



“DO I HEAR ...”

Fifty years after getting the green light, Keeneland’s sales pavilion continues its state-of-the-art run

By Terri Darr McLean

Call it “The Case of the Missing Arches.”

For five weeks in the late 1960s, during construction of the state-of-the-art \$700,000 sales pavilion at Keeneland Race Course, a mystery ensued that created “moments of grave suspense,” as former Keeneland president James E. “Ted” Bassett III recalled.

At the center of the mystery: the massive arches made of Canadian fir that would support the new pavilion and become the hallmark of its unique design. It seemed the two open-bed freight cars carrying the arches from Canada to Lexington had simply vanished.



Opposite, opened in 1969, the Keeneland sales pavilion has witnessed record-shattering auction prices, international drama, and technological advances that have kept it apace with the times.

“When Keeneland does build a new arena, it is hoped that it will be larger to afford seats for bidders and room for onlookers, will provide better traffic flow from the arena to the inspection shed, and include an electric bid board which permits a visual accounting of the bidding despite a noisy audience.”

— *The Blood-Horse* of Jan. 15, 1966



SHEETS MEADOWS; BELOW, BREEDERS' SALES MEDIA GUIDE, 1947

Left, Keeneland's first sale was held in a tent in 1943. Below, the first permanent structure was erected on the grounds in 1944 and served its purpose for more than two decades.



In reality, the shipment was sidetracked somewhere in North Dakota, thanks to a bill of lading labeled "KEENELAND USA." No city, no state, no Zip code.

"Keeneland did not have the international reputation that it has today," said Bassett, who at the time was assistant to president Louis Lee Haggin II, "so it took some detective work to locate them.

"These beams that have become the signature of the pavilion were almost the cause of the demise of the 1969 July sale," he said, with a laugh.

A fitting drama for the theater surrounding the sale of prized Thoroughbreds on a stage fit for the sport of kings? Perhaps, but it was also cause for much angst over a project that would set the stage for the meteoric rise of bloodstock sales and establish Keeneland as an international symbol of equine commerce.

Back to the future

To understand the drama surrounding the missing

arches is to understand the widely held opinion in the mid-1960s that the time had come for a new, more modern sales facility. After all, the old one — a 60-by-80-foot frame building formerly owned by Fasig-Tipton — had been moved from Paris Pike and reassembled at Keeneland in 1944 after wartime restrictions kept Kentucky breeders from the usual practice of shipping their yearlings to Saratoga.

"I remember the old pavilion was nice, but it wasn't a whole lot more than a glorified tent ...," said Pope McLean, a Lexington horseman who sold horses at the pavilion's inaugural sale. "At the time the old structure seemed fine, but then you move forward to something like the new pavilion; it just made you realize what we hadn't had."

Originally constructed in 1929, the old facility served its purpose during

"Gosh, I just remember back in those days, the summer sales were such a social event and all the parties that were held then — very extravagant parties. And even at the night sales, there were people from around town that weren't even in the horse business that would come out just to be part of the event. With that kind of facility it made it pretty glamorous."



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

— POPE MCLEAN

the early years, with the sales setting record averages, drawing the offspring of the nation's leading sires, and helping boost Keeneland's reputation. The Breeders' Sales Co., a separate entity that conducted the sales, continued to build on that reputation through the 1950s and 1960s.

"The business was just beginning to become an international business, and something like that (a new pavilion) was pretty necessary for people coming from all over the world to the sales," McLean said. "I think Keeneland, maybe, was ahead of its time a little bit and realized where it was going."

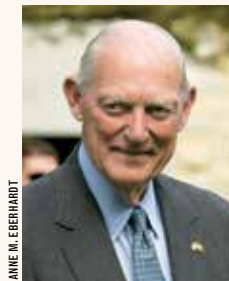
As Keeneland's Tom Thornbury recalled from his days as a teenager working for Lee Eaton, the need was especially obvious as the excitement surrounding the sales — and the audience — grew.

"It [the old pavilion] was so small, and you would have had a crush of people inside, but no one would have been able to observe," said Thornbury, who is now associate director of sales.

"Visionary" design

The Keeneland Association, having merged with the Breeders' Sales Co. and now entrenched in the business of selling horses, approved construction of a new pavilion in 1966. Two years later the board of directors gave final approval to the project and hired Arthur Froehlich and Associates of Beverly Hills, California, to design the facility. The grand opening was set for the 1969 July sale.

"Froehlich was an internationally known race-track architect," Bassett said. "He'd done Belmont;



James E. "Ted" Bassett III



KEENELAND PHOTO

During the July select yearling sales, evening sessions drew overflow crowds of horse people as well as spectators.



KEENELAND PHOTO

A TRIBUTE TO NORTHERN DANCER

Tucked away inside Keeneland's world-renowned sales pavilion is a small bar named after a small Thoroughbred whose legacy looms large in the world of equine commerce: Northern Dancer.

Considered perhaps the greatest Thoroughbred sire of the 20th century, Northern Dancer has had an unmatched influence on Keeneland's yearling sales. The legacy of this great horse continues through the sons and grandsons of Danzig, Storm Cat, and others whose offspring routinely top the Keeneland sales.

So, it was only fitting that the diminutive Northern Dancer somehow would be represented in Keeneland's sales pavilion. Displayed inside the cozy bar are photos of the "sire of sires," as well as his racing silks. "The Northern Dancer Bar tells you the influence he had," said Associate Director of Sales Tom Thornbury.

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Aqueduct; Hollywood; Del Mar; and Caracas, Venezuela.”

And his signature design element? Wooden arches — as in the massive wooden arches that mysteriously had gone missing for five weeks during construction.

Froehlich, whom Bassett called “visionary,” also brought a modern flair to the 12-sided building.

“It was totally different than the usual Keeneland architecture, except for the limestone. It was more modern. It had more windows. It had this rather unique and unusual design, with a hexagonal roof, and it created, from an architectural standpoint, a great deal of interest

POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE

The excitement that stirs when a great Thoroughbred is led through Keeneland’s sales arena is legendary. And there have been plenty of reasons for that excitement over the years. Keeneland sales graduates include:

20 Kentucky Derby winners
(most recent is Nyquist in 2016)

5 Epsom Derby winners

6 Irish Derby winners

4 French Derby (Prix du Jockey Club) winners

21 Preakness winners

18 Belmont winners

In addition, 88 sales graduates have won 95 Breeders’ Cup races. Horses of the Year Curlin and John Henry, likewise, were Keeneland grads.

Today, Keeneland conducts three sales annually. The two signature sales are the September yearling sale and the November breeding stock sale. There is also a January horses of all ages sale. The July selected yearling sale was discontinued in 2003 and the April two-year-olds in training sale was discontinued in 2015.



among the public,” he added.

Still, the design incorporated a nod to Keeneland tradition, including the use of arched windows and its limestone-and-glass facade. A “barn-like feel” was created throughout the interior, Bassett said.

“Most of the walls have wood-ed panels all the way around. He [Froehlich] wanted to make it feel like you were coming from the outside into a barn — a feeling that was horse-related, a warm feeling ... rather than cold and sterile,” he said.

Keeneland chose Sullivan and Cozart of Louisville to build the arena, which included 650 theater-style seats for consignors and buyers and bench-type seats for up to 150 spectators. It also boasted a telephone room with private booths (no cell phones back then), a bar, offices, a holding area for horses with an adjacent gallery area, and an entrance lobby.

McLean remembers the excitement when the pavilion first opened. “With all the windows around the back walkway, on the front side as you pull up, people could even stand there and look through the windows and actually see a horse in the ring and get to feel part of the action.”

Test of time

Of course, in the nearly 50 years since the pavilion was built, there have been necessary renovations, including a 17,000-square-foot expansion in 2005 that added new conference rooms and a larger business center. Additional renovations included adding a covered walking ring at the rear entrance of the sales pavilion, expanding the interior walking ring, expanding the restaurant and bar facilities, and adding a repository for X-rays and statistical data.

“Just like everything else at Keeneland, we were looking at the sales,

“It just made it a luxurious place to sell horses. And for people who weren’t even in the business coming out just to see what was going on, it created quite a hubbub of interest.”

— POPE MCLEAN



Director of Sales Geoffrey Russell

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and we wanted to be the destination for people,” said Director of Sales Geoffrey Russell. “We want to provide as much service as we can, and we felt we needed to do these renovations.”

Architect Mario Kow, who joined Froehlich’s firm in 1970, oversaw the renovations and updates. “To bring in Mario Kow was genius,” Thornbury said. “He was such a quiet, unassuming man but had such a design capability.”

Everything Kow did, Thornbury added, not only provided a better showcase for horses but also increased safety for buyers, sellers, spectators, and others involved in the process, especially in and around the walking rings.

“This [facility] allows you as a viewer to look at a horse and stay out of harm’s way,” Thornbury said.

In addition, maintaining a state-of-the-art arena required continued updates — installing a digital sound and graphics system, providing high-speed wireless Internet access, and adding more than 70 flat-panel televisions.

“When they built it in ’69, it was state-of-the-art then. Everything we’ve done has just added to it. I think it’s the most practical sales facility in the world,” Russell said.

“I guess it’s a cliché at this stage,” he added, “but this is the NBA draft. This is where people from around the world come to buy the horses they expect to be running on the big race stages all over the world.”

In recent years the internationally renowned sales venue has also opened its doors to the community for fundraisers, conferences, and social events. On Sundays during race meets, Catholic masses are conducted there. Each September since 2013, coinciding with the September yearling sale, the concourse walls are covered with art, mostly sporting art, which is for sale during a special auction that follows the November breeding stock sale.

Keeneland’s events staff is on hand to help individuals, businesses, and organizations make the best use of the facility, Russell said.

“Our mission statement is very community-centered, and it’s very important to Keeneland to be a community player,” Russell said. “We do have a beautiful facility ... We take pride and want everybody to be proud of Keeneland.” **KM**



Above, Tom Thornbury (right), the associate director of sales; opposite, an equine weathervane tops the pavilion; recent updates have included a covered walking ring where horses can be viewed before they move inside to the auction block.



ANNE M. EBERHARDT PHOTOS



KEENELAND/2

