



EMBRACING

THE BLUEGRASS

Canadians Jim and Susan Hill have added a Central Kentucky horse farm and a B&B to their burgeoning equine portfolio

By Lenny Shulman / Photos by Kevin Thompson



The Hills are busy renovating their Eighth Pole Inn, a B&B near Keeneland, as well as transforming Margaux Farm into a year-round training center.



Winter in Central Kentucky is the season people ship themselves and their horses to warmer climes in the Carolinas and Florida to wait out the ice and chill until the daffodils poke out of the ground to signal spring is close.

That's all relative, though, especially if your home base is Calgary and the prairieland of Western Canada. To Jim and Susan Hill, the Lexington area is downright balmy across the winter months, and they are undertaking big plans to make the Bluegrass accommodating to both Thoroughbreds and humans year round.

The Hills (not to be confused with Jim and Sally Hill, co-owners of the legendary Seattle Slew) entered Thoroughbred ownership a decade ago and have embraced racing with the enthusiasm of young lovers. Buying yearlings at Keeneland and racing about 50/50 in Canada and the States, the Hills have been rewarded for their passion with grade II winners Grand Arch, Solid Appeal, and Tizahit, and grade III victors Sharp Sensation and Go Blue Or Go Home. With a few dozen horses in training, the Hills rank in the mid-20s of the owners' standings by purse money earned in North America this year.

But an equally important contribution to the sport is their investment in infrastructure around Lexington. This year they bought out their partners in Margaux Farm, outside Midway, and are in the process of constructing a year-round training center there, featuring three training tracks that will enable both clients' horses and their own to stay in Central Kentucky and keep fit over all-weather surfaces.

As far as human creature comforts, the Hills also this year purchased the Swanns Nest Inn bed & breakfast just a couple of furlongs from Keeneland Race Course. They are presently refurbishing it and rebranding it the Eighth Pole Inn, which will reopen for business when Keeneland's spring meet rolls around in April 2015.

A native of Toronto, Jim Hill studied accounting and engineering in school, and he moved with his bride to Calgary when they were in their 20s. There, he helped grow Pason, a global provider of specialized data management systems for drilling rigs, from a \$50,000 enterprise into a public company worth \$2.8 billion. Now 64, Hill relinquished his position as CEO responsible for the day-to-day workings of the company and remains as chairman, allowing him the time to delve into his love of racing Thoroughbreds.

"The horse industry is ideal for us because there are a lot of older people in it," he said. "Here, you're a player. Anywhere else you're just an old businessman."

The Hills, who have two adult sons, also have a passion for art and own a gallery in Calgary under the banner Esker Foundation. The art gallery space is in a building that has art-related tenants who help finance the exhibits. The Hills have hosted shows by local artists and by artists from throughout Canada, and they plan to open the space to artists worldwide.

Jim Hill, in fact, entered the world of horses because of art. At a gallery opening 10 years ago he chatted up Leonard Zenith, a Thoroughbred owner whose wife owned the gallery. Zenith subsequently sent Hill a copy of Woodford County horseman Jim Squires' book *Horse of a Different Color*. Hill loved the work, and he and Susan bought into four yearlings Zenith had purchased at Keeneland. One, Storm Caller, could run a little and won four races.

Storm Caller, who is spending his retirement years at the Hills' farm in Calgary, got the couple hooked on the sport.

"He was our avenue into racing," Hill noted. "He was the one horse that got us into it. I'm very fortunate Sue enjoys it as much as I do, making it easy to stay with it."

Soon the Hills were coming to the Keeneland September yearling sale to purchase their own runners. Buying in the middle of the market, the Hills typically spend between \$100,000 and \$200,000 for yearlings, with a smattering of weanlings and 2-year-olds thrown in. Last season, buying at Keeneland and at European sales, they purchased 28 head, their highest seasonal number to date.

The horses are split among trainers Reade Baker, Brian Lynch, and George Weaver. Whenever possible, the Hills point runners toward the Keeneland meetings in April and October. Their Grand Arch ran second to two-time Horse of the Year Wise Dan in Keeneland's first \$1 million race, the Shadwell Turf Mile, in October.

"We really enjoy coming here," said Hill. "Calgary has six or seven months of winter every year, so we make sure to come in the fall and then again around the beginning of April. The weather is a part of it, but so is the horse history and the beautiful terrain. The Bluegrass area is drop-dead gorgeous, we think. It's also an almost precise four-season climate. We've gotten to really like a lot of the people around here, and it's become a fun place to come to."

The Hills are affording others a fun experience in Lexington through the Eighth Pole Inn, which is located on Cygnet Farm. In 2005 the Hills first came to town to see the yearlings they had bought into with Zenith but were less than enamored with their stay at a downtown hotel. They found out about the bed & breakfast, stayed there on their next visit, and loved the place. Nine years later, when owner Rosalie Swann



Opposite, the Elkhorn Creek adds to the natural beauty of Margaux Farm. Above, an all-weather surface on the gallops will allow horses to train throughout the winter.

embracing the bluegrass



wanted to sell, the Hills decided they didn't want to stay anywhere else, so they purchased the property.

The Eighth Pole Inn will have five suites available for visitors at approximately \$150-\$250 per night. The place is usually booked six months out for race meets and is already full for the 2015 Breeders' Cup World Championships, to be held at Keeneland. The rooms are spacious and afford views of surrounding farms, including Keene Ridge, the birthplace of champion English Channel. The inn boasts a beautiful patio with fire pit, den, and dining room with complimentary bourbon available at all times. A new game room with a pool table is being built downstairs, but the main attraction, appropriately, is the horses.

Just outside the front door in a grassy paddock, 11 broodmares peacefully graze, providing a classic Kentucky Thoroughbred experience for guests. With spring comes the added attraction of foals. They are a huge draw for visitors, who have come from as far away as Europe, Australia, and Japan.

"People who come here want to see the vaunted Kentucky horse," said Hill. "And there aren't many B&Bs that have horses on the property. You could actually make a case for renting a mare and foal and cue them to come across the field in the spring. But we have mares and foals



Jason Sciortino manages the B&B.

Above left, horses right out front provide guests of the Eighth Pole Inn with a classic Kentucky experience. Comfort and style are hallmarks of the inn's five guest suites and the common areas.

embracing the bluegrass



that have to eat grass somewhere anyway, so it's a happy combination to have them here, where guests can walk over and feed them carrots."

A second paddock is under construction (there will be 12 acres of paddock space) along with a new 10-stall barn at the side of the property.

"There are always people coming and going and it's so interesting," said Hill. "This morning I took a coffee on the front steps with [trainer] Michael Matz, and it was wonderful."

Equally impressive is the work being done at Margaux Farm, a 640-acre tract on beautifully shaded Moores Mill Road surrounded by the scenic Elkhorn Creek. The Hills have wintered their horses at Margaux for three years and now, having bought out their partners in the farm, are upgrading the property into a top-shelf training facility.

Farm manager Michael Hardy proudly surveys the training tracks from an infield gazebo. He points out the stamina-building figure-eight-shaped gallop that is about five-eighths of a mile around but with spurs that make it almost a mile. A synthetic surface known as Tru-Stride, manufactured in upstate New York, has been installed. The surface will not freeze and is designed so that water drains right off the top of it, making it perfect for winter use.

Nearby, being covered with Tru-Stride, is a straight strip that will allow horses to breeze a half-mile as they prepare to be dispatched to race-tracks. And on the banks of the Elkhorn, on a flood plain that keeps the silty soil soft, is an exquisite half-mile turf gallop featuring a three-furlong straight and then an uphill bend.

Margaux also has an arena, round pens, and three newly converted tobacco barns that now house horses. There will be 220 stalls on the property when the work is complete.

"About 25 percent of the horses on the farm now belong to the Hills,



Margaux Farm, which spans 640 acres, will have 220 stalls when work is complete. Though racehorse-oriented, the farm also accommodates mares.

with the rest from clients," said Hardy, a native of Ireland and a graduate of the Darley Flying Start program. "This property will allow more horses to be kept in Kentucky through the winter, where they can be trained or turned out and people can come see them whenever they'd like. Clients that have broodmares may keep them here also as a complementary service we provide for them, but primarily we're set up for training and lay-ups."

Both Hardy and Jason Sciortino, who manages the B&B, praise the Hills for giving them the tools they need to complete these major projects, for being direct in telling them what they want, then allowing them to accomplish it.

As for the Hills, they now have places of beauty for themselves and their horses to thrive in Central Kentucky.

"After being in the corporate world, the horse industry is like going back to a simpler business," Hill said. "It's usually two guys deciding, 'Let's do this,' and it happens. So we really do enjoy it." **KM**