



HAPPY DAYS

Ashview Farm's Wayne Lyster and family savor the success of Runhappy, winner of the 2015 Breeders' Cup Sprint

By Glenye Cain Oakford / Photos by Kirk Schlea



Ask the Lysters about a particular yearling on the family farm, and they can tell you not only the horse's pedigree but also name who was present at its birth, describe every rise and dip in its pasture, and point to where the hay it ate this morning was baled. Back when smaller, family-run farms were more numerous in the Bluegrass, that wouldn't have been so unusual. But in today's Thoroughbred breeding industry, as many farms have embraced a more corporate style, Wayne and Muffy Lyster's 350-acre Ashview Farm has found racing and auction success by keeping things more down-home, literally.

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ANNE M. EBERHARDT



COURTESY OF ASHVIEW FARM

Previous page, left to right, Gray Lyster, Bryan Lyster, Leon Hamilton with Bodemeister yearling filly, and Wayne Lyster at Keeneland's January sale. Above, Runhappy's Breeders' Cup Sprint victory, which capped a championship season, has sentimental value for the Lysters due to their long association with Keeneland. Bryan Lyster says Runhappy, pictured right as a foal, was "outstanding" from the start.

The Lysters have lived on the farm since 1978, when they bought their first nine acres, and raised their children at Ashview. Today, sons Bryan and Gray handle most of the farm's daily operations with help from sister Meredith, and now their

own children explore the same woods and hayfields their parents roamed as kids.

But Ashview is more than just a family farm. It's also made headlines on racing's world stage, most recently with 2015 champion sprinter Runhappy. Bred by

Wayne, Gray, and Bryan Lyster, the Super Saver colt won last year's Breeders' Cup Sprint at Keeneland. And although Runhappy isn't the first American champion the Lysters have bred and raised at Ashview — Wayne Lyster and longtime partner Richard Santulli also bred 2001's champion 2-year-old and Breeders' Cup Juvenile winner, Johannesburg — Runhappy's Breeders' Cup victory at Keeneland struck a special chord for the Lyster family because the colt is almost as much a Keeneland horse as he is a product of Ashview.

The Lysters, consignors for years at Keeneland's Thoroughbred auctions, sold Runhappy to current owner James McIngvale at the 2013 Keeneland Septem-

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ber yearling sale. And on the same day they watched the 3-year-old Super Saver colt flash past the Breeders' Cup finish line (and set a six-furlong track record of 1:08.58), the Lysters also were showing a barn full of mares and weanlings on Keeneland's sales grounds in preparation for the November breeding stock sale two days later.

"And it's not only that he did it," Wayne Lyster said of Runhappy. "It's where he did it. Our farm is only five-and-a-half miles from Keeneland. We do most all of our business with and through Keeneland sales, and I have so many friends there and in Lexington. To be able to do it right here? I still pinch myself."

Lyster, who was born in Philadelphia but moved to Bourbon County as a teenager, was a newlywed bloodstock agent back in 1978 when he spotted an ad in the *Lexington Herald* newspaper for nine acres and a farmhouse east of Versailles, Kentucky. Located between Lexington and Versailles, it was perfectly situated: The Lysters could enjoy family life in the country and be within easy hauling distance of the Thoroughbred world's marketplace at Keeneland. For Wayne, who had grown up on a farm, it was a return to a lifestyle he treasured as well as a new beginning as a hands-on Thoroughbred breeder and farmer.

The property also had an unusual historic landmark: It houses the tomb of General Marquis Calmes, the Virginia-born son of Huguenots who helped lay out Versailles and gave the town its name (if not its surprising pronunciation of VERSALES, rather than the French Vair-SIGH). Calmes, who purchased the acreage in 1775, returned there to farm after fighting in the Revolutionary War. He is buried with his wife, Priscilla, in the house-shaped stone tomb that sits in one of Ashview's paddocks.



SNIP DICKESTEIN

Breeders' Cup Juvenile winner Johannesburg represents the first American champion bred and raised at Ashview.

Lyster's dream of Thoroughbred breeding grew as the farm and his family did, and little by little Ashview expanded as he put earnings back into the farm and into upgrading his bloodstock.

"I learned a lot being in the bloodstock

office with all those pedigrees," he said. "It's not like today, when you can just press a button on a computer. There was a lot more manual looking up pedigrees and race records. I think it helped me spot the trend of what the consumer wanted. I always wanted to give the consumer what they wanted with what I could afford to do. Would I have liked to have bred the best-pedigreed mares to the best stallions in the world? Of course, but I couldn't afford it. So I grew the business by investing back into it all the time. It took

a long time before we bred Johannesburg and Runhappy, but we're really pleased with the results. It's been a lifetime of getting to this point, and now my sons run the farm, and our involvement together is great."



Wayne Lyster purchased the core of the property in 1978. Today, Ashview is home to 40-50 broodmares.

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Ashview's first big success came with the broodmare Knitted Gloves. Lyster came across the 19-year-old mare at the 1989 Keeneland November breeding stock sale and paid just \$9,000 for her.

"I bought a share in Seeking the Gold and bred her to him," said Lyster, 68. The resulting filly was At the Half, who blossomed into a grade II winner before Ashview sold her for \$950,000 at the 1996 Keeneland November breeding stock sale. But they kept her yearling, the A.P. Indy filly Lu Ravi, who went on to become an eight-time stakes winner and earn more than \$1.8 million after Lyster sold her privately to Japanese horseman Yoshio Fujita.

Ashview had made it into the limelight, thanks to a \$9,000 broodmare, careful choices of stallions, and a willingness to stay in for the long haul. (Ashview was leading consignor by average (three or more sold) at the 1989 and 1995 July selected yearling sales.)

But, as Lyster is quick to note, horse farming isn't all winner's circles, big paychecks, and champions. There's hard work and bad luck, too. At the 1997 Keeneland November sale Lyster paid \$350,000 for a broodmare named Myth, in foal to the well-regarded young stallion Hennessy. But when the foal was born, he had an overbite so severe that he couldn't nurse, and he ultimately was put down.

"It was unfortunate," Lyster recalled. "He was a beautiful foal

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otherwise." So beautiful, in fact, that Lyster wanted to breed Myth back to Hennessy. He consulted several veterinarians who assured him the "parrot mouth" issue was unlikely to happen again, and then he took the plunge. Myth's second appointment with Hennessy resulted in Johannesburg.

"It's not all Runhappy," Lyster said. "Sometimes something happens to a horse or you have tractor problems or whatever. But we've grown together with the farm, and it's made everybody stronger."

There were plenty of character-building lessons at the Ashview school of farming, sons Bryan and Gray agree. But, for the most part, what they remember about growing up at Ashview was the freedom to explore, learn, and interact with horses — both in and out of the saddle. And it wasn't just about horses. The boys also raised rabbits, ducks, and pigs, showed black Angus steers, and worked the family's tobacco fields in addition to helping raise foals and show yearlings at the sales. The farm is dedicated solely to horses now, though the Lysters do still grow their own hay and bedding straw, but the boys are glad to have had wider exposure to crop and livestock farming.

"The older I get, the more I appreciate how we grew up," said Bryan, 33. "There's a lot of fresh air, and you're learning things from people that are working hard physically six days a week, when it's cold and when it's hot. It's hard work and long days, and you also learn about freedom and responsibility."

"Our babysitters were the guys on the farm,"



Wayne, Gray, and Bryan Lyster review their consignment at the 2016 Keeneland January horses of all ages sale.



Muffy and Wayne Lyster ensured that farm life instilled an appreciation for hard work and discipline in their children.



added Gray, 35. "In the summers, as soon as we were big enough to hold a weed-eater, we were weed-eating on the farm. We didn't start off as grooms; we started off on maintenance: throwing hay, weed-eating, that stuff. The fortunate thing about it is that now that we're in management, we've done it all. I know how long it takes to weed-eat that fence. When you're walking for three straight hours on a really hot August morning to prep your yearlings and you're behind on other work, I know how hard that is. And little things, like the proper way to do things, attention to detail."

Now married and with a new generation underway, it's still what Bryan and Gray do, only now they've traded maintenance duty for management decisions, including what mares to acquire for the Ashview breeding program. The resident broodmare band remains fairly small and select, with about 40-50 mares on the property for breeding season.

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"I like our size," said Bryan, "because it allows us to literally put our hands on the horses. We foaled a mare this morning at 5:50 a.m. with our farm manager, and since then we've had our hands on every single yearling on the farm and every maiden and barren mare getting ready for the breeding season, and on any mare that's within 30 days of foaling. We truly have our fingers on the pulse of what's going on, daily."

Runhappy's dam, Bella Jolie, joined the band in 2010, when Gray and Bryan first spotted her in a claiming race.

"We're value shoppers: We try to buy for a nickel and sell for a dime so we can buy more, so we can pay our guys," explained Gray. "She was in for a \$5,000 claiming tag,

and we thought she was worth \$25,000. We liked her pedigree, and we claimed her. Initially, we bought her because we thought we could make a few dollars selling her. But when we got her to the farm, we all thought, 'Why would we sell this one? These are the kinds that we should keep.' It's a good pedigree, and we liked her so much physically."

Runhappy immediately justified the Lysters' decision to keep Bella Jolie.

"He was outstanding from day one," said Bryan. "He was one of our nicer foals, and all the way through he just kept getting better."

The Lysters sold Runhappy to McIngvale for \$200,000, or 40 times his dam's claiming price, at the 2013 September

sale. By the end of 2015, he had earned \$1,481,300 and taken everyone, including the Lyster family, on a dream ride to the top of the sport. Within three days at Keeneland, the Lysters went from having their picture taken with Runhappy in the Breeders' Cup winner's circle to selling Bella Jolie, in foal to Cairo Prince, for \$1.6 million at the Keeneland November sale — where Runhappy's groom, Cordell Anderson, led her through the auction ring.

"It took a while to sink in," Bryan said of Runhappy's win in the Breeders' Cup and his election to championship status. "I think it's still sinking in."

"We had the mare, who was on the sale grounds in Barn 15 at the very moment her first foal is about to run for champion sprinter — we knew the difference in her value if he wins versus if he finishes anywhere else on the board. And the fact that it was all at Keeneland was very powerful. It's truly our home track."

Added Gray, "I don't know how many times when there's been a lull in the conversation and Dad will say, 'Gray, do you realize what we did?'"

"I've told people, 'Maybe I should just get out now, because I don't think it can ever get any better than this.'"

"I think about it every day, about how special it is," Wayne Lyster acknowledged. "I know a lot of very good breeders out there who haven't bred a Breeders' Cup winner, and I hope they do, because the feeling is so good."

"To be able to breed Runhappy and be able to do that in partnership with my sons, it's like I've come full circle. To breed a Breeders' Cup winner first with a client, friend, and partner that backed me from day one and then to do it with my sons for a second Breeders' Cup winner? It's not even describable. That's how good it feels." **KM**

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Ashview Farm is now providing a nurturing environment for the third generation of the Lyster family.