

GIRLPOWER





Central Bank Ashland Stakes showcases outstanding fillies

By Tom Pedulla

As the \$500,000 grade 1 Central Bank Ashland Stakes marks its 80th running at Keeneland, it celebrates years of dramatic growth into a premier race for 3-year-old fillies and a maker of broodmares.

Named for the Lexington homestead and breeding farm of statesman Henry Clay, the Ashland has lived up to those lofty expectations through a history filled with extraordinary performances — human and equine.

More than anything else, the 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ -mile event at Keeneland holds a special place in the hearts of breeders big and small. For many of them, it is all but contested in their backyards.

Such was the case last year with Ashbrook Farm, the small operation Glen Bromagen started in 1985 with modest means and immodest ambitions.

Weep No More's victory in the 2016 Central Bank Ashland Stakes delighted her connections, opposite, especially the owning Bromagen family, whose small operation long aspired to win a major race at nearby Keeneland.

ANNE M. EBERHARDT PHOTOS



Fine spring weather always draws a large crowd to Keeneland's signature filly race.

"Our family farm, as the crow flies, is probably a mile and a half, two miles, from Keeneland," said Glen's son, Bo. "You can see the lights when they turn them on for training."

Bo grew from a child to racing manager at Ashbrook, spurred by what often seemed an almost impossible goal of winning a stakes such as the Ashland. Ashbrook owns one broodmare, Southern Honey, and its spending on racing prospects is relatively limited.

Then the Bromagens invested \$120,000 in Weep No More as a 2-year-old in 2015, and trainer Rusty Arnold decided to give her a shot in the following year's Ashland. Although Weep No More went off at 30-1, she staged a breathtaking charge to overtake Rachel's Valentina by a desperate neck last April.

Bo still struggles to describe emotions



Racing secretary Ben Huffman, left, and Central Bank president Luther Deaton draw post positions for the Ashland Stakes.

associated with a triumph that represented one of the most memorable editions. "I don't even know if I can put it into words," he said. "It felt like somebody shook up a

champagne bottle."

The Ashland has been special since 4-year-old Myrtlewood, an eventual Hall of Famer, scared off all but two foes and

CADY PHOTOGRAPHY; ABOVE, ANNE M. EBENHARDT



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Myrtlewood, shown in the paddock, and winning the Ashland in 1936, top, was one of the era's fastest females and became a foundation mare for Spendthrift Farm.



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Calumet Farm's Real Delight parlayed victory in the second division of the 1952 Ashland Stakes into a championship season that included a win in the Kentucky Oaks.

romped by 12 lengths in the first running in 1936. The race helped to open the initial Keeneland meet, a nine-day autumn stand that proved a success despite netting a loss of \$3.47.

The Ashland has gone through various incarnations. Its first two years the race was written for fillies and mares 3 years old and up going $1\frac{1}{16}$ miles. After being dropped for two years, it was revived in 1940, strictly as a showcase for 3-year-old fillies. It was run at six furlongs from 1940-73 and then seven furlongs, 184 feet from 1974-80. Although the race shifted to Polytrack from 2007-14 before returning to dirt, the current distance of $1\frac{1}{16}$ miles has remained intact since 1981.

The race almost continually grew in stature. There could be no greater testament than to know that 33 participants went on

to win the prestigious Kentucky Oaks.

"It has its own presence," Ben Huffman, Keeneland's racing secretary, said of the Ashland. "You can look at the history. So many good fillies and champions and multiple graded stakes winners used the Ashland in their racing careers. It's a fabulous race."

Central Bank has been the sponsor since 2010. "Keeneland offers a unique opportunity," said Steve Kelly, a bank spokesman. "They [Keeneland] attract all ages and all incomes, not only just from here in Lexington but throughout the state and neighboring states."

Bob Elliston, Keeneland's vice president of racing and sales, said the Ashland benefited from the decision to restore the dirt

girl power



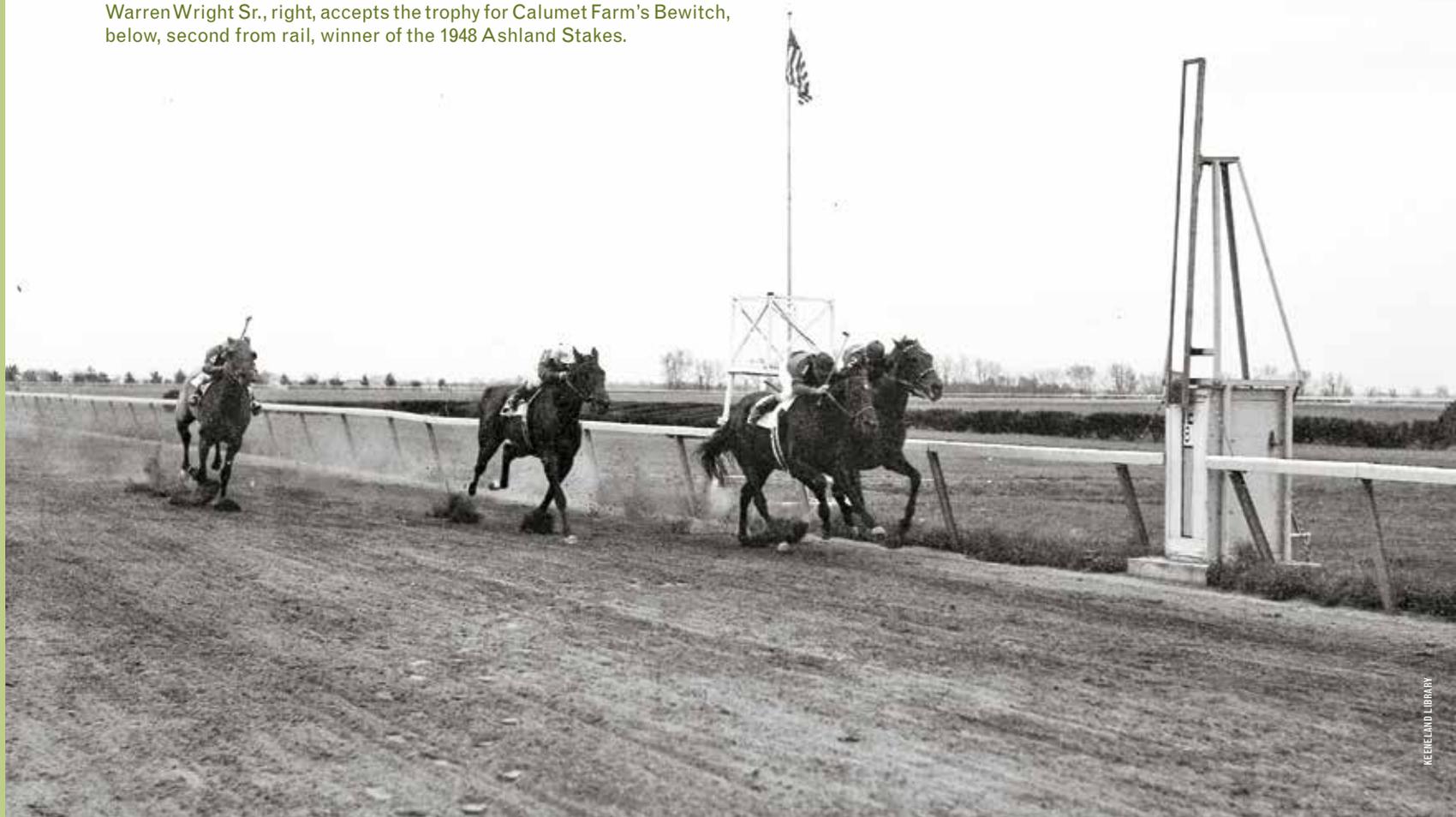
Warren Wright Sr., right, accepts the trophy for Calumet Farm's Bewitch, below, second from rail, winner of the 1948 Ashland Stakes.

surface since many view it as an ideal prep for the Oaks four weeks later on dirt at Churchill Downs.

"There have been some tremendous outfits that were dirt-oriented outfits that couldn't wait to get back on the dirt," Elliston said.

Whatever the surface, the Ashland has provided a grand stage for so many superior fillies. Bewitch, who joined Citation and Coaltown to give Bull Lea three offspring foaled in 1945 that would advance to racing's Hall of Fame, battled to a nose victory in the 1948 edition. That gave Calumet Farm the first of its record-tying three victories, the others coming in 1952 and 1980. Cain Hoy Stable (1957, 1959, 1963) also won three.

Calumet's Real Delight, another Hall of Famer, thrived under the impeccable combination of trainer Ben A. Jones and jockey Eddie Arcaro when she used the Ashland as part of an extraordinary campaign in which she swept 11 of 12 starts in 1952. Four years later Doubledogdare provided Claiborne Farm with its lone Ashland success. Bewitch and Doubledogdare became such integral parts of Keeneland history that races have been named for them.





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Claiborne Farm's Doubledogdare heads to the track en route to her victory in the 1956 edition.

Then there was that special spring day in 1999 when eventual Hall of Famer Silverbulletday, in another training masterpiece for Bob Baffert, set the Ashland stakes record by zipping $1\frac{1}{16}$ miles in a crackling $1:41\frac{3}{8}$ despite a muddy track. She demolished the field by seven lengths.

Owner Mike Pegram will never forget what amounted to an eruption when jockey Jerry Bailey nudged Silverbulletday that it was time to go.

"She made an unbelievable move between the half-mile pole and the three-eighths pole," Pegram said. "She won for fun that day, and we went and got our picture taken."

Pegram's roots in Fort Knox, Kentucky, made winning the race all the more special. "Being from back in that area, I always had my buddies with me, and it's always a thrill to win at Keeneland," Pegram said. "It's a special place, special ground at Keeneland.

You're on cloud nine."

No sooner had they exited the winner's circle than the party started. "We weren't short on beer," Pegram said.

Ashland's history is replete with training and riding exploits. Legendary trainer Woody Stephens, from Stanton, Kentucky, oversaw a record four Ashland winners: Tall Weeds, 1949; Jota Jota, 1957; Hidden Talent, 1959; and Sally Ship, 1963.

Shug McGaughey won three — in a torrid four-year stretch. He struck with Inside Information (1994), My Flag (1996), and Glitter Woman (1997). Each was a dream come true.

"Being from Lexington, I knew where it was situated on the calendar," he said. "To be able to start to win it was a big thrill."

Jockey Don Brumfield doubled his pleasure in the Ashland in one whirlwind afternoon in 1974, one of four years the race was run in two divisions. First, he prevailed with Winged Wishes by a length and a half. Then Maud Muller stormed home by nine lengths for Darby Dan Farm. As if that were not enough, he had used the only broodmare he owned to produce Winged Wishes and had given her to his mother, Viola.

Brumfield, from Nicholasville, Kentucky, enjoyed an emotional reunion with his mother after Winged Wishes all but flew home. "I don't remember the exact words or anything, but we were very happy," he said. "The only thing missing was my father [Edgar]. He had passed."

He said of Maud Muller's score, "That just added to it. It was more gravy on the meat."

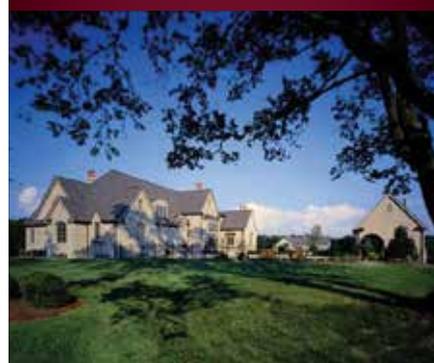
Brumfield and his mother did not take time to celebrate. "We went home, had

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some supper, and went back to work the next day," Brumfield said.

Such is the racetracker's life.

Jockey Kerwin Clark knows that life so well, rising early every morning with one goal in mind: the pursuit of quality mounts. For years he searched in vain for a horse capable of powering him to his first grade 1 victory and a trainer willing to entrust him with such a responsibility.

He developed his skills in his 20s with the belief that it would happen for him in his 30s. Then he thought his experience might secure such a shot when he was in his 40s. When he reached his mid-50s, he began to think the time would never come.

Everything changed when Lovely Maria entered his life. She was trained by Larry Jones, who is known for giving chances to less-profiled riders. Jones indeed presented Clark with the opportunity he yearned for. He would ride Lovely Maria, owned by former Kentucky Gov. Brereton Jones, in the Ashland.

Clark knew Lovely Maria had been training sharply. He ex-



Through the years Keeneland fans have packed the stands to witness each generation's top fillies battle in the Ashland Stakes.

pected her to break that way and be tugging him along. He was alarmed when she did not. Would this be another crushing disappointment in a career full of them?

Then they hit the backside and Lovely Maria began twitching her ears. His heart leapt as they accelerated in pursuit of

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Jockey Don Brumfield won the Ashland Stakes twice in the same afternoon when it was contested in two divisions in 1974: left, on Winged Wishes, and below, on Maud Muller.



“

It is something dreams are made of.”

—JOCKEY KERWIN CLARK
ON WINNING THE
2015 ASHLAND STAKES

Angela Renee. Lovely Maria shot past the front-runner turning for home. With an eighth of a mile to go, Clark knew the Ashland was his. Lovely Maria drew off by $3\frac{3}{4}$ lengths.

“To have it come so late in my career, at 56 years old, it was unbelievable,” he said. “It was something dreams are made of.” He doubled his grade 1 glory when Lovely Maria went on to win the Oaks. A photograph of the Ashland triumph greets Clark when he enters his New Orleans home. “I always stop to look at it,” he said, “because it’s got a special place in my heart.” **KM**



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Jockey Kerwin Clark scored his first grade 1 victory when he captured the 2015 Ashland Stakes aboard Lovely Maria.