

MAKING HIS MARK

Trainer Mark Casse finds a natural fit at Keeneland

By Claire Novak / Photos by Mark Mahan

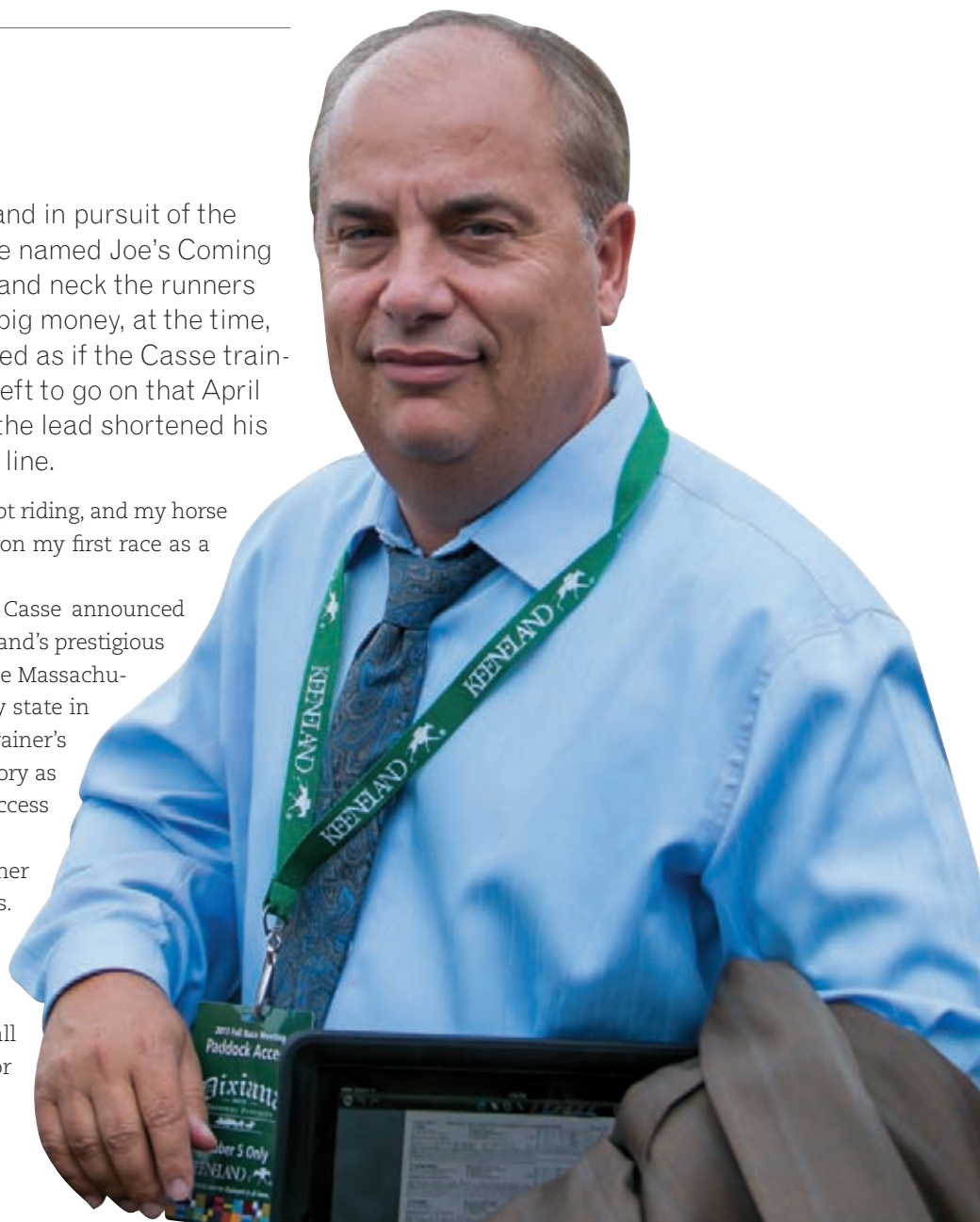
Hurtling down the stretch at Keeneland in pursuit of the front-running rival, one useful horse named Joe's Coming kept grinding toward victory. Neck and neck the runners dueled for a purse worth \$5,000 — big money, at the time, for 18-year-old trainer Mark Casse. It looked as if the Casse trainee would get edged out with a sixteenth left to go on that April afternoon in 1979. But then the horse on the lead shortened his stride. His rider had misjudged the finish line.

“The other jock pulled up, [James] McKnight kept riding, and my horse got up by a nose,” Casse recalled. “That’s how I won my first race as a trainer, thanks to the Keeneland finish line.”

Born and raised in nearby Indianapolis, Ind., Casse announced his presence to the racing world in style at Keeneland’s prestigious spring meet. He’d actually taken three races on the Massachusetts fair circuit the year before — it was the only state in North America where a 17-year-old could get a trainer’s license — but Joe’s Coming would go down in history as his first winner at a pari-mutuel track, his first success in the big time.

Now 53, the five-time Sovereign Award winner looks back on those early days with fondness. Keeneland was woven into the rich fabric of his upbringing, a life that has always been about the horses. Victories there — including the 2012 and 2013 editions of the Darley Alcibiades — mean all the more to him, given his innate appreciation for racing in the Bluegrass.

Mark Casse, who won his first race as a trainer at Keeneland, has an affinity for the track.



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Casse is the son of respected breeder Norman Casse, who got started in Indiana but eventually moved his business to Ocala, Fla., where he taught his son the tools of the trade at his Cardinal Hill Farm. The younger Casse ran that program before going out on his own at 18, picking up valuable experience that would shape his future career, not only as a conditioner but as a bloodstock specialist and racing and farm manager.

“My dad spent part of his honeymoon at the old El Dorado Inn across from Calumet and he took my mom to Keeneland,” Casse recalled. “Kentucky racing was always ‘it’ for me. The first time I went to the Kentucky Derby we saw Secretariat win. I’ve never known anything but Thoroughbreds, and since I was 10 years old, I was reading the *Racing Form*. The worst day of the week when I was a little boy was Sunday, because there was no *Form* printed on Sundays, and that was devastating.”

Today, Casse oversees an active 80-horse racing stable with the help of his wife Tina, son Norman, and main assistant David Adams. He holds training titles at Churchill Downs and Turfway Park but is best known for his success at Woodbine Racetrack in Toronto, Canada, where he advanced his career while working as a private trainer and general manager of operations for Harry Mangurian’s Mockingbird Farm until its dispersal in 2000. Since then, Casse has built up his own training complex — Moonshadow Farm in Ocala — and has developed a client roster that includes respected industry figures such as John Oxley and Bill Farish along with relative newcomers like Ernie Semersky of Conquest Stables.

In recent years Casse has upped his firepower at Keeneland, starting 33 runners at the 2013 spring meet and 21 in the fall compared to just eight at the 2011



Above, Casse gives a rider a leg up before a race. Right, the trainer keeps up with business from his barn at Keeneland.

spring meet and nine at the same meet in 2012. At last year’s fall meet his runners combined for a 43 percent in-the-money rating, with a 19 percent win mark off a 4-4-1 record for earnings of \$444,223. That purse figure placed him fourth in the standings by earnings.

“Keeneland works really well for us because we train all year long,” Casse said. “We train in Ocala at OBS, which is a synthetic surface, and we run at Woodbine, which is a synthetic surface, so Keeneland is a natural fit. As much as we enjoy winning in Canada at Woodbine, we’re trying to set our sights all over North America, and Keeneland offers such good racing that any time we have a chance, we’re going to send horses there and try to win.”

The spring meet at Keeneland provides



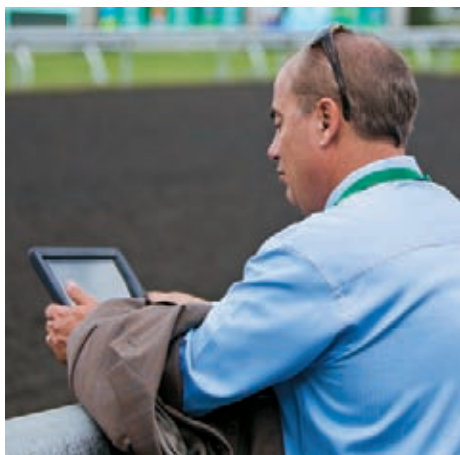
a good stopping point for Casse’s runners on the way from Florida as they’re bound for Woodbine, which opens in May. This year he applied for 36 stalls at the Lexington oval.

“Since Woodbine ends in December and we bring a large majority of our horses to Florida for the winter, we get them ready at OBS on the synthetic and then on the

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way to Toronto sometimes stop and run at Keeneland a time or two in order to get their year started,” Casse said. “I would say we’re going to be pretty active; now we just need to be successful.”

“For us in particular, we have a good gauge because we do run a lot of horses on Polytrack at Woodbine,” said the trainer’s son, Norman Casse. “At least when we go to Keeneland, we have a pretty good idea if our horses like Polytrack, whereas some people sometimes have to guess. We only



send horses we know are good enough to be competitive there, and obviously it’s a very competitive racetrack.”

Handicapper Ellis Starr, who specializes in racing at Keeneland, said Casse’s horses are always well-placed and conditioned to perform at the Lexington oval.

“When his horses have been racing at Gulfstream Park in Florida and come up to Keeneland, they usually have a good foundation under them,” Starr said. “His 2-year-olds in the fall are usually very live in the stakes as well. He brings his horses in with a good fitness level and often they’ve had experience over the all-weather track, and horses that have a start or two on that can run better here right off the bat. In the fall, certainly looking at his 2-year-olds, he spots them very, very well. And looking at his spring record, it’s not bad, given the quality of racing at Keeneland in the spring.”

Last fall Team Casse brought home a second consecutive victory in the Darley Alcibiades when My Conquestadory put in a brilliant run. Conquest Stables’ 2-year-old filly came in off a thrilling debut victory in



Top, Casse communicates with his assistant trainers and clients before a race at Keeneland. Above, clients such as Bill Farish Jr. have helped the trainer improve his horse power.

Woodbine’s TVG Summer Stakes over boys and wowed the crowd with her triumph against all odds after being steadied in traffic several times before unleashing a massive run. My Conquestadory went on to run fourth in the Breeders’ Cup Juvenile Fillies Turf, and the horse she beat in the Alcibiades, Rosalind, was third in the Breeders’ Cup Juvenile Fillies.

“It was remarkable, actually, for a young horse that had only started one time to do that,” Casse recalled. “And it turns out the filly she beat just got beat in the Breeders’ Cup by a good bunch of horses. I thought she deserved a lot more credit for her season. She had an impossible post in the Breeders’ Cup and ran 35 feet more than the winner; she started her career by beating boys; she went from one side of North America to the other and won in two countries. If that’s not special, I don’t know what is.”

Conquest Stables, along with Oxley, played a role in beefing up Casse’s stock with an eye toward the Keeneland meets. Oxley got his Alcibiades score in 2012 with Spring in the Air, a WinStar-bred Spring At Last filly Casse had selected for \$130,000 from Eddie Woods’ consignment at the 2012 Ocala Breeders Sales Co.’s 2-year-olds in training sale. The Casses also played a role in the victory of 2009 Alcibiades winner Negligee; they sold her to Sovereign Stable two weeks before she took the victory.

“The only reason we haven’t been doing this sooner is because we just didn’t have the horses in the last four or five years,” Casse said of his more active involvement at Keeneland. “Thanks to Mr. Oxley and Ernie of Conquest and those types of people, we’ve been given a little better horse here recently.”

The investment Semersky made with Casse paid off for the relatively new owner when he made his first-ever visit to Keeneland on Alcibiades day ... and won

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My Conquestadory helped Casse win a second Darley Alcibiades Stakes when she took the 2013 edition.

his first grade I with My Conquestadory. A 2012 Keeneland September yearling sale purchase consigned by breeder Paul Tackett, the Artie Schiller filly was pinhooked by Biltmore Mansion Racing for \$70,000 and sold to Conquest Stables for \$240,000 at the 2013 OBS select sale of 2-year-olds in training from the Eisaman Equine consignment.

“You can’t put a price on it, the relief when the horse ran well and won,” Semersky said. “It was almost surreal because up until that straightaway, you thought she was just not going to be able to do it, and then all of a sudden from out of nowhere — my God. Needless to say, so far for us Keeneland has been a really super special place, and everybody there has been wonderful.

“Mark is phenomenal. He blends integrity and honesty with incredible talent and a passion for the horses that was really important for us when we were selecting a trainer. He’s got a God-given instinct to be able to really judge a horse, the way they

move, and he’s been around them since he was a kid. We’ve learned a ton from him, and one thing you know for sure is when the horses go to run, they’re healthy and prepared.”



My Conquestadory’s connections, including owner Ernie Semersky (third from left), celebrate the filly’s victory.

A large part of the responsibility for ensuring those two factors rests upon the shoulders of 30-year-old Norman Casse. Growing up the son of a lifelong horseman with his grandfather’s legacy to guide him, the younger Casse recalls attending races at Keeneland much as his father did before.

“I didn’t really appreciate it until I was in college,” the Bellarmine ’06 alum said. “I went the year Bandini won the Blue Grass, and it was one of those things that kind of really hooked me — just how beautiful it was, how prestigious it felt. It was one of the things that made me decide to choose horse racing as my profession.”

As assistant to his father, Casse will oversee a string at Churchill Downs in the spring while heading to the races in the afternoons.

“It’s obviously very special when you grow up somewhere to succeed there,” he said. “Just being able to compete at the highest level and win the big races, it’s an awesome feeling and hard to describe. It’s why we do what we do.” **KM**