

Natural AFFINITY

Jockey James Graham Finds His Best Stride at Keeneland

By Claire Novak | Photos By Kirk Schlea

You won't see jockey James Graham standing railside at Keeneland while the rhythms of morning training pass him by. The 34-year-old Irishman is best found on the back of a horse, whether helping trainers with day-to-day exercise or sending potential mounts through pre-race breezes. On an average day in Lexington, he'll likely get on six to eight Thoroughbreds before heading off to the jockeys' room to prepare for the afternoon card.

Hard-working and energetic, Graham has never been one to shirk the building-block tasks that lead to success. That's how he has shaped his reputation since arriving in the Bluegrass 10 years ago, coming to North America in search of opportunities that evaded him in his native Ireland. Then, he was confident he could do two things — ride horses and work hard — and he set about convincing owners and trainers to believe the same.

"I've been around James from when he first came onto the scene; he had just come over from Ireland and he was just galloping and working horses," said trainer Mike Stidham, one of the jockey's longtime fans. "My first impression was that I'd never seen a harder worker, there every morning, getting on as many as he could get on from the minute the track opened until the minute the track closed.

"His work ethic has never changed, no matter how good he's done. To this day he's there whenever you need him, on time, works as many as you need him to work. The main thing about James is you know for sure when you leg him up that you're going to get his absolute best effort. It may not turn into a win, but you know it's going to be a solid ride."

A few months after booting home his first North American winner aboard a horse named B.J. Star at River Downs in July 2003, Graham rode his first Keeneland winner. Six years later he scored his first grade I victory when he notched the Queen Elizabeth II Challenge Cup Stakes with Hot Cha Cha. He added a special milestone at the Lexington oval, riding his 1,000th winner on April 14, 2010. And in 2012 he won five graded stakes at Keeneland alone: the grade I Jenny Wiley Stakes on Daisy Devine, grade I Central Bank Ashland Stakes on Karlovy Vary, the Grey Goose Bewitch Stakes and Rood and Riddle Dowager Stakes on Upperline, and the first division of the Pin Oak Valley View Stakes on Angel Terrace.



With a solid decade of North American racing under his belt, Graham now plies his trade on a comfortable circuit that includes Keeneland every spring and fall, Chicago's Arlington Park in the summer, and Fair Grounds in New Orleans in the winter. But Lexington will always remain close to his heart, with strong equine influences and a bucolic countryside that remind him of home.

"When you get to Keeneland, it's up a notch," said the jockey, who finished second in Keeneland's jockey standings at the 2012 spring meet and tied for third at the fall meet. "The horse has to step up a notch, the trainer has to step up a notch, and the jockey has to step up a notch. But it's one of the greatest places to race — the



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Early Days

A school guidance counselor helped Graham find his calling when he was 14. As a youngster, he was unfocused, often disrupting his class. But once he left home at 15 to enter Ireland's jockey school he saw a path to the future unfold.

"He asked me what did I like, and I said I'd like to be with the horses," Graham recalled. "There was an abundance of horses in our area where we grew up; we rode with no saddle, maybe a piece of rope bridle made like a hackamore. We couldn't really steer them or pull them up — they were ponies and half-drafts and half-hunters; they were nuts and we were nuts."

By the time he reached his 20s, Graham was working for a trainer who had a small string of flat and steeplechase runners.

"I'd love to be able to just say my family is involved with horses, but they weren't," the rider recalled. "A lot of people in Irish racing have the family connection, but for me it wasn't that easy. I had to work my way up, because at first I didn't really know anybody. It wasn't that I was no good; I just never got



Graham pilots Dijarvo to a winning ride at the 2013 Keeneland spring meet.

Trainer Jeff Thornbury welcomed Graham and the rider's future wife, Lisa, to his shed row in 2003, the year Graham rode that first Keeneland winner.

"I was blessed to have both James and Lisa early on when they first came over from Ireland," Thornbury said. "Lisa was my assistant trainer for several years, and they make a great team. James has experienced every facet of horse husbandry; he's a consummate horseman, really. What I like most about him is his work ethic and the fact that he does not imbibe. He's the same person day in and day out. Riding-wise, he's an exceptionally strong finisher on a horse, and I think that's led to his rise in the ranks. Additionally, he's a terrific family man."

McGeehey also said Graham's ener-

enough opportunities to get experience at home. I'd ride races once, maybe twice a month — and that's not enough."

Agent Britt McGeehey, who has managed Graham's book nearly all of the 10 years he's ridden in the U.S., attested to the hands-on horsemanship the jockey developed while working his way up from the bottom.

"He didn't just start riding; he was doing everything with the horses," McGeehey said. "His boss would say, 'Take these two horses over to this meet and run them.' I'll still find him every once in a while running a bandage or tacking one up. You really don't see other jockeys doing that unless they're bug boys, but he'll jump right in there and go at it. He loves it."

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getic and personable ways make him a popular figure on the racetrack.

"If you're having a rough morning in your barn and James spends some time over there, it turns into a good morning," the agent remarked. "It's just his attitude about everything, how upbeat he is — it's infectious to those around him. And as an agent I don't have to worry about whether he's going to show up. If he says he's going to do something, he's going to do it."

Learning from the Best

When Graham first started in the Keeneland jockeys' room, Hall of Fame riders such as Pat Day, Jerry Bailey, and the recently retired Gary Stevens were regularly booking mounts at the Lexington track. Thirsty for knowledge and continually striving to improve his craft, he was able to learn from the best — by trying to beat them.

"Jerry Bailey was really, really good," Graham recalled. "Pat was so patient, he almost always had horse. You had guys like Shane Sellers; he always seemed to be in a good spot. You look at the top five riders in the country right now, and they're all able to put together little things they learned from everybody. They're good speed riders, good sitting off the pace, good being mid-pack, they're just all-around good riders. When you're learning, you try to take a little bit from everybody and find your own little niche. If you get a reputation for riding a good race, people are going to use you no matter where you're riding."

Graham's first meet at Keeneland was spent mostly observing and perfecting his craft, but he threw himself into the challenge and steadily saw his business rise.

"I rode one winner for Jeff and that was it for the whole meet, but I was just happy to be riding because of the lack of opportunity I'd had in Ireland," Graham said. "When I did get the opportunity, I charged at it. I wasn't going in half-ass. I gave it my all and I still do, every day I go to ride."

Even with more than a decade of experience under his belt today, Graham said he continually works to improve his race riding, not only to up his chances at reaching the winner's circle but because it's also something he likes to study.

"If you like what you do, the learning comes easy," he said. "I'm very happy getting on horses, and once you get into a rhythm of doing it, you progress. Riding races is fun. It's like playing chess. You just have to hope you make the right move at the right time."

Family Life

While Graham is thoroughly invested in the racing world, he also takes time to decompress with his family. He has two daughters and a son — Hannah (5), Christopher (4), and Ella (6 months) — with Lisa, who already has the kids riding ponies and participating in some fun, laid-back horse shows.

"It's not that I don't love my work, I always have and I always will, but with the kids now it's not so much that every waking minute is racing," Graham said. "Before we had kids, it was, 'Hey, there's racing in New York, let's watch it!' Now, my TV has been taken over by cartoons."

Fostering a solid family life is important to the rider and his wife, who have homes in New Orleans and Arlington Heights, Ill.

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"It's really important to sit down and have a meal at the table with the kids, Lisa, and myself. That's a big deal," he remarked. "We're able to find out if somebody had a bad day in school, to connect with each other. Lisa has done a great job making sure that we do that. I love my career but I also love my family, and we do make time to be a family, that's what we are."

What advice would Graham give to an up-and-coming young jockey?

"Pay your taxes and work your rear end off," he said with a chuckle. "My biggest advice is to get out there every morning, have a smile on your face, and say hello. I like being busy. I'm not a very idle person. You ask anyone in the jocks' room, 'What about James Graham?' They'll tell you, 'He's just bouncing around the place.' I always look at the brighter side. No matter how bad things are, it could always be worse."



With the fall season coming up at Keeneland, Graham is hoping once again to parlay the success he had as a leading member of the Arlington riding colony into frequent trips to victory in Lexington. He will savor the short meet and enjoy being back at the site of many of his greatest triumphs.

"Being in Kentucky is like being in Ireland," he said. "The weather's kind

Graham prepares for his races by studying past performances.

of crazy — it's warm, sunny, hot cold ... and you have all the big farms nearby. It's good when a meet is going right and sad when you have to leave it at the end, because it's a wonderful place. Keeneland really doesn't let you go that easy." 🐾

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