



The couple make monthly visits to their Kentucky farm, which they have named The Bensons at Greenwood Lodge.





# DIVINE CALLING

Faith united  
Gayle and Tom Benson,  
who share a love  
of Thoroughbred racing

By Maryjean Wall / Photos by Kirk Schlea



**TOM AND GAYLE BENSON** juggle two professional sports teams, a racing stable, and, since last October, a Bourbon County horse farm. Benson laughed when he caught himself mentioning he and his friends sat at last year's Kentucky Derby on the 50-yard line — forgive him, the finish line. Keeping track of a jet-set agenda that orbits around multiple sports is an everyday thing for the Bensons. It can't be easy keeping all this straight.

## divine calling



In tribute to Tom's first car dealership, Gayle Benson had a golf cart converted to resemble a '57 Chevy.



A former interior designer, Gayle Benson says she appreciates the beauty of Thoroughbreds.

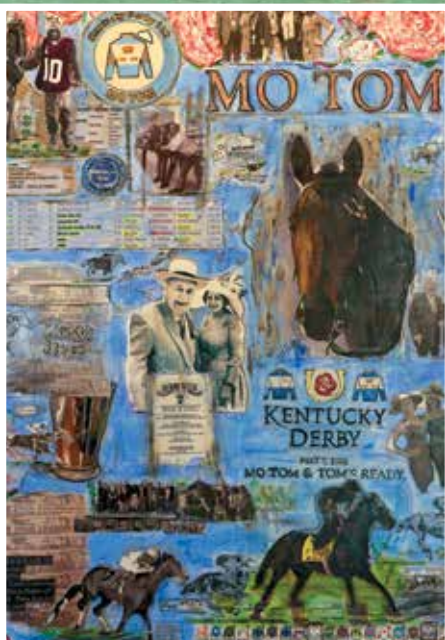
At any time the Bensons could be at training camp for their New Orleans Saints. Or flying to an away game for their New Orleans Pelicans. Or checking in at Keeneland. Last year they added the Derby to their whirlwind itinerary, watching two of Gayle's horses, Mo Tom and Tom's Ready, finish off the board. But all was not lost. Moving on last fall to the Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile, Tom's Ready ran a respectable fifth: not a bad finish to the season for this on-the-go couple in their first few years of racing.

The Bensons' goals for their horses are no different from those of others participating at Thoroughbred racing's elite levels: They want to win the major events. What makes this couple different is Tom and Gayle's decision to join in this sport when their NFL and NBA teams give them plenty of





The Bensons started two horses in the 2016 Kentucky Derby: Mo Tom and Tom's Ready. Though both finished off the board in the Derby, Mo Tom later won the Ohio Derby, above.



The Bensons commemorated their Derby experience with a scrapbook.

sports exposure. They did not need horse racing yet they fell in love with it.

"Do you know the story of how we met?" Gayle asked as she tucked comfortably into a sofa at the former Greenwood Lodge Farm. They have renamed the 610-acre retreat The Bensons at Greenwood Lodge.

"One day I was reading the scriptures at Mass," Gayle said, unrolling the narrative she would like to share with the horse industry. "He used to have a stationary bike that he rode every day and he would watch the Mass on TV (while riding his bike) and then he wanted to pursue me.

He came to Mass on that Monday morning (in 2004), and he walked behind the sacristy to tell the Monsignor celebrating the Mass hello. He wanted to thank him (the Monsignor had celebrated Mass at Benson's second wife's funeral), and he wanted to get a closer look at me. A couple of days later he called the Monsignor to ask for my telephone number."

As told by Gayle, the Monsignor passed on the request. She wasn't interested and told the Monsignor so. The Monsignor rephrased his request: Why not give Benson her phone number and that way, perhaps Saint Louis Cathedral, their church in





“

I still get emotional when I talk about how we met.”

—GAYLE BENSON OF HUSBAND TOM



Saddle cloths from their Derby starters have pride of place at the farm.

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## divine calling



Though Tom Benson has owned horses, they are new to Gayle. The stable, GMB Racing, runs in her name.

New Orleans, could obtain from him a much-needed donation toward a new roof.

Gayle acquiesced. Tom placed his phone call. He invited Gayle to an arena football game, and the story culminated five months and one week later in San Antonio, Texas, where they were married at Immaculate Conception Memorial Chapel.

No surprise: They have named one of their racehorses Cathedral Reader.

At their wedding in San Antonio, Gayle said she passed out pages printed with the story of how she and Tom met. A framed copy hangs in the parlor at Greenwood Lodge. "I gave that out to people at our wedding because I didn't want people to think, here's this young woman who's going to marry this older man," Gayle said. "They called me a gold digger. They weren't very nice to me, but now after 13 years they look at me in a different light. It's taken a long time."

Tom, who will be 90 July 12, and Gayle, 70, consider the story of how they met to be central to their marriage of 13 years. They are major contributors to the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and as such received from Pope Benedict in 2012 the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice. The award, the highest papal recognition given to any lay person, was presented for out-

standing service to the church and the pope.

Their religious beliefs are incorporated into their new horse farm, where they are remodeling a chapel installed by the previous owners to accommodate Catholic Mass. The chapel came complete with stained glass windows when they acquired the farm.

Additionally, the Bensons' racing silks pay tribute to their faith: blue and white with three gold crowns on the back, one crown on the front, and a blue cap. The blue and white colors are meant to represent the Virgin Mary.

Said Gayle of her husband, "I still get emotional when I talk about how we met."

Tom added, "She's so sweet. I made a good decision."

More recently Gayle's emotions have been spilling over into her admiration for the farm and its Thoroughbreds. "It's so exciting to see those horses run," she said. "They're beautiful animals. Beautiful. And they look at you with those eyes, and you feel like they know what you're thinking and doing. It's just a beautiful thing."

On an April morning during the Keeneland spring meet, Tom toured the farm to inspect the young horses. He tools around in a golf cart converted to resemble a '57 Chevy, fins and all. Gayle





A chapel on the farm is being remodeled to accommodate Catholic Mass.



Greenwood

The farm and its Federal-style house, built in 1810, have had only a handful of owners in two centuries.

presented him with the gift, as his first of numerous car dealerships over the years sold Chevrolets.

Gayle said she does not yet understand the pedigrees of the mares and foals, but she does love the racing. They have attended races in many parts of the Eastern United States, and Tom, she said, “doesn’t care where he’s going but he loves to be going. And I enjoy seeing him have a good time.”

Gayle said she finds herself quite taken by the panorama of the race course. “It’s like a fashion show,” she said. “All the women like to dress up. I was in the interior design business, and I love fashion and clothes and beautiful things. Horses are beautiful things and they’ve got the beautiful bridles and when they run they’re so pretty. It’s exciting.”

The Bensons try to visit their farm at least once a month. They bring an entou-



Says Gayle of the horses: “...they look at you with those eyes, and you feel like they know what you’re thinking and doing. It’s just a beautiful thing.”



With Gayle's focus on the horses, Tom Benson remains active in the car dealership business.

rage of guests on their plane from home in New Orleans because Tom likes to be surrounded by people. The main residence at Greenwood Lodge is a spacious Federal house, with later additions, that can accommodate several families at one time, including visiting children. The dining table, situated off the parlor done up as English country, seats 24.

The property has not had many owners. The first family to own the property, the Garth family, built the Federal style home in 1810 and continued to operate the farm for the next two centuries. Greenwood Lodge was established only 17 years following the final attack by Native Americans on Bourbon County settlers.

Bill and Carole McAlpin purchased the farm in 2003 from the original family. The

farm had never been used to raise horses commercially until the McAlpin stewardship, when remodeling produced significant equine-specialized features, including a European yard with stable units, as well as fenced paddocks and pastures. The farm office easily could be mistaken for a home and was the feature that sold Gayle on the property.

Gayle is new to horses, but Tom is not. He tells about the ranch he formerly owned, "in Texas, in Johnson City," he said, which was called Benson Farm and Ranch and where he kept show jumping horses, racing American Quarter Horses, and riding horses for his late daughter, Tootsie. His late son, Robert, managed the horse division.

Among the Bensons' Texas neighbors

was President Lyndon Johnson. Benson has his memories of the man. "He used to love to get you in an open car and ride around," Benson said.

"He's known a lot of presidents," Gayle interjected. "He's very close to George Bush."

Following son Robert's death, "we vacated the farm," Tom said. "That was at least 30 years ago."

"I started living more in New Orleans," Tom said. He'd already owned a Thoroughbred racehorse, Si Cima, a Louisiana-bred mare (foal of 1975) well suited to the Fair Grounds, where she won multiple stakes and allowance races. But following Robert's death, Tom did not buy more racehorses.

Meanwhile, Tom was building business interests in automobile dealerships. He



had gone from working as a bookkeeper in a dealership to owner of the same dealership, and from there to founding a finance company while expanding into banking and to more dealerships. He continues to acquire dealerships, recently adding Cadillac, and bringing his current number to three. He had as many as 20 dealerships at the height of his business career.

Tom's interest in Thoroughbred racing reawakened following his marriage to Gayle, according to Greg Bense, director of communications for the New Orleans Saints. The trigger was California Chrome, 2014 Kentucky Derby and Preakness winner who two years later won the Dubai World Cup. Bense, along with Dennis Lauscha, president of the Saints, and Tom, along with the men's wives, were enjoying a glass of wine at the Greenbrier resort in

West Virginia, relaxing while at the Saints' training camp. "We were captivated by this California Chrome and the success he was having," Bense said, "and with Mr. Benson coming fresh off the Super Bowl (win in 2009), he thinks he's invincible, anything he touches is going to turn to gold, and he says, 'let's get in the horse business.'"

Just like that. Tom asked Bense, "How much money do I need to get started? This was in May 2014," Bense recalled. "I told him we're probably going to need a couple of million dollars to get in this game to do it the right way. I didn't go beyond that because I didn't want him to throw the bottle of wine at me."

Bense and Lauscha sought out trainers with strong New Orleans connections: Al Stall Jr., Dallas Stewart, and Tom Amoss. The Bensons gave the trainers \$400,000

each to begin building a stable. The result was seven young horses, two of which — Mo Tom and Tom's Ready — raced in the 2016 Kentucky Derby. That step came quicker than anyone would have expected.

"When Mr. Benson decided to do this, he wanted (the racing operation) in Mrs. Benson's name, so she is the sole owner (of GMB Racing)," Bense said. "He is the spouse of the owner."

The morning of the 2016 Kentucky Derby, when the group was headed to Churchill Downs, Tom announced, "You know, if we win this Kentucky Derby, I'm going to have to buy a farm," Bense recalled.

They didn't win. But simply starting two in the Derby raised the stakes. "We literally bought the farm," Gayle said, laughing.

They hope to enjoy their farm with friends for many years to come. **KM**

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