



DAVID YOUNG

WESLEY'S WARDS

Trainer known for his winning ways with precocious 2-year-olds

By Cynthia Grisolia

It's no secret: Trainer Wesley Ward likes 'em young and he likes 'em fast. His idea of lickety-split perfection: a 2-year-old Thoroughbred sprinting 4½ furlongs in under :51.

Ward, 45, has based much of his near 30-year career on the need for speed. First as a jockey, winning stakes races at the tender age of 16. Then as a conditioner with an especially keen skill set: a knack for getting adolescent Thoroughbreds to run like cheetahs. And nowhere is that talent more on display than at Keeneland every spring, where his swift brigade of young bloods, many making their first starts, dominate the series of sprints or "baby races" (think of them as horse racing's version of a tweet) offered during the track's 16-day meet.

"Wesley has made training 2-year-olds into a fine art," said Keeneland's vice president of racing Rogers Beasley. "His horses are always well schooled, they're well out of the gate — and that's the key to those sprints — and they've done very well because of it."

Indeed. Ward has been racking up juvenile accolades at Keeneland since 2007 when his homebred filly One Hot Wish set a world record on the Lexington oval going 4½ furlongs in :48.87 (a record that still stands). To date, he has won the inaugural 2-year-old race of the meet five times in the past seven years, and in 2012 Ward snagged his first leading trainer title. He captured the honor again at the 2012 fall meet when he topped the leader board with 12 wins.

Ward declines to split hairs. “I have never been one to go after titles or whatever,” he said, “but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t really want to win a trainer’s title at Keeneland at least once.”

Making history is not unfamiliar territory to Ward. In the summer of 2009, he entered the record books as the first American trainer ever to saddle a winner at England’s Royal Ascot when two of his juveniles, Strike the Tiger and Jealous Again (a filly who had broken her maiden over the Keeneland course), captured the Windsor Castle Stakes and the Queen Mary Stakes, respectively. There was also a third contender, the turf sprinter Cannonball, who placed second in the group I Golden Jubilee Stakes. It was Ward’s first trip across the pond, but the idea, he said, had been percolating for years. “The weather conditions in Europe are not really conducive to getting horses ready early like we have in Florida,” said Ward, who makes his home in Hollywood, Fla., with his wife, Kimberly, and their three children: Jackson, Riley, and Denae. “So I had it in my mind for years to try and go over there. We have a little bit of an edge here [in the spring], so why wouldn’t we have a little bit of an edge over there in the middle of June?”

At first Ward had to convince his owners it was worth the time and cost. “He called me about

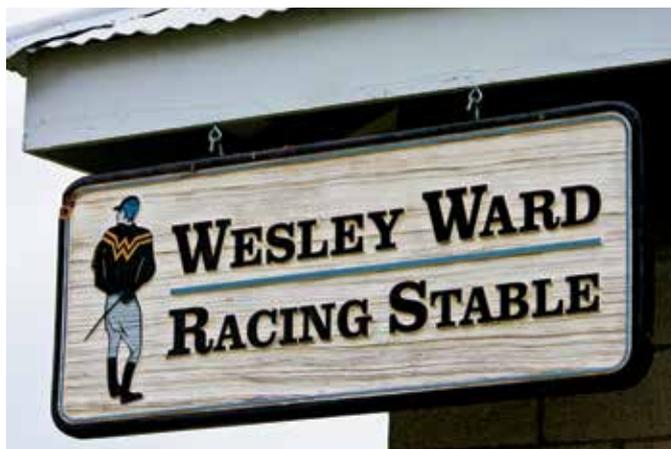


Ward (center) became the first U.S. trainer to saddle a winner at Royal Ascot when two of his juveniles won races there in 2009. He saddled a second-place finisher, Cannonball, for longtime owner Ken Ramsey (below) at the same meet.

going over there, and at first I said, ‘I don’t know,’ ” said Ken Ramsey, one of Ward’s top clients and owner of the then-4-year-old Cannonball. “But Wesley said, ‘No other American trainer had done it and no other American owner had done it, so let’s go over and be a trailblazer,’ ” Ramsey said, laughing.



MATTHEA KELLEY



DAVID YOUNG

Ward always has been a bit of a forerunner. He was born in Selah, Wash., a small town not far from the now-defunct Yakima Meadows racecourse, where his father, Dennis Ward, also a jockey-turned-trainer, was often based. Wesley Ward’s grandfather, on his mother’s side, was Jim Dailey, a steeplechase rider who later became a popular New York outrider. By all accounts, Ward was a fierce athlete, playing hockey and baseball, as well as wrestling. But what he really wanted to do was ride. “Ever since he could walk,” said Dennis Ward, “he was riding.”

One of the earliest accounts of his time on the back of a Thoroughbred goes like this: When Wesley Ward was only 4, Dailey, proud of his equestrian grandson, hoisted him over the withers of a trainee at Belmont Park. Unexpectedly, the horse shied and bolted. By the time the panicked Dailey caught up with



DANIEL WATSON

Ward earned an Eclipse Award as leading apprentice jockey before weight forced a career change.

the runaway, Wesley had already pulled him up. When his grandfather asked if he was frightened, little Wesley quipped: "Nah, I just said, 'Whooaaa, you son of a bitch!'"

Wesley Ward laughs about the incident now. "He was so excited that his grandson could ride," he said. "That's a story that has stayed in the family for years."

By the time Ward was 12, he had won his first race on the rough-and-tumble county fair circuit in the Northwest. Before he was 16 — legally able to compete in a recognized race — he had won 158 of his 300 starts. In 1984 Ward went to New York to live with relatives, anxious to begin his professional career. While waiting to blow out those 16 candles, he practiced jockeying wherever he could: crouching low on a sofa arm, switching whips while wheeling a bicycle. "You have a dream of leaving a small town and going to the big city where the great horses are and the best jockeys," said Ward. "It was a dream for years and it finally came true, and I just couldn't get enough."

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MATHIEA KELLEY

Ward has saddled many a juvenile winner at Keeneland, where, below, vice president of racing Rogers Beasley presented him with a silver julep cup to mark his leading trainer title in fall 2012. Ward also earned that distinction in spring of last year.

Like his father before him, Ward had his first professional start on his 16th birthday. Within five days he had won his first legit race. Insatiable for the run, Ward began riding nearly 20 mounts a day among New York's Aqueduct and Belmont Park and New Jersey's The Meadowlands. "If they had races at 2 o'clock in the morning, I'd have been there, too," Ward said. In less than a year, he rode 335 winners and earned more than \$5 million in purses. He also earned the Eclipse Award as the nation's leading apprentice.

But a few years later Ward was struck down by the jockey's curse — again, like his father before him. He could not control his weight, and so, in 1989, at 21, he hung up his silks. "It took a while to figure out what I wanted," said Ward. "I went through a bout of depression until I decided I wanted to work with the animals and become a trainer. It was tough to go into training, though, I'll tell you that."

It's not that Ward didn't have credentials for the job. In addition to his accomplishments under tack,

he had been breaking horses for his father since he was 10 and, as a rider, was often under the tutelage of such conditioners as Charlie Whittingham and Bobby Frankel. But despite the bullets on his resume, about a month into the announcement that Wesley Ward was now a trainer, the phone had not rung. So he invested in a few low-cost Thoroughbreds of his own. And Ward was convinced that one, a gorgeous colt named Romeo's Heartbreak, was going to be a career maker. "I thought this was the horse," he said.

Ward entered the 2-year-old at Hollywood Park, where he went off at about 80-1. The fledgling trainer was nevertheless convinced Romeo was the second coming who would come in first. "He ended up getting beat about 30 lengths," said Ward. "I still had a jockey's mentality, and training and riding are completely different worlds. Had I had that horse today, he would have had his first start at Turfway in December," he said. "But I had big aspirations. It was a learning process."

Learn he did, first by assisting his father and then by going out on his own, initially in California and eventually shifting his entire operation to Florida in 2006. He moved from \$2,500 claimers to winning his first stakes in 1994, and he soon earned the trust of more owners. In addition to Ramsey, he now trains for actor Joe Pesci and Denver Bronco wide receiver Wes Welker, among others. Ward has won more than 1,100 races, and his horses have earned more than \$30 million in purses.



KEENELAND

Along the way he also won a reputation for being an anomaly on the backstretch. Like his dad, Ward breaks his own horses (“When the horse comes in, within five minutes I’m on his back, no matter what type of horse or how wild he is,” he said). He owns or co-owns many of his 60 trainees and would rather buy weanlings than drop a bundle on high-priced 2-year-olds. He’s been known to haul a horse here and there, and “as a hobby” he stood his own stallion, Bring the Heat. It was that stud’s first crop that produced record-breaker One Hot Wish. (Bring the Heat passed away in February.)

“Wesley is very consistent in the things he wants to do,” said Dennis Ward, who still works with his son and talks to him daily. “He does it to the hilt. There’s nobody in racing, I don’t think — I don’t care if it’s Wayne Lukas or even Todd Pletcher — who does the things that he does or goes the places he goes.”

Where Ward has gone is far from his humble beginnings in Selah, Wash. After shaking it up at Royal Ascot, he made



MATHEA KELLEY PHOTOS

Ward and jockey Joel Rosario teamed up for a winning effort with juvenile Mary at the Cove at Keeneland’s recently concluded spring meet.

headlines in France a year later by saddling his first winners at Longchamp and Chantilly. In 2011 he took Peachtree Stable’s Flashpoint to the Preakness, and other charges have vied in Australia, Hong Kong, and Dubai. The trainer’s gypsy style stirred one reporter to call him “the first realization of the global American trainer.”

Not that he’s forgotten those modest beginnings. “He’s what I would call a jockey’s jockey,” said Ramsey. “He likes to help out the apprentices and jocks just getting started. He’ll put them on a horse that he thinks all they have to do is hang on because he’s got them trained to win.”

For Wesley Ward the Sport of Kings, it appears, comes down to one thing: “I just love the horses,” he said. “I really love what I do. The one thing about racing is, you always have something to look forward to no matter how down you are.” He pauses slightly and then adds, “In racing, there’s always hope.” And if you’re lucky, it will come roaring down the stretch like greased lightning. 🐎