

HOME COMING

Keeneland's hosting of the 2015 Breeders' Cup marks a return to the event's origins in Central Kentucky

By Glenye Cain Oakford

KEVIN THOMPSON



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

The Breeders' Cup World Championships are coming home to Keeneland. Though it's the racetrack's first time as host, Keeneland and the Bluegrass have a long connection to the world-class international racing event. The idea for the Breeders' Cup — a season-ending championship event that attracts the best racing stars from around the world — germinated in the Bluegrass in the early 1980s. Since then the Breeders' Cup has grown into an all-star weekend that pays out \$26 million in total purses and awards across 13 championship races. And, from the beginning, Kentucky breeders have been its central pillar of support through the nomination fees they pay for stallions and foals. What's more, many of those horses have gone through Keeneland's famed Thoroughbred auctions or raced over its historic racetrack on their way to the Breeders' Cup.



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The late John Gaines conceived the Breeders' Cup, for which the Keeneland sales have provided many runners.

In fact, 82 Keeneland sales graduates have won 88 Breeders' Cup races since the championships' inaugural event in 1984, and 37 Breeders' Cup winners prepped in Keeneland races.

"Being at the heart of the breeding capital of the world, we have sent so many of these great racehorses around the world," said Keeneland president and chief executive officer Bill Thomason. "Now we've got a chance to bring them back and showcase them to a community that's all about the horse and all about the sport that takes such great pride in our farms and our athletes and the people who raise them."

Keeneland's deep roots in Breeders' Cup history were a compelling factor in the Breeders' Cup's decision to make it the 2015 host track, with the event taking place Oct. 30-31, said Breeders' Cup chief executive officer Craig Favel. The impetus for creating the Breeders' Cup came from the late John Gaines, a breeder and then-owner of Gainesway Farm in Lexing-

ton, a leading Keeneland auction consignor and stallion powerhouse. Gaines is credited with developing the Breeders' Cup's stallion- and foal-centered funding mechanism, too, which placed Thoroughbred breeders squarely at the heart of the Breeders' Cup, and not just in name only: According to Breeders' Cup figures, Kentucky's stallions currently account for a majority — about 78 percent — of the organization's total proceeds from stallion nominations, and almost two-thirds of the foals nominated to the Breeders' Cup during the past three years were born in Kentucky.

Importantly, Gaines also built the consensus between racing and breeding interests that took the Breeders' Cup from concept to reality.

"The original idea for the Breeders' Cup was introduced in 1982 at a luncheon before the Kentucky Derby that year," said Favel, "and the remarkable thing was that the event came together and the funding sources were created as stallion farms and breeders rallied around



MARC MANING

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A nationally televised Breeders' Cup broadcast will expose Keeneland and its picturesque grounds to a wide audience.

the idea. In two years' time they managed to create the Breeders' Cup and run the first one in 1984 at Hollywood Park."

But Keeneland has unusually strong appeal even beyond its longstanding relationship with the Breeders' Cup, noted Fravel, whose Breeders' Cup headquarters is only about 1½ miles from the track. "Part of what we look for in a host site is something that adds to the prestige of the Breeders' Cup, venues that are iconic in their own right and that have deep and talented management teams that we know can pull off the event," he said. "Keeneland came to mind as a unique venue, showcasing not only the track and the countryside but also the culture of farms here in Central Kentucky."

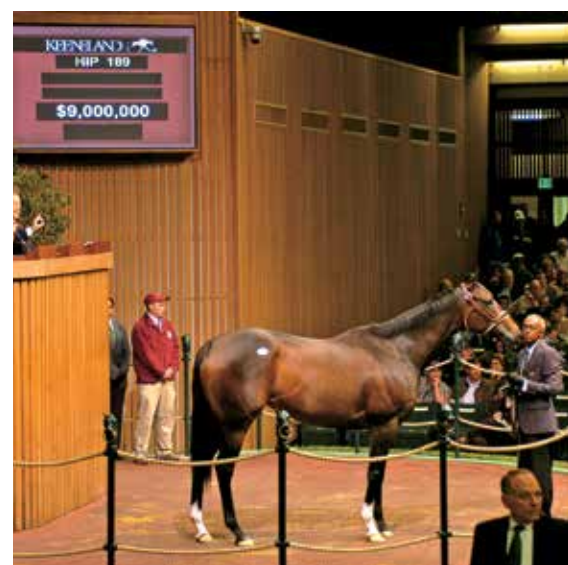
That opportunity will be substantial. The Breeders' Cup will bring visitors to the area, but it also will expose Keeneland and the Bluegrass to the nation through live telecasts via NBCSN and NBC, culminating with the Breeders' Cup Classic live on NBC.

Keeneland's setting is ideal both for television and tourism. Its pastoral landscape serves up gorgeous views, its limestone grandstand is handsome and genteel, and the state-of-the-art facilities and



Geoffrey Russell anticipates a boost to the 2015 November sale because of the Cup.

technology are eminently fan-friendly. But it also has unique attractions for every racing fan, whether a first-time patron or a serious lifelong scholar of the sport. There's the celebrated Keeneland Library, in which visitors can peruse racing-related publications dating back several hundred years, including the *Daily Racing Form's* complete archive. Another Keeneland jewel: the auction pavilion. That building has seen many historic moments, among them the multi-million-dollar sales of such Breeders' Cup winners as Ashado and Groupie Doll. Ashado fetched \$9 million at the 2005 November sale, and



Champions Ashado (above) and Groupie Doll (below) brought big post-race sales prices at Keeneland.

Groupie Doll was a \$3.1 million sale at the 2013 November sale.


"Historically, every time the Breeders' Cup has been in Central Kentucky [at Churchill Downs], it's always given a good boost to the November breeding stock sales," said Keeneland's director of sales, Geoffrey Russell. "Where the bounce really comes from is that we will have principals present, and when the owners come themselves to watch their horses run and stay a couple of days afterward to buy horses, they really get enthused by it and encourage the market."

"There's a lot of excitement in being here Friday and Saturday,



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watching these beautiful horses participate on what probably will be the greatest stage the Breeders' Cup has ever been held on, and then to have the opportunity to purchase on Monday — that's the opportunity of a lifetime for most people.

"And we are flexible enough that if the horses aren't even cataloged until they get to the Breeders' Cup, they could always be cataloged soon thereafter," Russell added. "They can go from the winner's circle straight to the sales barn."

Trainer William "Buff" Bradley and his father, Fred Bradley, enjoyed that Breeders' Cup-Keeneland November doubleheader in 2013, when their homebred mare Groupie Doll won her second consecutive Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Sprint and then sold to Mandy Pope's Whisper Hill Farm. As a native Kentuckian whose family farm and training operation are based in the Bluegrass, Buff Bradley couldn't be happier to see the Breeders' Cup coming home to Keeneland.

"When the Breeders' Cup was formed, the idea was that it moved to different venues to reach a broader spectrum of people and showcase the biggest day of racing, and there's no better



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place than Keeneland to do that," Bradley said. "Keeneland is beautiful, and I know they'll always do everything right. I think it's very special for it to be at Keeneland and right in the dead center of the horse capital of the world.

"I run horses at Keeneland every meet, and I just dream of having another horse able to run in the Breeders' Cup and being able to compete on that day. It's in my backyard, and for friends and family to be there to see it, that would be special."

Rogers Beasley, Keeneland's vice president of racing, sees mutual benefits between the Breeders' Cup championships and Keeneland's traditional spring and fall race meets. One special highlight: Keeneland's Fall Stars weekend on Oct. 3-5 will feature a number of Breeders' Cup Challenge races that will allow winners to qualify automatically for Breeders' Cup World Championships races. And Beasley is al-



DAVID COYLE

Rogers Beasley anticipates a strong fall race meet due to the Breeders' Cup.

ready hearing from Breeders' Cup-bound horsemen eager to race horses in the spring and fall to try out Keeneland's new dirt racing surface. The dirt strip replaced a synthetic surface last year.

"The synergy is absolutely there and is very positive," Beasley said. "It should be a tremendous boost for our Fall Stars weekend, which is our grand weekend outside of Breeders' Cup. All those races should be a great preview day for the Breeders' Cup, so we're looking forward very much to that. The great thing is that we've always been known for taking care of our owners and trainers here, and I think that's a tremendous plus for us."

Wherever Breeders' Cup visitors go, Keeneland president Thomason said, they'll encounter that famously high standard of customer service.

"The uniqueness of the experience here is going to be in the quality people have come to expect when they step onto our grounds, from the historic nature of the grounds to

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Keeneland president Bill Thomason predicts a memorable Breeders' Cup for Lexington.

to be a part of something special. Everybody here cares so much about the sport and the horse."

the pride that all our Keeneland team members take in this place," said Thomason. "We all take pride in the history of this place and our promotion of the sport and the way that we really enjoy entertaining and bringing people here. People have an expectation, and when they get here, it's even better than they thought it was going to be. The people are even nicer; they're even more helpful and knowledgeable. They appreciate the horse. They appreciate our visitors coming

The 2015 Breeders' Cup presents a unique chance for Lexington and surrounding communities to show off their individual charm. Area breeders are making the most of the opportunity. For the past two years a group of Bluegrass farms and equine facilities have been developing Horse Country Inc., which will promote farm tours and other horse-related experiences for visitors before, during, and after the Breeders' Cup. The idea, Thomason explained, "is to let the public behind the scenes, if you will, of everything that goes on in raising our athletes.

"The timing is so good for 'horse country,'" he said.

"So many consignors and breeders and farm owners and others in the Central Kentucky area are looking for ways to enhance the experience and showcase the farms."

And there's even more to come, Thomason hinted.

"There are going to be incredible opportunities for people to participate in this event throughout Lexington and on our grounds," he said. "I hope everybody in our community and in our industry will utilize every one of those possibilities to make this a very special year for them and for Keeneland." **KM**

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