



Riley McDonald's attention to detail and his communication skills have given him an edge in the business.



MAN IN MOTION

REILEY MCDONALD MEASURES HIS SUCCESS IN THE FAST-PACED WORLD OF HIGH-STAKES BLOODSTOCK

By Maryjean Wall / Photos by Z

Reiley McDonald is a man in motion. The Keeneland horse sales keep him constantly on the run, tending to clients, checking consignments, taking care of business on the phone, and keeping up with the horses whose success he works so hard to ensure.

Fast horses and stakes winners are McDonald's lifeblood. Long before becoming owner of the full-service Eaton Sales and of Athens Woods Farm, McDonald, 60, entered the horse world as a teenager, exercising racehorses in Maryland for a renowned old-timer from another era, Frank Christmas.

"Being a teenage kid riding racehorses, there's no greater thrill: speed," McDonald said.

A speeding horse beats a sports car any day. And they don't give speeding tickets on the racetrack.

What they do give is coveted black type for graded stakes wins and placings. McDonald has developed a solid reputation for attaining success at the highest level of the sport. This led him to a placement on the Keeneland board of directors. His achievements have come both as a breeder and as a buyer but mostly as an agent consigning horses for clients to the auction ring.

These milestones have included the purchase of Take Charge Lady for \$4.2 million at the 2004 Keeneland November breeding stock sale. Subsequently named Broodmare of the Year, Take Charge Lady produced 2013 champion 3-year-old Will Take Charge and grade I winner Take Charge Indy.

Among a long list of marquee horses handled by Eaton Sales was 2010 Breeders' Cup Ladies' Classic winner Unrivaled Belle, purchased for \$3.8 million by Mandy Pope's Whisper Hill Farm to top the 2016 Keeneland November breeding stock sale. Unrivaled Belle is also the dam of Unique Bella, a multiple graded stakes winner in 2017.

Eaton Sales operates from an office in downtown Lexington. The agency does much more than buy and sell horses, including writing or revising business plans for farms and horse owners as well as advising clients, not only at auctions but also throughout the year. Prominent clients include Elizabeth Moran and her Brushwood Stable, who have been a cornerstone of Eaton Sales since 1988, when McDonald came on board as her Thoroughbred adviser.



Young Thoroughbreds destined for the auction ring benefit from McDonald's sales experience and horsemanship.

The business model is all part of what McDonald garnered from mentors who were horse sales pioneers: Lee Eaton, John Williams, and, most of all, John Finney.

That trio of names represents a history of modern-day horse auctions in a nutshell. Eaton; John Finney; his father, Humphrey Finney; and famed Keeneland auctioneer George Swinebroad, all deceased, established standards for sales agencies and auction rings that today are considered the norm. Before Eaton founded his agency in the mid-1960s, farms generally had acted as their own consignors. As the business of auctioning horses began to evolve in the 1960s, Eaton pioneered the use of professional showmen, prep schedules for the farms, and those ubiquitous call-out cards that everyone fills out before horses are brought from their sales barns to stand or walk for inspection.

McDonald believes it was his good fortune to learn the business from Eaton and Finney, calling them “the two smartest men I could have worked for. Finney was an auction pioneer and Eaton revolutionized the way horses are sold at auction.”

John Williams, a partner for 10 years in the Eaton-Williams sales agency, hired McDonald in the late 1980s and believes among the most important things McDonald learned with the agency were attention to detail and communication with clients.

These would have included “how you set up barns, how you select [sales barn] staff,” Williams said. Eaton-Williams made regular visits to its clients' farms anywhere in the country “to see how the horses were being developed so that when they came to the sale there was uniformity in the consignment: They were fit properly, or what our vision of proper was. Those horses



Athens Woods Farm is home both to McDonald and his mares and foals as well as clients' horses.

didn't look different from the horse next to them. We told people don't pull the manes: We did all that at the sale so they were all pulled just right; the bridle paths were cut just the way they should be, the width of the halter. I had halters custom made for the yearlings.

“Little details like that, Reiley learned all that,” Williams said. “And he's a good people person. He's a good communicator.”

McDonald's education in the sales arena, particularly the auction stand, came from his mentor and friend John Finney. The Finneys were well known throughout the horse world, and John's father, Humphrey, founded *The Maryland Horse* magazine. McDonald was four days past his graduation from Cornell University in 1979, with a degree in animal science and business, when John Finney took him on as an understudy at the Fasig-Tipton Co.

“Every project that came across his desk, I would start,” McDonald said. “Whether it was an appraisal for Spendthrift Farm or Tartan Farm or Bert Firestone or a business plan for somebody who wanted to come into the horse business, whether it was a full evaluation of farm management, I got to do all the leg work. John was a very smart guy, and I learned an awful lot. At the same time John put me with really good horsemen to learn how to look at horses. It's a lot different than if you're riding or training a horse. You're looking for how to get the most out of that animal.”

One significant phase of McDonald's tutelage under Finney was announcing pedigrees and racing updates from the auction stand. “You learn an awful lot about people, about how an auction works, what works, what doesn't work,” he said. “That actually



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

McDonald and former partner Tom VanMeter, right, learned invaluable lessons from Lee Eaton, co-founder of Eaton-Williams.

was my best education for what would be my next career, which would be consigning horses to sales.”

Keeneland Director of Auctioneers Ryan Mahan agreed this background prepared McDonald for a successful career.

“I think as a consignor it aids him in every way to know the rhythm, the momentum that we have at auctions,” Mahan said during a break at the Keeneland September sale. “As an announcer, he would understand what’s important as far as updating [on recent stakes winners in the pedigrees]. And he also gives us information about who might be interested in a horse [the live money]. He might say ‘xyz has been looking at the horse and seemed interested.’ We don’t

want to miss anyone, so we look out for those people who’ve shown an interest to him.”

The auction ring remains the core of McDonald’s business, with his sales consignments for numerous clients. A conversation with him about selling horses is a primer in horse auctions, for this is a world of complicated nuances that might seem difficult to follow. While newcomers might think the auction is a simple process of leading the horse into the ring to be sold, the process is much more layered and unfolds extremely quickly.

Most horses are sold with a reserve, or minimum, price the seller will accept according to the seller’s risk tolerance. And while the auctioneer is calling out in his singsong chant, his mind actually is “three, four, five bids ahead of where their amount is,” McDonald said. “They know where they want to get.”

Good auctioneers are “just that good with numbers,” McDonald said.

McDonald said he meets with the auctioneer before every sale, goes through each horse he has selling that day, and tells the auctioneer what he thinks that horse will bring. He might ask the auctioneer if he can go slowly on a particular horse. “There are different ways to sell every horse, but we sit down and have a strategy session with the auctioneer an hour before each auction,” he said.

While the auctioneer thus adjusts his style to fit a particular horse at the consignor’s request, much more already has occurred at the sales barns before the horse leaves for the ring.

Prospective buyers will ask to inspect the horses they have on their wish lists, sometimes returning two, three, or even more times. McDonald said the goal is to fit the horse with the right

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McDonald's contemporary cabin evokes the feeling of a retreat.

WOODED RETREAT

The fruits of McDonald's success surround him in the woodsy environs of his Athens Woods Farm, located just east of the only intersection crisscrossing tiny Athens in rural Fayette County. McDonald said he carved out the present 110-acre property from a cattle farm to its present-day purpose (originally, he owned 300 acres with partners). The farm houses his mares and their offspring as well as a handful of clients' horses.

Barns (that McDonald designed) are light and airy; horses seem happy; and at the rear of the farm McDonald makes his residence in his happy place: a one-bedroom contemporary cabin he helped design with architect Tom Wilmes of Lexington. The residence, built by Isenhour Inc., would be worthy of a photo layout in any architectural magazine. Pastures and woodlands surround the house. Horses walk up to the fence to receive their anticipated carrots.

Wilmes wrote in an email that his vision for McDonald's house was to create a modern version of a Central Kentucky farm house "that blended natural materials into a high level of details and organization, in a very efficient space." The design had to be efficient: McDonald's house is small, only 1,200 square feet. A guesthouse of 800 square feet is under construction.

"I wanted it to be a space that relaxed both the mind and body," Wilmes said. He worked to create what he described as a strong relationship between interior and exterior "with great views of the land and sunrises." With the house sited at the rear of the farm, Wilmes said he wanted to give the house a feeling of a retreat.

A retreat surely is just what McDonald needs, a place for the man in motion to draw back and relax when he can find time for this rare luxury.

On a tour of the residence, McDonald points out some notable features: beams of Alaskan cedar lining the vaulted ceilings, pegs instead of nails in the beam framing, and incredible storage everywhere, with every inch of space utilized.

In the open kitchen/living area, a small freezer and refrigerator, along with a tiny washing machine and dryer, are nestled behind cabinet doors. A hanging fireplace forms a centerpiece for the living area, with custom-built bookshelves anchoring the opposite end. Large windows are on all sides. Porches, one of them opening off the bedroom, and an inviting patio extend the interior's ambiance outside.



McDonald closely follows the development of the young horses that will go through the auction ring at the major sales.

buyer, so he will adjust his salesmanship to suit the person who is looking.

“Some people want to talk about [the sales horse they are inspecting], and some people are lookers who don’t want to talk about it, who want you to leave them alone,” he said. “Part of it is knowing who to leave alone and who you can talk to. At the same time, when you’re at a horse sale, you’re really working for the buyer as well as the seller. You’re trying to hook a buyer up with a horse that you know they want or you know they would like.”

If McDonald thinks a prospective buyer might have overlooked a horse suited to his needs, he will suggest, “let me just add this horse on because he’s exactly what you normally look for.

“After doing this for so many years, we’ve developed an understanding of what most of our buyers are looking for,” McDonald said. “And you really have to know your sellers as well because you have to know how much risk each owner can take as far as pushing a reserve. You have to know each owner’s business practices and how much risk tolerance they have.”

McDonald says this is where he believes Eaton Sales excels, in “knowing our selling clients really well and having the ability to translate for them how their horse is going to sell and helping them get to the point where it can bring the most money with as little risk as possible.



At Keeneland, McDonald has been a force in the purchase and sale of high-priced horses, including the sale of a \$900,000 Medaglia d’Oro colt at the 2017 September yearling sale.

“It’s the horse business, but it’s all about people,” McDonald said. “I think predominantly this business has a lot of really good people and very trustworthy people. I do a lot of deals with a handshake, and that doesn’t happen in the business world very often.”

Undoubtedly those were skills learned from time well spent with John Finney and Eaton-Williams Sales. Putting it all together keeps the man in motion constantly on the move, in a whirlwind expression of that most difficult art form that is the selling of Thoroughbred racehorses. **KM**