



# CHAMPION MAKER

The Toyota Blue Grass Stakes has shaped the careers  
of many notable Thoroughbreds

TOYOTA  
DOM



Below, the field breaks for the 2015 Toyota Blue Grass Stakes; bottom, Street Sense (center) loses a close 2007 running.







MILT TOBY

1979

**Spectacular Bid dominated in the 1979 Blue Grass Stakes before taking the Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes.**

By Jennie Rees

**C**arl Nafzger's short list of races he most passionately wanted to win during his Hall of Fame training career included Keeneland's Toyota Blue Grass Stakes.

Instead, with his active trainer days winding down, he has had to settle for a pair of Kentucky Derby victories launched by the Toyota Blue Grass. Three weeks before they entrenched their names in history at Churchill Downs, Unbridled finished third in the 1990 Derby prep race, and in 2007 Street Sense lost it by a nose.

"I've always coveted the Blue Grass, maybe because it was at Keeneland," Nafzger said. "I thought I'd win it with Street Sense, and he makes two mistakes coming down the lane and I get beat an inch.

"Generally, the horses that ran well in the Blue Grass ran well in the Derby. I used it every trip as a measuring pole to see what I needed to do, what I had to adjust, before I got to the Kentucky Derby. The Blue Grass was the perfect race to set up for the Kentucky Derby, and I used it to that advantage."

The 11 Blue Grass Stakes winners that went on to Kentucky Derby glory include greats such as Spectacular Bid (1979), Riva Ridge (1972), Shut Out (1942), and Northern Dancer (1964), whose offspring would

send the Keeneland yearling sales into the stratosphere. But to show the depth of the Blue Grass, consider the dozen 3-year-olds that lost the Blue Grass before wearing the roses: Nafzger's two champions are joined by the likes of 1941 Triple Crown winner Whirlaway and former record-money earner Alysheba (disqualified from first to third in the 1987 Blue Grass).

Then there are the Blue Grass winners that were tripped up in the Derby for their legendary owners but are ensconced in racing lore and as stallions, including Calumet Farm's Bull Lea, who in 1938 won the second Blue Grass at Keeneland and went on to sire three Kentucky Derby winners; E.R. Bradley's Bimelech (1940), Kerr Stable's Round Table (1957), Calumet's Alydar (1978), and Claiborne Farm's Pulpit (1997).

And the winners that lost the Derby but landed in the Hall of Fame, such as Coaltown (1948, who could beat everybody but stablemate Citation), Arts and Letters (1969), Holy Bull (1994), and Skip Away (1996).

### Kentucky Derby tune-up

The Blue Grass is the winningest 3-year-old prep for the Kentucky Derby, one more than the Florida Derby, with 23

horses having used the Keeneland race as a springboard for victory in the Run for the Roses. Before Keeneland was built, the Blue Grass had been held at the old Kentucky Association racetrack.

The Blue Grass has morphed from a then-record \$5,000 futurity stakes in 1937, the first year it was held at Keeneland, to last year's \$1 million won by Carpe Diem. The Blue Grass was \$10,000-added in 1941 when the stakes at Keeneland earned its first Derby winner as Our Boots beat Whirlaway by six lengths. Whirlaway also lost Churchill's Derby Trial five days later, but four days after that took the Kentucky Derby by eight lengths en route to the Triple Crown — the first of Calumet Farm's eight Derby triumphs as an owner.

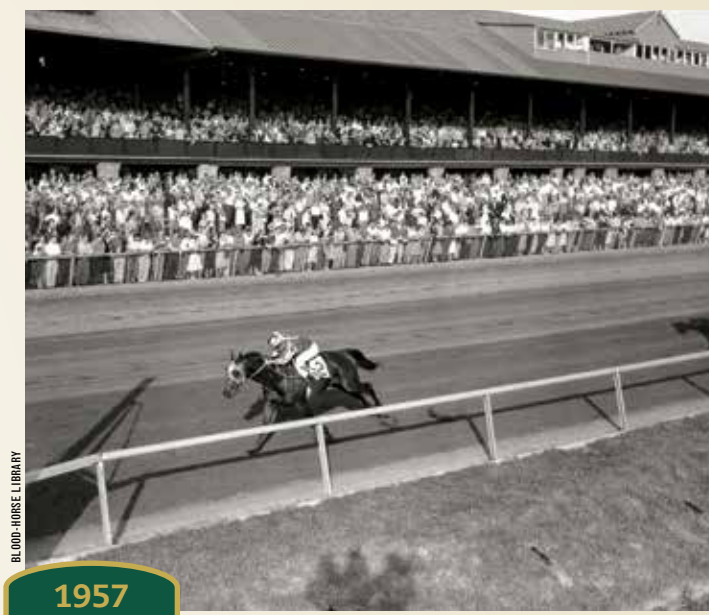
"I'm a traditionalist," said Hall of Fame trainer Nick Zito, a native New Yorker and three-time Blue Grass winner with Calumet-bred Derby winner Strike the Gold (1991), Rick Pitino's Halory Hunter in 1998, and The Cliff's Edge in 2004. "I used to watch all these famous horses run in the Blue Grass. When I was a kid, I went to the Keeneland Library and said I'd really like to come back here someday and do something. When I had a good 3-year-old, there was no doubt in my mind that [we'd go to] the Blue Grass, not New York, though we've won the Wood Memorial also three times.

"You look at the horses that ran in the Blue Grass, it's a Who's Who. You get to Keeneland a couple of weeks early, and you see those horses and they look amazing. You could comb your hair looking at their coats. There is something with the water, something with the bluegrass and environment. They say you're a product of your environment, and what better place to have horses?"

The Blue Grass went from \$25,000-added in 1951 to \$40,000-added in 1972, the longest span between purse increases. But fueled by an explosion in Keeneland's horse auctions in the late 1970s, the Blue Grass quickly became a bigger payday: \$100,000 in 1976 to \$250,000 in 1988 after four \$50,000 hikes, to \$350,000 in 1991, \$500,000 in 1992 and to \$700,000 in 1996 — that \$200,000 jump the largest until the \$250,000 raise to \$1 million last year.

If other tracks beat Keeneland to the million-buck punch, perhaps no other track did better at making sure its other stakes and daily races remained well-funded.

"A million dollars is huge, and we're very pleased about that," said W.B. Rogers Beasley, Keeneland's vice president for racing who has worked at the track since 1982 (when Gato Del Sol finished second in the Blue Grass nine days before winning the Derby) and will retire this June. "But you've got to take care of



Above, Coaltown easily won the 1948 Blue Grass but could not beat stablemate Citation in the Kentucky Derby. Center, Round Table ran away with the 1957 edition then finished third in the Derby. Top, Northern Dancer won in 1964 then took the Derby and Preakness.



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1996

An easy winner in 1996, Skip Away puzzled with a dull run in the Derby then finished second in both the Preakness and Belmont Stakes and earned the 3-year-old championship.

your horsemen and your other stakes races, too.”

### Tweaking the calendar

The Blue Grass was on Thursday, nine days before the Derby, until moving to three weeks out in 1990. The payoffs were immediate: Third-place Unbridled went on to win not only the Derby but also the Breeders’ Cup Classic in New York while victorious Summer Squall captured the Preakness Stakes. The next year Zito won his first of two Derbys, with Strike the Gold, the last horse to win both the Blue Grass and Derby.

But Zito backed away from the Blue Grass when Keeneland, believing it would prove safer for horses, installed the synthetic Polytrack surface for the 2006 fall meet. Zito’s horses instead won the Florida Derby twice.

Street Sense gave the Blue Grass an immediate Derby winner in the first Poly running, but he was clearly better on dirt. While the synthetic era produced some notable grass and/or synthetic horses (such as General Quarters, Paddy O’Prado, Brilliant Speed, and Dullahan), the race clearly fell out of favor except with those with turf horses trying to get in the Derby,



1937

Fencing (No. 3) won the first running of the Blue Grass Stakes at Keeneland, in 1937.

some Kentucky trainers and large outfits’ second- and third strings.

“It wasn’t the same race; a different type of horse,” said Kenny McPeck, the Lexington trainer who won the 2002 Blue Grass with Harlan’s Holiday and in 2013 with Java’s War.

The Blue Grass was moved to four weeks before the Derby for 2015, also the first time it was back on dirt as Keeneland installed a state-of-the-art surface following the eight-year synthetic experiment.

Elliott Walden, president and CEO of Carpe Diem’s co-owner WinStar Farm, applauds the move to dirt and positioning the stakes a week earlier — and the \$1 million is nice, too.

“Trainers want more time between races,” said Walden, who also trained Menifee, the 1999 Blue Grass winner and Derby and Preakness runner-up. “The other key to it is spending six weeks in Kentucky. Springtime in Kentucky is a really, really good time for a horse to mature and grow.

“It’s a great prep for the Derby; always has been. There are so many preps now, I really focus on that last group as far as their prestige and what they mean as a stand-alone race. Of those four-five grade I preps, the Blue Grass is a great one to

win because of the tie-in to Keeneland and most of your audience for breeders are there live and can experience the moment.”

The first race that decorated sports journalist Billy Reed covered was Northern Dancer winning the 1964 Blue Grass. His all-time favorite remains the 1978 Blue Grass, where he witnessed Calumet Farm’s elderly and frail owners Admiral and Mrs. Gene Markey watch



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KEENELAND/BILL STRAUSS

1991

Strike the Gold is the last horse to win both the Blue Grass Stakes and the Kentucky Derby. Right, Nick Zito (center) has trained three Blue Grass winners, including Strike the Gold and The Cliff's Edge.

Alydar run for the first time in person, having been driven up to the rail at the top of the stretch in a station wagon. Alydar won by 13 lengths before becoming racing's most famous runner-up during Affirmed's Triple Crown sweep.

Reed recalls that Thursday being like a holiday in Lexington when the Blue Grass was held nine days before the Derby, thousands taking off from work (or school) to go to Keeneland.

"It was the Derby prep race, and it really kicked off the Derby season, not only in Lexington but in Louisville as well," Reed said.

The last Derby winner out of the nine-day time frame was Alysheba, who was disqualified from first to third in the five-horse Blue Grass of 1987, the beneficiary being the ridgling War, who was moved up from second for colorful owner Tom Gentry.

But most trainers no longer wanted to run two weeks, let alone nine days, before the Derby. Keeneland moved the Blue Grass to three weeks before the 1990 Derby and landed back-to-back Derby winners in Unbridled and Strike the Gold.

### Benchmark

Nafzger said the wonderful aspect to the Blue Grass is that "it can be used in so many different ways" — an objective in itself to ensure a colt gets a good stallion home, a step-



2004

ANNE M. TEBERARDT



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ping-stone to stardom in Louisville, and also just to see if a horse belongs in the classics. For instance, Nafzger knew he was in trouble at 1¼ miles with 1999 Florida Derby winner Vicar when the colt couldn't win the Blue Grass with his speed.

Conversely, former jockey Mike Manganello, a Lexington resident, said he knew after he won the 1970 Blue Grass on 35-1 shot Dust Commander that, "I really felt I had a really good shot to get a piece of the Derby." He did better, with Dust Commander paying \$32.60 to win as one of the longest shots.

Dust Commander ran three times in 19 days at Keeneland, making the Derby his fourth start in 28 days — an unheard of schedule today.

Indeed, by the 21st century, races that once were stepping-stones to the Blue Grass — notably the Florida Derby and Louisiana Derby, when those races were held earlier, and even the Santa Anita Derby — have become major Kentucky Derby preps in their own right.

"Everybody is four and five weeks out now," Beasley said. "All those things have evolved in the big picture. Four weeks out, we think it's a



1990

Summer Squall was a popular winner in 1990 but ran second in that year's Kentucky Derby.

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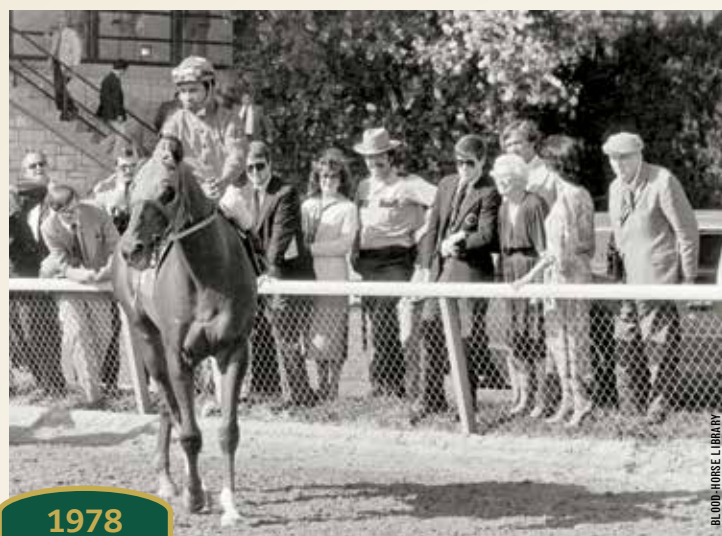
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## CHAMPION MAKER



2009



1978



1987



Clockwise from above, Alysheba (center) was disqualified from first to third in the 1987 Blue Grass but rebounded to win the Derby; General Quarters was an impressive Polytrack winner; Alydar's 1978 victory is remembered for his frail owners, Adm. Gene and Lucille Parker Markey, greeting the colt during the post parade; racing secretary Ben Huffman and Toyota Motor Manufacturing Kentucky President Wil James lead the Blue Grass post position draw; Carl Nafzger, with eventual Kentucky Derby winner Street Sense, says he has used the Blue Grass as a "measuring pole."

great race on its own merits and then also a good race for down the road."

Beasley believes future Blue Grass runnings will benefit from last fall's first Breeders' Cup ever at Keeneland, with powerful performances by not only Triple Crown winner American Pharoah but unbeaten 2-year-old champion Nyquist in the Juvenile and unbeaten 2-year-old filly champ Songbird in the Juvenile Fillies.

"That was the greatest showcase for us, when you have trainers from all over the United States come and run over the dirt," he said.

Neil Howard, who trained 1990 winner Summer Squall for Dogwood Stable, expects the Blue Grass to return to its premier status.

"It's really almost too much to describe, what a race like the Blue Grass means," he said. "... Now that Keeneland is back to traditional dirt, that's putting the Blue Grass back in its place." **KM**

