

shared Passion



George and Lori Hall Embrace the Racing Life

By Alexandra Beckstett | Photos by Boo Hardy

As Ruler On Ice strode across the finish line to win the 2011 running of the Belmont Stakes, George and Lori Hall's names became immortalized in racing's history books. The couple, whose first runner set foot on a track a mere six years prior, had just won the most tasking leg of the coveted Triple Crown.

These relative newcomers to the Thoroughbred industry have proved they can breed and compete with the best of them, and in an economical manner to boot. Although they call New Jersey home, the Halls have fallen in love with and set up shop in prime Kentucky horse country, and the community has likewise embraced them and their dedication to all things equine.

George's lifelong passion for the sport (coupled with his savvy business sense) is at the root of their success. Some of his earli-

est memories include weekly track outings with his horse racing enthusiast grandfather, Larry Fagan. As a New York native — born in Queens and raised on Long Island — George spent his youth at nearby ovals Belmont, Aqueduct, and Saratoga learning to handicap and dreaming of one day becoming a jockey. "Of course, by the time I was 12, I was too big," George, now 51, said with a chuckle.

His career path instead led him to establish the investment company Clinton Group Inc. and back several philanthropic efforts — one of which crossed paths with his future wife. Lori at the time was an assistant to Nancy Brinker, Susan G. Komen for the Cure founder and New York University School of Medicine Foundation board member. George, too, was a board member and met Lori indirectly through Nancy.

Although Lori had grown up and attended college in Texas,

she neither lived on a ranch nor rode horses. George was quick to familiarize her with one of his favorite pastimes, however, taking her to Saratoga Race Course on their third date.

"That's when I was introduced to a racetrack, handicapping, and the horse racing industry," she said. "I just picked the jockeys (to bet on) because I didn't know the sport well enough to handicap."

Now Lori not only has a firm grasp on the industry but also enjoys a hands-on role in the business, making breeding decisions and scrutinizing sale prospects.

The other key player in the Halls' racing business is trainer Kelly Breen. George met the local New Jersey trainer in 2004 while accompanying a friend to Monmouth Park. After a little time spent looking at Breen's horses and discussing the where's and how's of buying a racehorse (as the Keeneland September Yearling sale was right around the corner), George took the bait.

"I said, 'Well, he seems like a pretty good guy; maybe we'll go buy a few horses and let him train them and see how he does,'" he said. "So that's what we did."

Under Breen's guidance, the Halls purchased four yearlings from the Keeneland September sale for a combined \$180,000. Two of those ended up stakes winners: Keeneland Kat (named after the Halls' eldest daughter, Kathryn) and Fagan's Legacy (in honor of George's grandfather).

Fast-forward to the present, and the Halls now own about 50 head divided among mares, foals, racehorses, and retirees, and Breen trains for them exclusively. George — taken by the trainer's sincerity, drive, and love for the animals — approached Breen about training privately in 2006, and they have since developed a solid working relationship with 35 horses in training at Monmouth.

"You can just see his passion, and he really cares about the horses and wants to win," George explained. "His father once said he brushes his teeth with a big smile on his face at four in the morning because he's on his way to the track."

Within a few short years Breen had taken the Halls to the 2008 Breeders' Cup Juvenile with up-and-comer West Side Bernie. Their operation truly stepped up a notch when two of their Keeneland-purchased colts — West Side Bernie and Atomic Rain — ran in the 2009 Kentucky Derby, finishing ninth and 16th, respectively.

"In some senses you've arrived with the best in the business," said George. "So that was a great experience. And then, of course, you get spoiled and want to go every year. People kept telling me people do this for years and are lucky if they get one shot — you can't expect to get two or three."

But just two years down the road the Halls were running for the roses again, this time with homebred Louisiana Derby winner Pants On Fire. Although he finished midpack, their Triple Crown race plans weren't yet over. Breen and the Halls

would celebrate the spunky chestnut gelding Ruler On Ice's (named for their son, who is a passionate hockey player) classic victory five weeks later at George's old stomping grounds. Ruler On Ice is a graduate of the 2009 Keeneland September yearling sale.

Said George, "No matter what happens, from now on looking back, we won a Triple Crown race — a tremendous privilege."



The 385-acre Woodford County farm is a sanctuary for the Halls, who live in New Jersey.

Home Away from Home

No racing and breeding operation, however, is complete without the Bluegrass farm. Six years ago George drove 200 yards onto a spectacular piece of horse property outside Versailles and knew he was going to buy it. The soil was rich, the layout ideal, and the vistas unrivaled. Today Annestes Farms houses approximately 25 broodmares and youngsters and serves as a 385-acre private oasis for George and his family when they jet from Jersey to Central Kentucky on weekends and holidays. "We fall in love with Kentucky over and over again every time we come," said Lori.

While they only have the opportunity to visit the farm on average four times a year, it's always a family affair. Lori and George's three children — Kathryn, 9; George Jr., 8; and Charlotte, 3 — also share a love for horses and the outdoors and can be found fishing, four-wheeling, or otherwise frolicking around the farm, which the Halls named after their kids' middle names (Annestes is a combination of Kathryn Ann and George Estes).

Even Charlotte shows promising signs of a future race fan.

Right, Lori shows off Keeneland Kat. Below, the Halls hold their Belmont trophy aloft after Ruler On Ice's victory in the third leg of the 2011 Triple Crown.



ADAM CORLIANESE

"If we're watching races on television, she'll yell at the TV and say, 'That's my horse!'" said Lori. "She knows the silks. She has about as much passion as all of us put together."

"They are very family-oriented people," said Dale Holly, farm manager and the glue that holds everything together while the Halls are home in New Jersey. "They always bring the full family (and often extended family) with them to the farm. They enjoy being together."

The Halls also enjoy and appreciate the other members of their family — the animals they have built their business around. "It's nice to know you have people that will do the right thing by the animal," said Breen. "They make sure everyone's treated right from the most expensive horse we purchase to the lower-end horses."

And George is quick to assure that his horses receive nothing but the best care and have a great life after their racing careers are over. "We treat them like royalty," he said.

Indeed, some of the Halls' former runners, including Derby

starters West Side Bernie and Atomic Rain, happily roam the hilly pastures as retirees. Others have started new careers as riding horses, and one special runner, Fagan's Legacy, is a top-notch lead pony. George himself enjoys ponying on him from time to time — the closest he's gotten to his past dream of being a jockey.

"The first time (I ponied) was at Churchill Downs the day of the Kentucky Oaks," George related. "There were 80,000 people in the stands, so it was a little nerve-wracking, but it was fun."

"A couple of years ago George was like our fulltime employee," Breen joked. "Every chance he got he was riding."

But George, ever the businessman, stresses that while he enjoys racing, he's also trying to run a smart operation.

"We don't look at it as something we're going to throw money at because it's a fun hobby," he explained. "A big part of the excitement is to do it in an economically feasible way. If you've got unlimited money, you can pretty much buy whatever you want and even then you can't necessarily buy success."

The results of the Halls' business sense is evident: Of their three homebreds from 2008, one ran in the Derby. Of the six horses from their 2009 crop, one (My Adonis) ran in the Wood Memorial and also was on the Derby trail. They purchased a Derby horse for \$50,000 (West Side Bernie) and a Belmont Stakes winner for \$100,000.

"I think there's a lot to be said for the quality of the horse we're trying to produce," said Lori. "It's a business, so you try to do everything for value and try to get the most enjoyment out of it as possible."

She also credits both Holly and Breen's keen eyes for horses as key to their success. "To get the two of them to agree, I think you get the best of both worlds," she said. "You get a viable horse

according to the Kentucky mind and then a raceable horse from the New Jersey trainer perspective at value price points."

"So when we have a good homebred, Lori was involved in the nicking, Dale raised it, Kelly trained it, and I have to help arbitrate who really was the success of that horse," George said with a laugh.

Giving Back

When the Halls aren't spending time with family or cheering on their runners, they make an effort to give back to their community — both in Kentucky and New Jersey. Along with serving on the NYU Medical Center board for 14 years, George is a noted philanthropist of medical causes and research. He supports the American Cancer Society and established the George E. Hall Childhood Diabetes Foundation affiliated with the Hall Family Center for Pediatric Endocrinology and Diabetes at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York.

Back in the Bluegrass, the Woodford Humane Society approached frequent barn cat-adopters George and Lori a few years ago about hosting the organization's annual Freedom Fest fundraiser. "The community had completely embraced us, and we wanted to do something in return, so we agreed," Lori said. "We loved it so much that we hosted it a second

year in a row. It gives us another reason to come down in the middle of the summer, get to know more people, and utilize the farm."

And while the Halls won't be trying to defend their Belmont Stakes' win this year, they still intend to have a presence there. Lori is hosting an event at New York City's The Garden restaurant the Wednesday before the race to benefit The Grayson-Jockey Club Foundation. "Called 'Tea in the Garden,' it's to generate interest in the race and raise some awareness for The Jockey Club and their efforts for the horses," she said.

Keeneland president Nick Nicholson said of the Halls: "They are poster models for the type of Thoroughbred owner that the industry needs going forward. Everything they touch they leave better, whether it's the land they own or the horses they own or the communities they live in."

Although George and Lori's foray into racing is still young by many multi-generation owners' and breeders' standards, they are as dedicated as any. Just as they support many causes close to their hearts, they spare no expense when it comes to their horses' well-being, from foaling to retirement.

As Holly summed it up: "They're the kind of folks that are good for racing and good to have in the business." 

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