure its imprint is evident in such details as its racing silks, adorned by a lawn jockey on the main office veranda, center.

preparation; Curiche, an agricultural division that has 715 acres reserved for Thoroughbreds; Matancilla, a new division of 739 acres that stands stallions; and Pirque, 264 acres that includes a training center with a mile dirt track — and vineyard. The remaining 17,000-plus acres are given to agricultural endeavors, including the large dairy. The Andes mountain range looms over much of the property.

Heller drives over these acres, customarily accompanied by numerous dogs of varying sizes and shapes. What's driving him is "the passion of the horses," according to Priscila Beloch, office manager at the Kentucky farm. Beloch says this passion extends to horses retired from the racing stable. Retirees live out their lives in designated areas of Don Alberto farms in Kentucky and in Chile.

"That comes from Liliana, too," said Mundy. "The horses are the most important thing to them."

For some years Haras Don Alberto has been breeding numbers of the family's Chilean-based mares to international

stallions standing part of the year in South America, including Fusaichi Pegasus, Rock of Gibraltar, Bluegrass Cat, Stormin Fever, Proud Citizen, Henrythenavigator, Mastercraftsman, Holy Roman Emperor, Dylan Thomas, and Stevie Wonderboy. Liliana Solari is involved in all breeding decisions.

Meanwhile in the United States, Don Alberto also bought a stake in Empire Maker when Gainesway Farm repatriated the stallion from Japan.

In the Kentucky farm's short history, a shift in focus already has occurred. Don Alberto Corp. has been seeking fewer mares but of higher quality than it might have purchased initially. Some acquisitions have included grade 1 stakes winners Angela Renee and Sarah Lynx, along with La Cloche, also a graded stakes winner. The corporation was underbidder on Unique Bella's dam, Breeders' Cup Ladies' Classic winner Unrivaled Belle, by Unbridled's Song, when she topped the 2016 November breeding stock sale in foal to Tapit for \$3.8 million. At the 2017

January sale Don Alberto Corp. purchased this same cross when it acquired the sale-topper, Siren Serenade.

"They've been doing this in Chile for the last 15 years so they know they want quality," Diaz-Valdes said. "Like any business, when you start, it's a year in transition," he said. "They started at the beginning here, but the idea was to immediately start building with the better quality."

The Heller-Solari history in Kentucky has been brief thus far but significant. Most importantly for Heller and his mother, they feel at home in the Bluegrass.

"He felt like a stranger but he was so much welcomed," said Diaz-Valdes, translating for Heller.

"In 48 hours he was welcomed by everybody because he bought the farm. People were very friendly. It was shocking to him. This is when he started a love affair with Kentucky because he was so welcomed and well received." **KM**



Don Alberto's Thoroughbred operations in Chile include divisions for broodmares and foals as well as for yearlings and sales prospects. With an emphasis on breeding name stallions to its broodmares, the Chilean operation yields yearlings by Tapit and Scat Daddy, center.