
TALENT SCOUT

The Claiborne Breeders' Futurity Stakes, inaugurated at the old Kentucky Association track and today a Keeneland fixture, has had a storied history as a launching pad for future champions

By Tom Pedulla

For owners and trainers who believe they have a 2-year-old with the mind and talent to allow them to dream big, the \$500,000 Claiborne Breeders' Futurity offers a proving ground like no other.

At a mile and a sixteenth, it marks the first Grade 1 two-turn dirt race for juveniles in the Bluegrass and has steadily increased in prominence since its inaugural running in 1910. When the Futurity ends as one of the signature events of Fall Stars Weekend at Keeneland Race Course, countless questions are answered.

The overriding issue, of course, involves distance. Those that have the stamina to be serious candidates for the Kentucky Derby and the other classics the following spring begin to separate themselves from those better served competing at shorter distances.





MEADORS

Classic Empire won the 2016 Claiborne Breeders' Futurity en route to a champion 2-year-old male title. Above, Round Table (8) won the 1956 version and captured championships in three subsequent years.

MARK MALIN



The highly competitive nature of the Claiborne Breeders' Futurity ensures full fields as championships often are on the line.

"We can always say a horse is bred to run two turns, and we can think a horse can run two turns," said noted trainer Mark Casse. "But until you actually see it, you just don't know for sure."

Classic Empire took the Futurity for Casse two years ago, securing the automatic berth in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile that goes to the winner. The colt made the most of it, prevailing by a neck in the Juvenile to secure the Eclipse Award as leading 2-year-old male in North America.

Hall of Fame conditioner D. Wayne Lukas said his perennial emphasis on the Futurity greatly contributed to an unmatched six triumphs.

"You have to recognize that this is a very important race in the big picture of your program. I did that always," he said. "I always marked that on the calendar. If you're Alabama, you mark LSU and Auburn as games you really want to be up for. That's the same thing here. You say, 'This is one that's special.' I always thought it was a pivotal race on the road to the Kentucky Derby."

Lukas' 14 Triple Crown wins testify to his ability to take dead aim at targets and hit them. So do his Futurity scores with Dance

Floor (1991), Mountain Cat (1992), Honour and Glory (1995), Boston Harbor (1996), Cat Thief (1998), and Consolidator (2004).

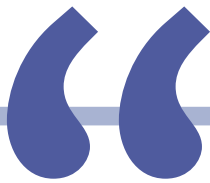
Lukas is the first to admit that pedigree, workouts, and early results offered only a glimpse into what he could expect in the talent-laden Futurity. There is nothing like seeing how the race unfolds and learning from every stride an unproven youngster takes.

"It is a tremendous measuring stick," Lukas said, "as to what you maybe will have in the future."

As the Futurity marks its 105th running, it has gone through various changes since it was initially established at four furlongs in the spring at the old Kentucky Association track in Lexington. The addition to the calendar coincided with the implementation of a walk-up start in place of a standing start.

The filly Housemaid set the stage for the quality to follow by breaking on top and never looking back in a 10-length romp for Will Perkins, an African-American trainer, and Vince Powers, his jockey-turned-carefree-passenger.

The chart reads: "Housemaid, away forwardly, was rushed into a commanding lead quickly, is probably a crackerjack, and won as her rider pleased."



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— D. Wayne Lukas

The action shifted to Latonia in Northern Kentucky from 1931-33 after the demise of the Kentucky Association track and then, after a brief lapse, to newly opened Keeneland Race Course as a six-furlong event in 1938. Johnstown held off Allegro by a desperate nose to bank the winner's share of \$9,335 in 1:11²/₅ seconds. The chart noted that the field remained at the post for 4½ minutes.

The current distance of a mile and one-sixteenth was set in 1981 and has remained intact. The race has enjoyed Grade 1 status since 2004 while benefiting from the popularity of Fall Stars Weekend.

“People identify that when Fall Stars Weekend arrives, this is a crucial, critical time,” said Ben Huffman, Keeneland's racing secretary. “Everybody is prepared to get to the next championship level [at the Breeders' Cup], and a lot of these good horses come through Keeneland.”

Since the inaugural Breeders' Cup in 1984, the winners of 47 Cup races were razor sharp after making their preceding starts at Keeneland. The Futurity will be one of a plethora of major stakes on Fall Stars Weekend (Oct. 5-7) that are part of the Breeders' Cup “Win and You're In” Challenge Series.



Owner John Oxley, trainer Mark Casse, and jockey Julien Leparoux celebrate Classic Empire's victory in the 2016 Breeders' Cup Juvenile.



RIK SAMUELS

Trainer D. Wayne Lukas has won six Futurities.



Lukas-trained CatThief won the 1998 Breeders' Futurity over Answer Lively.



SKIP DICKSTEIN

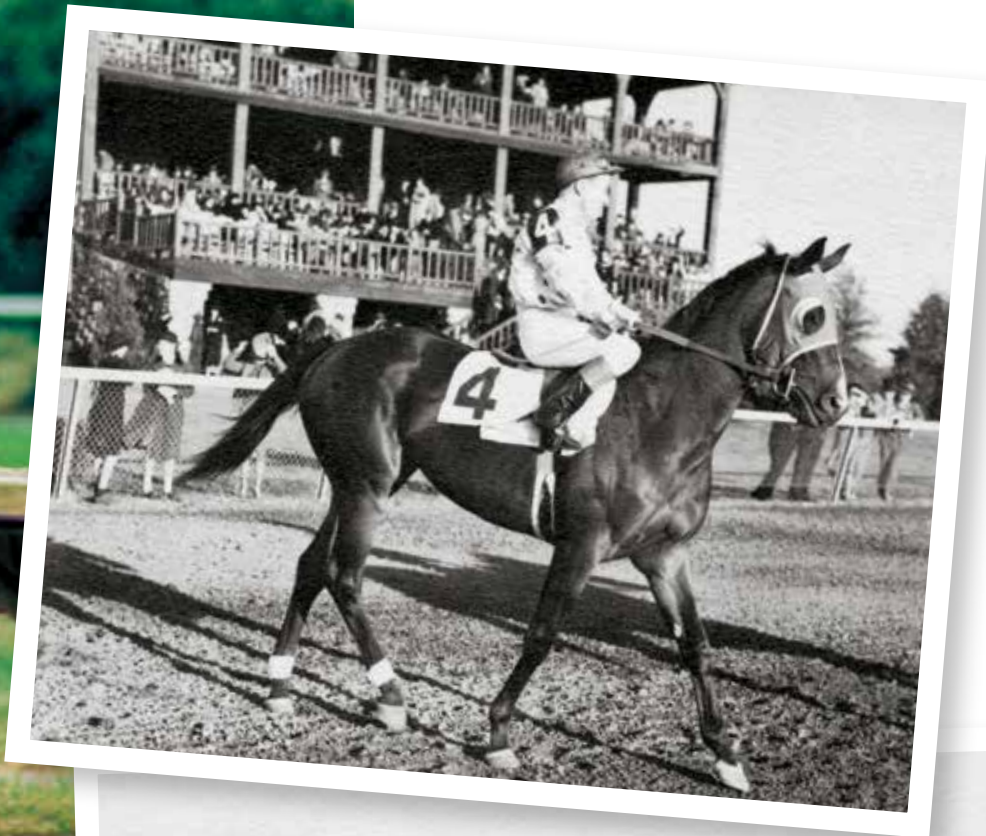
In 1999 CatThief crowned his 3-year-old season with a victory in the \$3-million Breeders' Cup Classic.

The excitement starts with the \$400,000 Darley Alcibiades (Juvenile Fillies) and the \$250,000 Stoll Keenon Ogden Phoenix (TwinSpires Sprint) on Friday. Saturday's loaded lineup features the \$1 million Shadwell Turf Mile (Mile), \$400,000 First Lady (Filly & Mare Turf), \$250,000 Thoroughbred Club of America (Filly & Mare Sprint) and, of course, the \$500,000 Futurity. The \$200,000 Indian Summer (Juvenile Turf Sprint) is a welcome newcomer to a Sunday menu that offers the \$500,000 Juddmonte Spinster (Distaff) and the \$250,000 Dixiana Bourbon (Juvenile Turf).

NBC will televise the Futurity and the Shadwell Turf Mile from 4:30-6 p.m. ET on Saturday, Oct. 6. Shadwell Farm is celebrating its 20th year as a sponsor, leading fans to connect that respected operation to the Turf Mile automatically. When Walker Hancock took over as president of Claiborne



ANNE M. BERHARDT; RIGHT, KEENELAND LIBRARY PHOTOS



Farm in 2014, he sought the same immediate association with the Futurity, and Claiborne began sponsoring the race that same year.

“My hope for the race is that when people think of the Futurity, they will think of the Claiborne Futurity,” said Hancock, the fourth generation to oversee tradition-rich Claiborne.

Claiborne boasts an unparalleled five Futurity winners, a testament to the acumen of generations of Hancocks. The success began with Round Table (1956) and continued with Duel (1963), Dike (1968), Swale (1983), and Forty Niner (1987). Round Table went on to be arguably the greatest grass runner of all time. Swale won the Kentucky Derby; Forty Niner missed by a neck to the extraordinary filly Winning Colors in the Derby.

“You have to have a great mind. You have to take the training, and you have to have some precocity, too,” Hancock said. “I think it’s a great test for a young horse.”



Top, Johnstown parades onto the track for the 1938 Breeders' Futurity, then sweeps down the center of the stretch to take the first running of the race at Keeneland.



JULIAN WILSON



TONY

TONY LEONARD

Top, Calumet Farm's Whirlaway used the 1940 Futurity as a springboard to his successful Triple Crown sweep of 1941. Above, Claiborne Farm's Swale captured the 1984 Kentucky Derby after having won the Futurity the previous fall.

Whatever the formula, trainer Dale Romans and Albaugh Family Stable appear to be figuring it out together. Romans boasts four victories: Dawn of War (2005), Dullahan (2011), Brody's Cause (2015), and Free Drop Billy (2017).

"The bottom line is that you have to have a 2-year-old that has some foundation and is waiting to run around two turns," Romans said. "This is one of the first big races going longer, and you need a horse that wants to run a mile and a sixteenth at 2."

That is exactly the kind of horse Dennis Albaugh and Jacob Loutsch, Albaugh's son-in-law and racing manager, search for when they annually shop at Keeneland's September yearling sale.

"We're looking for horses that are two-turn horses that have pedigrees to run in the Triple Crown races and the prep races to get into the Kentucky Derby," Loutsch said of an outfit that boasts three successive Derby starters.

For his father-in-law, the thrill of the chase at the sales is part of what drives him to be in the game.

"You're making a decision within, like, 15 seconds," Albaugh said of the bidding process. "Is the other guy done? You don't really know that until the hammer goes down."

Albaugh Family Stable looks to make approximately eight purchases each September. Although Albaugh attempts to set limits, he just might change his mind during those 15 seconds or so that fly by between bids.

He spent \$350,000 for Brody's Cause, more than intended. Free Drop Billy went for \$200,000, less than budgeted. He hit pay dirt with both. Brody's Cause stands at Spendthrift Farm; Free Drop Billy is headed there after this season.

According to Loutsch, the path to a promising stallion career for each started with winning the Futurity. "It's a big stallion race for us," he said. "When you win that race, it puts you on the map as a stallion prospect."

The Futurity is equally central to the plan that Casse devises. "It's my way to get to the Breeders' Cup most of the time," he said. "New York is not going to want to hear this, but I think it is better than the Belmont route because it allows



Spendthrift Farm's Durazna became the first filly winner, taking the 1943 running.

you to get a two-turn race. If you stay in New York, with the configuration of Belmont [Park], you're still running one turn. I think it's extremely important to get a two-turn race in before the Breeders' Cup."

Classic Empire could not have had a better stepping-stone. He had wheeled and dumped jockey Irad Ortiz Jr. in the Hopeful at Saratoga Race Course in his previous start. Casse did extensive gate work with the mercurial youngster and added blinkers, leading to an impressive three-length decision against Lookin At Lee in the Futurity.

"I went into the Juvenile with a lot more confidence after that race," Casse said. "He had to prove he could run two turns, he could run fast, and keep going."

Worth noting is that Lookin At Lee went on to place second to Always Dreaming in the Kentucky Derby. He is one of a significant number of juveniles that, despite not winning the Futurity, went on to distinguish themselves as 3-year-olds.

Bravazo, last year's Futurity runner-up, gave Triple Crown champion Justify his biggest scare when his dramatic late surge left him just one-half length behind the winner in the Preakness in the mud and fog at Pimlico Race Course. Exaggerator, second to Brody's Cause in the Futurity, captured the Preakness after running a game second to Nyquist in the Derby. Keen Ice, fifth in the 2014 Futurity, will always be remembered for his shocking upset of Triple Crown champion American Pharoah in the Travers the following summer.

Fans would do well to scrutinize every starter in this year's Futurity. The next crackerjack might pop up at any time. **KM**

(Members of the Keeneland Library staff contributed research to this article.)



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Claiborne Farm's Forty Niner triumphed in the 1987 Futurity, helping cement his Eclipse Award as champion 2-year-old male.



Dennis Albaugh, left, and son-in-law Jacob Loutsch, right, lead in 2017 winner Free Drop Billy.