





EYE ON THE prize

Woods Edge Farm owner Peter O'Callaghan has a proven record of spotting good horses and selling them for top dollar at the major yearling sales

By Cynthia Grisolia | Photos By David Coyle



hip No. 91 at the 2018 Keeneland September yearling sale was a strapping chestnut colt stamped with the keen eye, silky glide, and cool demeanor of his sire: 2015 Triple Crown winner American Pharoah. As he entered the sales ring, bids on the offspring by, arguably, the greatest racehorse in the past few decades, were expected to fly. But even the yearling's consignor, Woods Edge Farm, headed by Irish-born Peter O'Callaghan, didn't expect the number to soar so high. A few minutes later the hammer fell at a striking \$2.2 million, solidifying the colt as the highest-priced yearling of the opening session.

Not 10 months before at the 2017 Keeneland November breeding stock sale, O'Callaghan had bought the colt as a weanling, paying the most he's ever shelled out for a youngster — \$400,000 — and making the purchase risky business. "Obviously, he was by American Pharoah, and we were very eager to have one," O'Callaghan recalled. "And he had all the things we're looking to buy. He was a great individual. He was a big, raw, athletic horse. He had a wonderful presence. We knew if we didn't get him, we probably wouldn't get another one," O'Callaghan continued, "or another one like him. So we gave the extra bid and we got him."

The chart-topper is another example, in a long line of chart-topping examples, of O'Callaghan's innate eye for quality weanlings and sharpened business sense that have helped make the Lexington-based Woods Edge one of the most effective consignors in the industry. According to Keeneland's online sale summaries, in last year's September sale Woods Edge ranked eighth out of 138 consignors, having sold 46 horses that grossed more than \$9.6 million and averaged \$210,511.

"Peter has built his success with Woods Edge Farm on a keen understanding of the market," said Keeneland Director of Sales



Peter O'Callaghan took a gamble that paid off with this seven-figure son of American Pharoah at the 2018 Keeneland September yearling sale.

Operations Geoffrey Russell. "He buys quality foals during our November sale and then presents them very well for sale as yearlings in September. Woods Edge is perennially among the leading consignors at Keeneland, and deservedly so."

The American Pharoah colt was not the first Keeneland-sale zenith in Woods Edge's history, either. In 2013 the consignor also scored when a son of War Front sold for \$2.5 million. On the same day, a few hip numbers later, Woods Edge sold a Tapit filly for a cool \$1 million. What makes the story all the more impressive is the number of Woods Edge graduates that move beyond triumph in the sales ring to success on the racetrack. Among them are 2010 Wood Memorial victor Eskendereya; 2017 Breeders' Cup Sprint winner Drefong; and Street Boss, a \$300,000 yearling who went on not only to be a grade 1 winner but also a highly coveted stallion. More recently, the Congrats filly Stronger Than Ever earned the top spot in the Silverbulletday Stakes in 2018 at Fair Grounds, and Knicks Go captured the grade 1 Claiborne Breeders' Futurity last fall at Keeneland, giving his sire, Paynter, a first grade 1-winning offspring.

In 2019 Woods Edge grad Mr. Money (owned by the Allied Racing Stable) looks to be headed toward stardom having already

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O'Callaghan bought the nucleus of Woods Edge Farm in 2001.



In addition to yearlings, the farm is home to approximately 60 broodmares and their foals.

earned four grade 3 wins: the Pat Day Mile and the Matt Winn Stakes, both at Churchill, and most recently the Indiana Derby and West Virginia Derby. “In the 3-year-old group he might be our best performer,” said O’Callaghan. “He looks like a good horse.”

Steeped in horsemanship

That’s not surprising. Good horses have been a part of O’Callaghan’s life since birth. He grew up in Ireland, raised in Kildare, where his parents, Gay and Annette, own the now 600-acre Yeomanstown Stud, one of Europe’s more distinguished producers of top-class runners. At Yeomanstown he and his three brothers, David, Guy, and Robert, learned, among other things, how to spot a top-notch horse and, maybe just as importantly, how to sell them. Pinhooking — buying horses with the intent to resell them at a profit — and building a powerful broodmare band were the cornerstones of the business, and that model O’Callaghan has replicated in the U.S. at Woods Edge. (Yeomanstown currently stands one of Europe’s foremost stallions, Dark Angel, and his son Gutaifan, along with Camacho and a graded stakes-winning son of Scat Daddy, El Kabeir.)

“My father always came to America to buy foals as long as he’s been in the business,” said O’Callaghan. “It was a great market for many years. With currency the way it used to be — a dollar was so advantageous. You could buy here in dollars and go home and sell them in British or Irish pounds, and with the currency exchange you were already ahead. It was a great business. He certainly wasn’t the only one doing it, but it is what got him interested in America in the first place.”

After finishing school and after spending some time competing at championship levels in three-day eventing, O’Callaghan got down to what he was born for: the Thoroughbred business. In addition to the family business, he learned the ropes by spending a season in Ocala, Florida, work-



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O'Callaghan believes in the importance of giving horses plenty of space and time to develop.

ing at Nick de Meric Thoroughbred Sales in “the 2-year-old game,” said O’Callaghan. “It was a great experience. They have an unbelievable operation. That’s an example of a family that has done an amazing job at developing their brand and their business — just top class.”

O’Callaghan then spent a yearling season at Dromoland Farm in Kentucky working for Gerry Dilger, who is known for filtering through such champs as 2016 Kentucky Derby winner Nyquist, 2004 Breeders’ Cup Juvenile winner Wilko, and 2017 Derby winner Always Dreaming, whom Dilger bred with partner Mike Ryan. “Gerry and my father go back a long way,” said O’Callaghan. “Gerry, in fact, worked for my dad in Ireland, and he has obviously been doing amazing things since he has lived and worked in America. So he was an obvious choice for someone like me to go to. Gerry is exactly what someone like me aims to do in this business.”

Dilger admits he saw a lot of potential in his student. “Peter was very alert and observant,” he said of his teaching expe-

rience. “He was eager to learn and was a very hard worker. I had no doubt he was going to be successful.”

Staking a claim in Kentucky

Woods Edge, with O’Callaghan at the helm, has been doing business since 2001, ever since the day Gay O’Callaghan thought it might be a good idea to look at some property in the Bluegrass and perhaps lease 100 acres. He and Peter looked at various farms with well-known realtor, author, and horseman Arnold Kirkpatrick, but found nothing quite right — until they drove into Woods Edge. “It was the last place we looked at,” said O’Callaghan. “My father did a handshake deal on the spot. We went from leasing 100 acres to buying a 400-acre farm in the space of 10 minutes.” Since then, O’Callaghan has added an annex and a broodmare division down the road, which makes Woods Edge now a sprawling 700 acres.

That space, said O’Callaghan, is of utmost importance when you are in the business of breeding horses. There are



Serenity abounds at Woods Edge.

about 60 broodmares and nearly 68 yearlings currently on the farm, but a look around reveals trim paddocks dotted with only a few horses grazing the lush pastures; some are even empty — resting to allow for fuller grass. The openness is certainly not a lack of business, but rather by design. “These horses need space; they need land and fresh ground,” said O’Callaghan, “and you can’t put a price on that. You can see the difference in the horses when they have the added space and the extra time you can give them.”

Time and space, patience, and a top-notch staff are the elements O’Callaghan points to when discussing the accomplishments of Woods Edge. The farm has seven barns; four are used for sales preparation and each is structured identically to allow for consistency of care: oversized, well-ventilated stalls — some as vast as 16 x 16 — round pens for longeing, and automatic horse walkers. In the world of Woods Edge, a Keeneland Book 6 horse should look as well-turned out as a Book 1 horse.

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The Woods Edge broodmare division is just down the road from the main farm.



Woods Edge's prepping program is designed to give sales yearlings every opportunity to succeed.

sale to look as good as possible," said O'Callaghan. "That's the great thing about the game — you don't know where the next top runner is coming from. That's why I feel it's so important to give them all the best chance by preparing them all as well as you can."

Staff, he added, is another huge factor when giving the horses every opportunity to succeed in the marketplace. Woods Edge operates with about 18-20 staff members most of the year, many of whom

O'Callaghan has personally cultivated. "People that are good with the horses are kind, give them confidence, teach good habits — they change everything for that horse," said O'Callaghan. "It can be night and day. You'd think it couldn't, but it does. They are very sensitive animals." In return the company does its best to reward good help with a competitive wage and, in the case of some longtime staff members, an investment in a few of the horses. "It gives them a vested interest," said O'Callaghan,

“

You can see the difference in the horses when they have the added space and the extra time you can give them.”

— PETER O'CALLAGHAN



O'Callaghan will bring more than 60 yearlings to the September sale.

“and it's a nice bonus.”

With the September yearling sale fast approaching, prep was in full force by late June. For 2019 O'Callaghan expected to bring more than 60 yearlings; many pinhooks and a growing number of homebreds now make up his allotment as the farm's broodmare band grows. O'Callaghan points to colts by leading sires Malibu Moon, Into Mischief, Frosted, and the time-honored turf producer Kitten's Joy, as well as filies by Breeders' Cup winner Runhappy and a homebred by Street Sense as hip numbers he hopes will bring big numbers. He even will be back with not one, but two colts by American Pharoah: a Keeneland January 2019 purchase, consigned by Alfred Nuckols' Hurstland Farm, and a homebred out of a stakes-

placed daughter of Tiznow. “They are both nice; they are different,” said O'Callaghan. “They are like a lot of the Pharoahs; they have a lot of strength and a lot of action.”

With every sale, however, what comes back into play most for O'Callaghan is the foundation laid by his family and his years of experience. “It's very good to have people come to your consignment and feel they can trust you to sell them a sound horse,” he said. “I certainly learned from my father, you are only as good as your word. If you don't tell the truth, you have nothing. So you do the best you can to sell as many well-raised, well-produced horses. If you've been honest in the process, you've done what you can do. The rest is up to the horse.” **KM**

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