

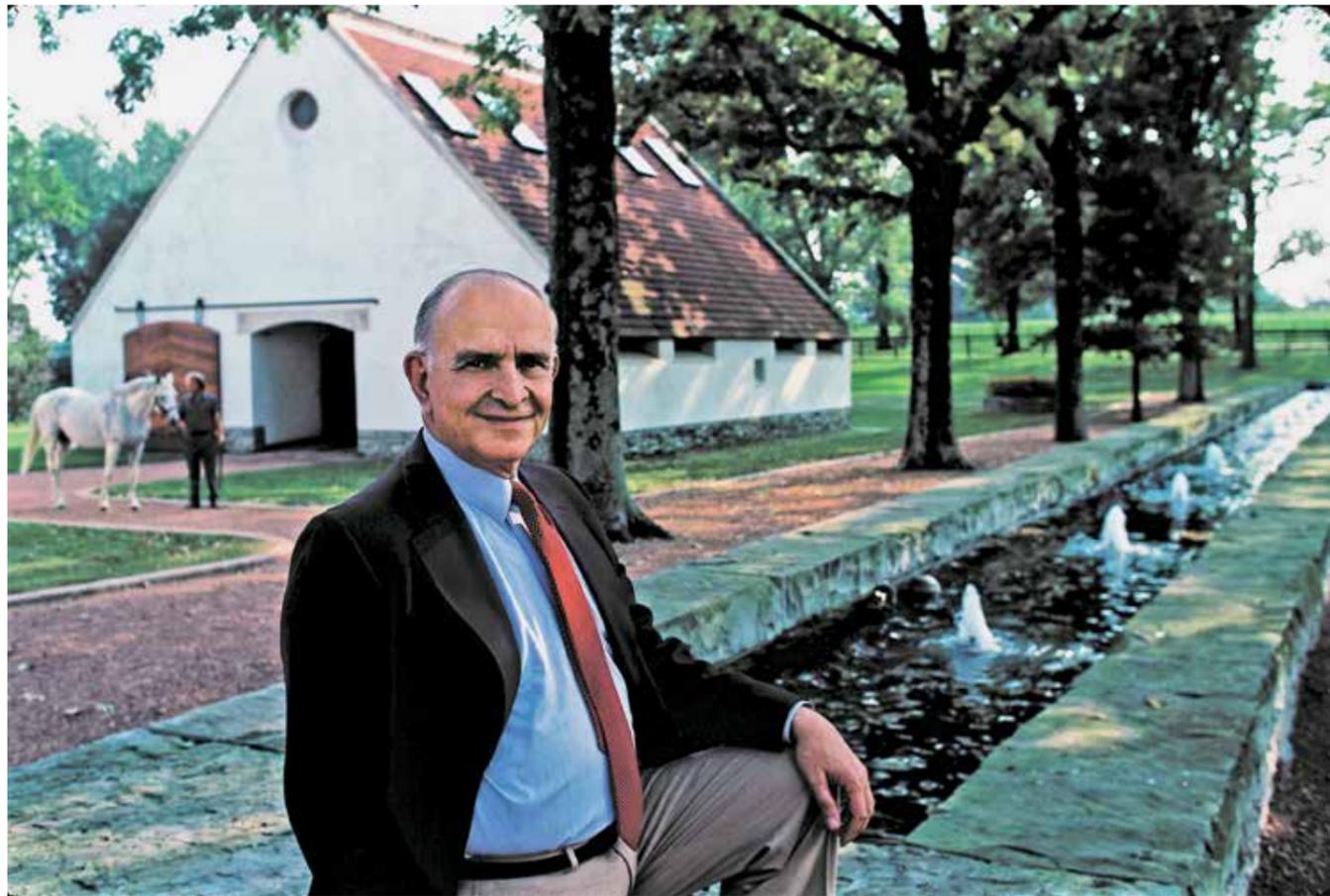
WILLIAM STODOL



FATHER OF THE CUP

John Gaines envisioned an international racing event that became the Breeders' Cup World Championships

By John Eisenberg



WILLIAM STROBE

A visionary in many endeavors, John Gaines developed Gainesway Farm into a stallion powerhouse.

Joan Gaines didn't sense history in the making on the morning of April 23, 1982, as she and her husband, John, and their 14-year-old-son, Thomas, drove from their home in Lexington toward Louisville.

John Gaines, owner of Gainesway Farm, the world-class commercial stallion station on Paris Pike, was scheduled to speak that day at the Kentucky Derby Festival's "They're Off" luncheon, an annual event opening the Derby season. But Gaines gave a lot of speeches and had not indicated this one would be memorable.

"He had never before mentioned what he

brought up that day; I had no ideas he was even thinking of it," Joan Gaines recalled years later. "He was a very interior person. He would just mull things."

When Gaines took the microphone in the Pegasus Room at Churchill Downs, the audience consisted mostly of journalists in town to cover the Derby. The place was not anywhere close to packed.

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—Joan Gaines

But Gaines gave a speech that changed horse racing in America, outlining his vision for a championship day of racing, a Super Bowl-style event comprising seven lucrative races for horses of different ages and sexes, all run at the same track on the same day while being televised around the world.

"I have personally spoken to virtually all the prominent breeders in this country and several in Europe, and to a man they have endorsed the program as a means of our industry helping itself," Gaines said in his speech.

There would be races for juveniles, turf races for both sexes, a sprint, and a distaff race, all with \$1 million purses. The all-day spectacle, to be known as the Breeders' Cup, would culminate with a \$3 million "classic" race, open to all ages and sexes.

On their drive back to Lexington that afternoon, Joan turned to her husband and said, "Well, that was a pretty good idea, John. How long have you been thinking about it?"

"Oh ... three years," replied Gaines, then 53 years old.

A slender chain-smoker with a sharp tongue and dark eyes that blazed with intensity, Gaines was known in the Bluegrass as a bold, outside-the-box visionary with a mind that worked on the grandest of scales. The only son of a New York businessman who bred champion trotters and made a fortune with dog food and Florida real estate, he had already blazed trails on several fronts.

He had taken Gainesway, his father's standardbred breeding operation, and made it into a Thoroughbred colossus, expanding its stallion roster from zero to 50 in two decades, putting him on equal footing with iconic breeders such as Spendthrift Farm's Leslie Combs II and Claiborne Farm's Arthur "Bull" Hancock. He had also conceived the idea for the Kentucky Horse Park, endowed a center for the humanities at the University of Kentucky, given generously to the university's art museum, and helped fund the Max-

well Gluck Equine Research Center. His art collection included paintings by Vincent van Gogh, Henri Matisse, Claude Monet, and Leonardo da Vinci. When he built new barns at Gainesway in the early 1980s, they won prestigious architectural design awards.

"John had vision," Joan Gaines said of her husband, who died in 2005. I don't know an awful lot of people who have what he did. He could get an idea, like for the Kentucky Horse Park or the Breeders' Cup, and understand what it would mean 25 or 30 years down the road. It's an aptitude and he had it."

Of Gaines' many big ideas, the most lasting — the one for which he became best known — was the one he brought up in that 1982 speech at Churchill Downs. The Breeders' Cup has become a landmark event on racing's calendar. Held every year in late October or early November, it has grown into a two-day, 13-race festival that attracts the world's top juvenile and older male and female horses. A victory in a Breeders'



PIETER ESTERHOFF

Gainesway Farm's award-winning architecture became recognized the Thoroughbred world over.



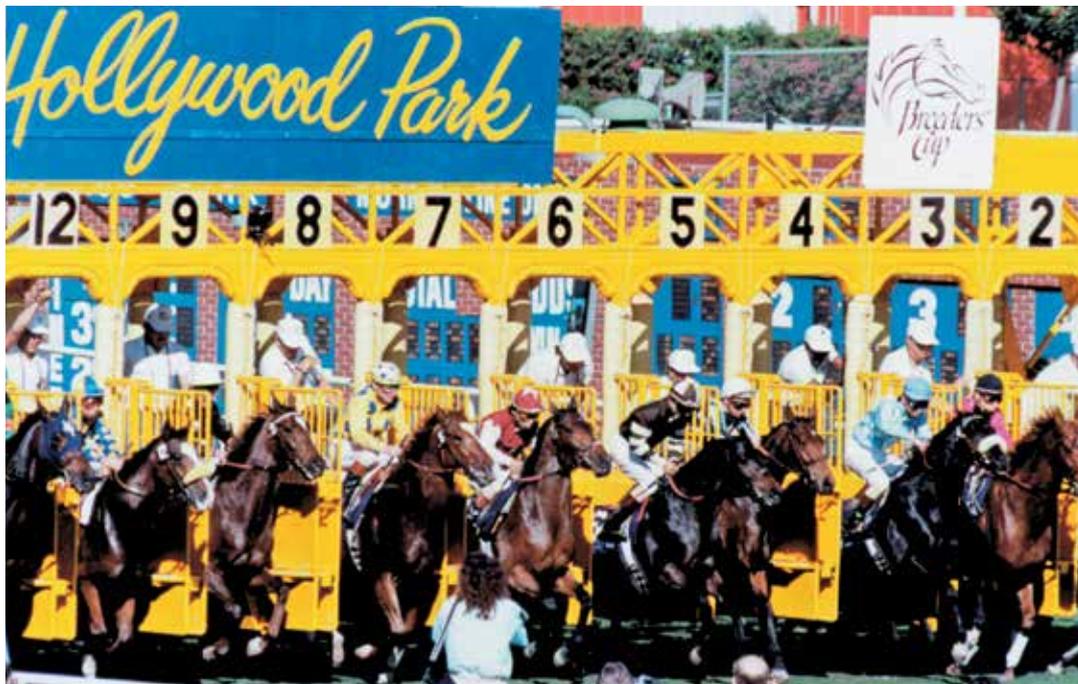
father of the cup

Cup race is often viewed as a career-defining achievement.

Before he went public with the idea in the early 1980s, Gaines had discussed it privately with supporters such as Nelson Bunker Hunt, a wealthy Texas breeder, who was all for it. But there were no guarantees it would ever become a reality. In a sport rife with infighting and conflicting agendas, lacking a powerful commissioner, getting anyone to agree on anything was a challenge.

“There was no way to just gain a consensus,” Gaines’ son, Thomas, said years later. “Dad’s thought was, ‘I’m just going to spring this on an unsuspecting world,’ because the only way to make it happen was to announce the idea and let it gain its own momentum.”

After he went public with it in 1982, he spent the next two



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Hollywood Park served as the host racetrack for the inaugural Breeders’ Cup.

years wrangling with other breeders, racing associations, television executives, and racetrack officials, trying to get them on board. His diplomatic wiles were tested. Anyone could see the merits of the idea. The sports world was ruled

by major events. Baseball had the World Series, football had the Super Bowl, and college basketball had the Final Four. Racing already had the Triple Crown, and there was room for another big, attention-getting event. But who would pay for it? Where would it be held? Who would broadcast it? There were as many questions as answers, it seemed.

Gaines devised a blueprint that included a Breeders’ Cup fund, which would effectively underwrite the event. Breeders would contribute a flat fee for each Cup-nominated foal and also donate one stud fee per season from every Cup-registered sire. The fund would then return some of the money to tracks to increase purse sizes and create prestigious races during the year. Meanwhile, the Breeders’ Cup itself would rotate from track to track to keep various racing associations happy.

“And then he got the ‘powers that be’ at NBC to embrace the idea,” Thomas Gaines said. “Once he had TV committed to it, he had something.”

Gaines’ most daunting obstacle was gaining the support of several pillars of the breeding



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Though Gaines had to step away from the Breeders’ Cup to bring it to fruition, he continued to influence the event’s development.



father of the cup

establishment, his chief rivals in the battle to stand top stallions. In building Gainesway into a powerhouse, he had made his share of enemies. Most signed on to support the Breeders' Cup, but several didn't want to participate as long as Gaines was involved.

"My father was powerful but polarizing," Thomas Gaines said. "The people he was working with were the same people whose brains he was bashing in competing to stand horses at his farm. The Breeders' Cup began when a bunch of fierce rivals agreed to collaborate."

Gaines was so polarizing that he resigned from the event's board of directors to make sure it came to fruition. But he was on hand when the Breeders' Cup debuted on a sunny



Gaines helped create the Breeders' Cup trophy.

October afternoon in 1984 at Hollywood Park in Southern California. The grandstands were packed. The betting totals set records. NBC's cameras beamed the races around the world. America's sports landscape had a new marquee day. "The 64,254 spectators who showed up at Hollywood Park on the most beautiful day imaginable could elect to ogle either seven of the runners who ultimately won Eclipse awards or such luminaries as Frank Sinatra, Gregory Peck, Cary Grant and Fred Astaire," *Sports Illustrated* racing journalist Whitney Tower wrote. "Sinatra sang at the gala the night before the races, and Astaire's wife, the former jockey Robyn Smith, was part of the NBC crew that covered the doings in an unprecedented four-hour live show."

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“WHAT MADE HIM A GREAT MAN IS HE WOULDN'T JUST COME UP WITH THESE IDEAS, HE WOULD MAKE THEM HAPPEN.”

—Thomas Gaines

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Although Gaines was no longer in the event's decision-making apparatus, his fingerprints were all over it as it quickly developed into a racing institution. He even had a hand in developing the ecorche replica that serves as the Breeders' Cup trophy.

When the second Breeders' Cup was held in New York in 1985, NBC's broadcast was seen in 40 countries. Newspapers in England, Ireland, France, Germany, Sweden, and Japan sent reporters. In addition to giving out \$10 million that day, the Breeders' Cup, Ltd., also gave out \$12 million during the year as premiums for stakes races at 85 tracks across America. The premium awards races were added to the program at the request of leading breeders who thought the Breeders' Cup should be a year-long initiative culminating in the championships.

Within a few years the Breeders' Cup was regarded as the equal of the Triple Crown in terms of prestige. The racing world saw it as a version of soccer's World Cup, a global championship. "The idea of Thoroughbred racing without the Breeders' Cup is unthinkable," said Lord Hartington, senior steward of the English Jockey Club.

John Gaines sold Gainesway in 1989 but continued his involvement in the breeding and racing industries, helping found the National Thoroughbred Racing Association. Ironically, Gaines preferred collecting rare coins and Japanese prints to spending a day at the races; he was a businessman with many interests, not a horseman. Yet few men have left a greater footprint on racing and breeding. Gainesway's success helped cement Central Kentucky as the epicenter of the international breeding world. And with the founding of the Breeders' Cup, Gaines, quite simply, changed racing forever.

"What made him a great man," Thomas Gaines said, "is he wouldn't just come up with these ideas, he would make them happen. In terms of what he did for the business, there is no one in the second half of the 20th century who comes close to what my father did." KM



Gaines received a special Eclipse Award of Merit for his contributions to racing.

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