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Keeneland's Rogers Beasley reflects on 34 years at the iconic Lexington racetrack and sales company

W. B. Rogers Beasley retires June 30 after more than three decades in key leadership roles for Keeneland Association, first as director of sales and, since 2001, as director, then vice president of racing. A native of New Orleans, Beasley traveled early in life as his father's profession took the family to India, Africa, and England, among other countries. Those experiences proved helpful preparation for his later roles at Keeneland, which involved extensive international travel while recruiting sales and racing prospects. Beasley graduated from Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky.

Beasley recently was interviewed by Edward L. Bowen, a former editor-in-chief and managing editor of *The Blood-Horse* and current president of Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation.



What is your earliest memory of Keeneland?

Rogers Beasley: When I was 8 or 9, my mom brought me to Lexington. We were living in Hyden, Kentucky, at the time. My father was medical director for Frontier Nursing Services. We went to Calumet Farm first, and I remember seeing those shiny brass nameplates of those magnificent horses. Then we came to Keeneland. I was like, "Wow!" The color and excitement really made an impression.

Later I went to school at Transylvania University (Lexington), and of, course, if you are student anywhere within a radius of 30 or 40 miles, you become enamored of Keeneland. I actually worked as an usher here when I was in college.

When did you come on board as an employee?

RB: In 1982. I had been a banker and then I became a hotwalker for Mr. Mike Bell, which was a great educational experience. Then Howard Battle hired me to

be an entry clerk here and also at Churchill Downs. I had other official jobs. Howard and Bill Greely were the two greatest teachers I had.

Then later, Bill (Greely, president) asked if I would be interested in being director of sales, and I interviewed and got the job. Mr. (Ted) Bassett (chairman) and Bill were looking for somebody young. They understood that to a degree the sales would be changing. You had an old guard — people like Leslie Combs II and Warner Jones — but they wanted to reach out to younger consignors, too. So they wanted a fresh set of eyes to look at the sales and see where they might be changed, modernized to a degree.

Were there points of tension among consignors wanting you to look out for their interests perhaps more than the buyers?

RB: First, I had 110 percent support from Ted Bassett and Bill Greely and Stan Jones (Keeneland's then-CFO). They never wavered in their support. We would dis-

cuss ideas and they asked why we would change things, and Mr. Bassett might pound the table and ask, "Why would that be better?" The role of the sales company is to do your best for the consignors. They are the ones leading the product. But you also have to have some transparency so when people buy your product, they have a comfort level. It wasn't the 1950s or 1960s when you had the old boys who had their individual clients. It had been becoming more international long before I got here. Robert Sangster and Vincent O'Brien had already been making their presence felt, and then the Maktoums came in the 1980s. You had to make them feel comfortable.

What changes did you make?

RB: Some of the things we did might seem like no-brainers now. If you were a consignor up in barn 41, you had no way of knowing what was going on down in the sales arena. I told Mr. Bassett we needed televisions, and he asked why. To his credit he went up there and he came back and said, "You're right. Go get some televisions." I thought this would be this huge requisitions project and asked "what do we do?" He said, "Go find the best ones!"

Another change was to get away from the pattern of the major consignors selling everything on their certain day. I went to Bill and Mr. Bassett and said we needed to split up consignments, and they asked why at first but went with it. The consignor who was the most helpful was Seth Hancock (Claiborne Farm). Seth is a wonderful person and a great traditionalist, and he said we had always done it one way. I said, "We need to think about down the road. If a buyer comes in and wants to spend \$50,000 a horse, he doesn't want to stay here five or more days." Seth agreed to split his consignment, which let me show others that I was being impar-



Beasley has been a familiar presence in the paddock during the race meets.



Colleagues honor Beasley on the last day of the 2016 spring race meet.

tial. Mr. Combs was not pleased and went to see Mr. Bassett. Again, I had the support, and Ted said, "Well, you better go see Rogers because that is what we are going to do."

What were the steps toward creating the select sessions for the numerically huge September sale?

RB: I realized that when people look at horses, they look at the sire power, the dam — her racing record and produce record. I had been mentally figuring the importance of those, but I realized I needed some help. So I asked Hank Zeitlen (The Jockey Club) and Bill Oppenheim (agent and commentator) to come in and help me. We devised a weighted point system so you could tell someone "this is how we rate your horses" in addition to the physical inspection team's evaluation. That's how we started splitting consignments in September. I wasn't saying the best horses were going to be sold in the first few days, but I could say the most expensive horses would sell then. The buyers knew when to come for the level of horses they would be able to buy, and it didn't penalize the consignor who still got to sell to the right people.

The inspectors liked the September sale because it gave them another 40 days to look at horses and a lot of yearlings improve later. Bill Greely asked, "By doing this, how long will we have the July sale (traditionally the most spectacular sale)?" I said "10 or 12 years." I was kind of joking, but it turned out about right. It is



Circa 1982, from left, William C. Greely, Beasley, James E. "Ted" Bassett, R. James Williams, and Stanley Jones

easier to get a yearling ready in September than for July, and my consignors for July were major, but there were not very many of them. (An example was) Green Desert, a Danzig colt whom Lee Eaton held out of July and put in the September sale. Harley Clemmons bought him (\$650,000) for one of the Maktoums. (Green Desert became a major winner and later an important sire.)

Beginning in the late 1960s, the yearlings from E. P. Taylor's Windfields Farm, and the Northern Dancers in particular, were internationally prominent and had led to an era of many of the most popular sires among European buyers standing in the United States. This led more and more international business to Keeneland. What were keys to that pattern?

RB: Keeneland had made a concerted effort to get Mr. Taylor. They put him in the Monday night slot at first in July, but later we realized we should merge and not have a consignor sell everything in one session. Warner Jones was not happy. He was used to selling on Tuesday, but when he saw all those Northern Dancers bought by buyers who then left after Monday, he came around. Another change was going over to Virginia and knocking on doors. They had always been regarded as consignors for the Saratoga sale, but we went after them and we got some: Mark Hardin, Peggy Augustus, etc.

How did the X-ray repository come about?

RB: It came from some legal cases. I got very frustrated. We were winning the legal cases about the conditions of sale, but we weren't comfortable with the situation. By then we had a lot more people selling horses, and you didn't have as many people breeding to race. People had realized there was money to be made in the sales. It wasn't as much about racing. To some degree, you feel proud of what we did for the sales, but you feel a little remorse that so many people became more sales oriented than racing oriented.

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So, we had some consignors who would agree to take a horse back (because of physical conditions), while others would just say “tough.” That didn’t give me a very good taste in my mouth as to what you are doing for your buyers. Dr. DeWitt Owen, Dr. Art Davidson, and Dr. Fred Arnold and (attorney) Buddy Bishop had talked about how we needed to have X-rays on file, so we made the repository voluntary. We had a few old-time consignors who didn’t send X-rays to the repository, but the first year I think we already had 94 percent who did. We also did the wind arbitration. That is a very good thing. It doesn’t say that a horse has to have a perfect throat, but he has to meet a certain standard so he’s got a shot of getting to the races. We had won a lawsuit over a horse (that had been sold) that didn’t have any shot of getting to the races, and that didn’t really make me feel that good.

We are very proud of the repository, and other sales companies have done the same, so it is a matter of transparency.

What are some of your favorite memories of yearlings sold by Keeneland?

RB: One is Secreto. When we went to Windfields, Dr. Owen as always was precise when it came to conformation, but I said, “We are going

to take him.” Well, he sold for \$340,000, which was a lot less than other Northern Dancers, and Dr. Owen chastised me. But then, the horse won the Epsom Derby, and I said, “How does he look now?”

When you moved over to the racing office, you were dealing with many of the same people but in a different context. Were there any difficulties in that change?

RB: Not really. Bill Greely always had thrown me into the racing part. I used to go out and do nominations every year for the Ashland and the Blue Grass, for example, and in delivering the sales catalogs I dealt directly with the trainers. I always had a rapport with the trainers. It was a seamless transition.

Were there changes in racing that were comparable to changes you saw were needed in the sales?

RB: We have always believed in constant re-evaluation. I had already been sort of the junior member who would sit in on the meetings about racing. One example of re-evaluation, the First Lady used to be $1\frac{3}{16}$ miles, but other tracks had similar races around that time of year. We changed it to a mile, and we have had three Breeders’ Cup winners come out of that. Some things, though, you never touch. The Claiborne Breeders’ Futurity, the Darley Alcibiades — these are standard 2-year-old races at their time and distance. Some things stand the test of time, and you shouldn’t touch them.

The first suggestion of sponsorship caused an intake of breath, but it was accepted, and some of our sponsors have been with us 20 years. One of our sponsored races is the Shadwell Mile. Rick Nichols (vice president/general

manager of Shadwell Farm) was the one who pushed us into our first million-dollar race. He was pounding on me for three or four years before, and I was the one saying “Mmm, mmm, mmm.” He laughs about that to this day. We see sponsorships as a partnership, and if a sponsor isn’t happy with what our approach is, “OK, we will tear up this agreement.”

We are blessed with a great mixture of business outside racing as well as farms, veterinary firms, etc.

Nothing could have been done with more admirable intent than the change to artificial surface. What do you think the industry has learned from the use of all-weather surfaces?

RB: First and foremost, we are proud that we tried it. Our track had been built in the 1930s. It wasn’t exactly the most symmetrical track. I remember (jockey) Donnie Brumfield used to say he liked to be in the two hole in a distance race because you could keep the No. 1 horse down on the rail going into the turn, and then with the shape of the turn, he had to pull up, and you were four lengths in front leaving the turn.

So one of the things we did when we looked at synthetics was ask, “How do we change this racetrack?” So we widened the turns, banked the turns better, and put in a drainage system. We used it for six years. There were a lot of pluses and minuses. We had fuller fields, and catastrophic injuries were low. But we weren’t accomplishing our mission, which is to attract the best racehorses in America. We weren’t drawing the best dirt horses by any stretch of the imagination. It is kind of like standing a stallion. You can tell everybody he’s a great stallion, but if nobody wants to breed to



JOHN CROFTS PHOTOGRAPHY

Beasley had the last laugh when Secreto (outside) won the 1984 Epsom Derby.



ANNE M. BEBERHARDT/PHOTOS

Beasley and racing official John Veitch

him, what are you accomplishing?

You have to be very pragmatic. So we went back and said, “OK, now we are going to put in the best dirt track.” I went to every racetrack and got five-gallon buckets of sand. We have a very good scientist at the University of Kentucky, and I said, “I want you to study the porosity of all these buckets of sand. We brought in some other experts on sand, because sand can’t be just sand. And, we wanted to keep the excellent drainage.

We tried different kinds and found what would work for this climate. We found something and then did a sand search, and my heart was in my throat because I thought, “They’ll probably find the best sand in Nevada and then I am going to have to explain to the board how we are going to truck this stuff in here. This will be my last hurrah.” But very fortunately, we found some within 100 miles and brought that in. That, plus the drainage we had before, has been very, very excellent. We have had five inches of rain, and the track held up magnificently. Trainers and owners are pleased with the consistency of it. We hired a new track man, Javier Barajas, who had been track man at Arlington and in Dubai. He is a workaholic of the first order. He takes it very much to heart, not only on dirt but he is a turf wizard as well. And we put in a flexible rubber rail on the turf course.

Obviously, the Breeders’ Cup at Keeneland last year was an enormous success from all vantage points. What were the challenges and satisfactions from your specific role?

RB: We had been asked a number of times if we would host the Breeders’ Cup, and we had always said no, for a variety of reasons.

But we realized it was time for the Breeders’ Cup to come “home” — because a vast majority of the funding comes from within a 40-mile radius with the fees from stallions and foals. But we had to make sure it didn’t interfere with the November breeding stock sales. We had to put 1,500 to 1,600 horses on the grounds to sell! Sales are our bread and butter, so we had to sit down with the sales guys and figure out how we could do this. Geoffrey Russell and Tom Thornbury and their team worked very hard to devise how we could get sales horses on the grounds and not impede the race meeting or the stabling of the Breeders’ Cup horses on Rice Road. We had to have them all there at the same time and have people able to go and look at them.

The stabling on Rice Road was perfect: 350 stalls, quiet, good security. We went out and got the National Guard. The horsemen loved those barns, and those that we had to displace, we paid “rent” at places we found for them to move their horses to.

We heard a lot of naysayers, but we were pretty sure we could do this because we had not been averse to bringing up road blocks to each other during meetings: “How would you do this? How would you do that?” So we had stood the test of fire by the time we came out of those staff meetings.

We were over the moon with the two days. The track was in great shape; Javier did a great job with the safety of it. The best horses won, and we were lucky to have American Pharoah as the icing on the cake. We proved we could do it. We wanted it to be the best Breeders’ Cup that has ever been, and we think it was.

When you go overseas and people say how much they enjoyed it, you realize how much Keeneland means to so many people. This place is a standard, set by the founders and brought to great heights by Mr. Bassett, Mr. Greely, and those who have followed. And the city was wonderful. People in Lexington feel like they own this place, and in a way they do. I had somebody come up to say that they were worried about Keeneland being able to put on the Breeders’ Cup successfully. And then he said, “I should never doubt this place.”

What do you think racing's greatest strengths are?

RB: The chance to be close to these wonderful animals. When you are out by the paddock and you see these horses come by and the colorful silks, and then you see them turn for home, it is something you can’t grasp unless you are there. Even if you don’t make a wager but are pulling for the gray or the chestnut and they are making a move on the turn, it is something so hard to describe. Racing has the ability to touch people of all walks of life. I always say if we could ever bottle that emotion, we would have so many owners that we wouldn’t know what to do with them. **KM**



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