

NO CHANGE

REQUIRED

Clarkland Farm's no-frills approach has yielded an impressive record in the Keeneland sales arena

By Lenny Shulman / Photos by Bill Luster

Here's all you need to know about Nancy and Fred Mitchell, the proprietors of Clarkland Farm near Lexington: After selling a yearling for \$1.1 million at the 2014 Keeneland September auction, they celebrated by buying a used horse trailer, a manure spreader, and a hay baler.

"Well, we needed a new hay baler," said Fred Mitchell. "The one we had was 20 years old."

There are no fancy cupolas on the Clarkland buildings; no newfangled horse walkers or swimming pools or elaborate gates or barns that look like four-star hotels. All Clarkland has to boast is good old-fashioned horsemanship practiced by Fred, Nancy, Nancy's daughter Marty Buckner, and Marty's husband, Matt "Ernie" Ernst.



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The Mitchells have been raising Thoroughbred runners on these 400 acres just a few miles east of downtown Lexington for 40 years. Their no-frills philosophy represents a perfect fit for this land, which has been in Nancy's family since the 1770s, when it was part of a land grant from the Commonwealth of Virginia to her ancestor Lt. James Clark for his service in the French and Indian War. Back where the old railroad tracks used to cross the property is an old barn that served as an Army barracks during the Spanish-American War.

Both the 1931 Preakness Stakes winner Mate and Nancy Mitchell were raised on the farm.

"I would get out of school every day at noon so I could come home and clean stalls and break yearlings," she said. "My father always told me not to let my studies interfere with my education."

Fred Mitchell also comes from a farming pedigree, having grown up on a 2,000-acre spread near Georgetown. He managed the livestock and crop operation there before marrying Nancy and getting involved with Thoroughbreds. The Mitchells began boarding mares with the help of their veterinarian Ed Fallon and legendary Kentucky horsemen Henry White, Bill



Top, mares graze on land "as good as you'll find in Central Kentucky," said Fred Mitchell. Above, young Thoroughbreds benefit from the rolling acreage.

O'Neill, and Ralph Kercheval.

"We had the [Paul Mellon] Rokeby mares during the breeding season, so we got to see the best mares in the country," said Fred. "And we also got to see the top stallions, which was an education."

Soon the Mitchells began investing in mares of their own at the Keeneland breeding stock sales, particularly older stakes-winning or stakes-producing mares that were more affordable. They selected well. The Mitchells and/or Buckner have

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From left, Fred and Nancy Mitchell, Matt “Ernie” Ernst, and Marty Buckner take pride in their hands-on approach.

bred graded stakes winners The Pamplemousse, Dixie Dot Com, Cherokee Country, Mass Market, Sierra Diablo, R Lady Joy, and two-time champion Beholder.

For the Klein family of Louisville, whose horses are the only boarders on Clarkland, they have raised Allamerican Bertie, Hurricane Bertie, Whirlie Bertie, Early Return, and Change Up.

Richard Mandella, the Southern California-based trainer who has conditioned Beholder to a pair of Breeders’ Cup victories and more than \$3.3 million in earnings, said of the Mitchells, “I’d like for them to raise my grandchildren.”

Their aptitude for breeding and raising good horses is no accident. Nancy Mitchell took pedigree books to school to fill any idle time and then worked at *The Blood-Horse* for five years doing research and cataloging, leaving only when she was ready to start a family. Fred Mitchell talks about the stack of racing publications she kept under her bed when they were first married. None were thrown away.



Clockwise from above, the remnants of an ice house; the modest main farmhouse; Marty Buckner leading in Leslie’s Lady

Nancy Mitchell likes nothing better than sitting outside their home on summer evenings watching the yearlings run and frolic with one another and predicting which will be the most talented racehorses. Her keen eye has served the operation in good stead.

The Mitchells were in shopping mode at the 2006 Keeneland November sale, where Nancy Mitchell picked out a couple of mares from the dispersal of the late James Hines, the owner/breeder of Eclipse Award winner Lawyer Ron. One of those purchases was Les-

lie’s Lady, a minor stakes winner for whom they gave \$100,000.

Timing is everything. Into Mischief, a 2005 foal out of Leslie’s Lady, won the 2007 CashCall Futurity and has become a rising stallion at B. Wayne Hughes’ Spendthrift Farm. The Mitchells, on Nancy Mitchell’s suggestion, bred Leslie’s Lady to Henny Hughes, who wasn’t exactly setting the stallion world on fire, and got a filly that became a nice weanling and yearling, always healthy but initially unremarkable. Coming up to the September yearling sale at Keeneland, however, she blos-

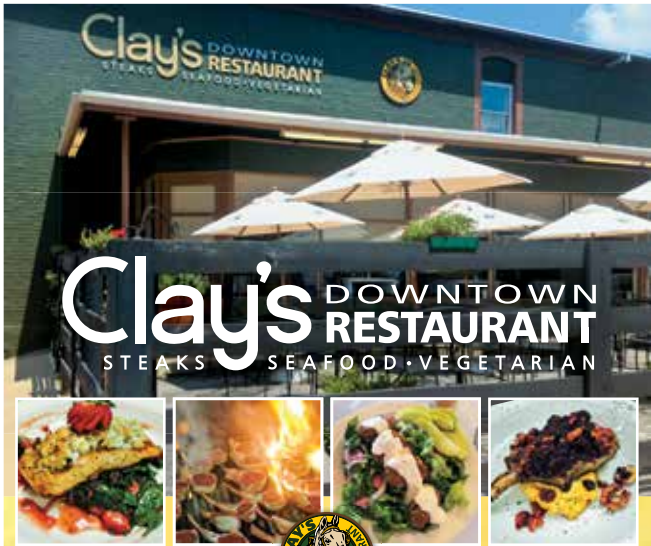
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somed and caught the eye of Sean Feld, who was selling seasons and helping pick out horses for Spendthrift.

“I never had a filly in the auction ring show herself like that one did,” said Fred Mitchell. “It was like, ‘Here I am. Everybody look at me.’”

Likely because she was a half brother to Into Mischief, the filly interested Spendthrift enough to make the winning bid of \$180,000 for the Clarkland-bred who would be named Beholder.

Under the care of Mandella, Beholder won the 2012 Grey Goose Breeders’ Cup Juvenile Fillies and was named that year’s champion 2-year-old filly. In 2013 she returned to win the Las Virgenes Stakes, Santa Anita Oaks, Zenyatta Stakes, and Breeders’ Cup Distaff (all grade I races) en route to being named champion 3-year-old filly. Although Beholder spiked a temperature and missed the 2014 Breeders’ Cup, she is back with Mandella and being pointed for a 2015 campaign.

Beholder is a gift that continues to give back to the Mitchells. Her success has made Leslie’s Lady’s offspring among the most desirable at the yearling sales. Sent to the stallion Curlin, Leslie’s Lady produced a filly that sold to John Malone’s Bridlewood Farm for \$1.1 million at the 2014 Keeneland September sale and could have changed the Mitchells’ lives — had they wanted any change. Which they don’t.

Leslie’s Lady lost her yearling for 2015 but is scheduled to produce a foal by Scat Daddy in May.

An eye for a horse

Take a drive around Clarkland Farm with Fred Mitchell and you quickly understand how decades of knowledge and experience translate into success. Mitchell is a hardboot who isn’t averse to flashing a knowing grin when someone hits on a small truth. His hands are like fine sandpaper with the strength that comes from a lifetime of farming. A re-lit cigar parting his lips, he drove past stands of tall oak and ash trees. (“Land with big trees is good land.”) There are hay fields that will feed the



Marty Buckner and Nancy Mitchell appreciate how good Leslie’s Lady has been to Clarkland Farm.



The foaling barn was constructed with logs from the farm.

horses and provide bedding for them.

“This is as good a ground as you’ll find in Central Kentucky,” he said, chomping on that cigar. “We get the same minerals, vitamins, and limestone out of our hay as our grass puts into our horses, and we feed a lot of hay.”

An old dairy barn, from a previous incarnation of the farm, now serves as Clarkland’s foaling barn. Thick timbers laid horizontally serve as its walls. One of the foaling stalls has thick breeding mats from Spendthrift, once used by Seattle Slew.

Fred Mitchell has an eye for a horse as well. At the Keeneland 2003 November sale he bought for \$47,000 a mare with a spotty produce record named Comfort Zone. The Mitchells bred her to Kafwain and got multiple grade III winner The Pamplemousse. The Mitchells then sold her Stormy Atlantic yearling (eventual stakes winner American Lady) for \$230,000 at Keeneland, and then a Curlin colt out of her for \$375,000 at Keeneland. That, as the legendary horseman Robert Courtney likes to say, is how you make money in this business.

Michael Levy of Bluewater Sales, who spent time at Clarkland as a young man being mentored by Fred Mitchell, recalls the Mitchells scouting at the breeding stock sales at Keeneland.

“Fred and Nancy would get chairs and sit in the back ring and watch every mare come in,” Levy said. “It would take something very specific to get

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Fred out of his chair. His eye for a horse is a gift.”

Clarkland is not resting on its laurels. Marty Buckner, who is significantly happier working in the barns than talking about the family's achievements, explained that each year the farm tries to buy two or three mares to replenish its band. The foal crop of 2012 ran as 2-year-olds last year, and Brookerson, Curlino, Calmbeforethestorm, Party Pooper, El Deal, Escondido, and Top Decile all were victorious in their first year racing. Clarkland owns 17 mares, Marty Buckner and Ernie Ernst another six, and 18 mares are boarded for the Kleins.

Top Decile is another example of the Mitchells' astuteness. Clarkland purchased her dam, Sequoia Queen, at Keeneland's 2009 January auction for \$70,000. They bred the daughter of Forestry to Congrats and got Top Decile, whom



they sold at Keeneland September for \$110,000. Top Decile, second last year in both the Darley Alcibiades Stakes and Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies, has banked \$491,000 to date. The farm owns her half sister Top Tiara, a 2-year-old filly on whom they are very high.

“It's look like Sequoia Queen is going to make a nice mare,” Fred allows, a smile playing at the edges of his mouth.

Celtic Chant, a Songandaprayer mare bought for \$175,000 in 2013 at

Keeneland November, has a First Samurai yearling — her first offspring — that everyone at the farm loves.

“To get a good first foal is certainly a good sign,” said Fred Mitchell.

To pick out and breed and raise good horses over this length of time is another good sign.

“The horses get the best care, the best land, and the best true horsemen,” said Richard Klein, whose family has been associated with the Mitchells for more than two decades.

Outside one of the farm residences sits a kennel with Fred's six English setters, who accompany him on bird hunting forays back on the farm's nether reaches. It's the only diversion he needs from his love of working with horses. That love is why, even after a \$1 million jackpot, nothing needs to change at Clarkland Farm. **KM**



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