



A bouquet of red roses sits on a white surface next to a small, ornate silver frame containing a photo of a horse race. In the background, a larger, out-of-focus framed picture is visible.

magic touch

BLOODSTOCK AGENT MIKE RYAN,
WHO ENJOYED DERBY AND PREAKNESS
SUCCESS LAST YEAR, HAS HAD A HAND
IN THE CAREERS OF MANY NOTABLE HORSES

By Cynthia Grisolia | Photos by David Coyle

Mike Ryan displays his breeder's
trophy and other memorabilia
from Always Dreaming's
Kentucky Derby.



Inspecting horses on the farms often means navigating fences and other obstacles.



Few aspects of a horse's conformation — good or bad — escape Ryan's scrutiny.

to call Mike Ryan just a bloodstock agent is an understatement.

The 35-plus-year veteran of the Thoroughbred breeding industry does far more than cherry-pick prospects from a sales catalog. He is also a successful breeder and pinhooker — scooping up under-the-radar yearlings to flip at a profit — a successful owner, and a trusted adviser on everything from choosing a trainer to mating a mare. To say he excels at buying horses — well, another underestimation. Ryan has more than a flair for finding a yearling with the right stuff. What he has is more like a prophetic vision: He can eyeball a gangly colt or filly and come up with a pretty clear picture of what the youngster will look like charging down the stretch as a 3-year-old. And never has Ryan's sagacity been more on display than in the past year or so as horses with his name in their provenance have racked up win after win in classic races and Breeders' Cup contests.

Just take a look at 2017. A 2015 Keeneland September yearling sale purchase, Cloud Computing captured the coveted Preakness Stakes. Horses purchased by Ryan took home not one, but two titles at the 2017 Breeders' Cup World Championships. Good Magic won the Juvenile while Rushing Fall took the Juvenile Fillies Turf (following



One of Ryan's talents is envisioning the future racehorse in the foal.

in the footsteps of New Money Honey, another Ryan purchase, who won the same race in 2016). But by far the high point of the year came on the first Saturday in May when Florida Derby winner Always Dreaming, a near-black Bodemeister colt bred by Ryan and his longtime friend and business partner Gerry Dilger, owner of Dromoland Farm, won the Kentucky Derby.

"I mean, winning the Derby, that was ..." Ryan said in a fading voice, unable

to conjure even a remotely appropriate adjective. "It's all part of history now," he added. "His name will always be up on the building at Churchill Downs."

Co-breeding a Kentucky Derby winner was the culmination of a career that has seen well more than 250 stakes winners and eight Breeders' Cup champs.

"All you have to do is look at Mike's roster of tremendously successful clients to understand what rarefied air he travels in at the commercial auction market-

place," said Robert Elliston, vice president of racing and sales at Keeneland. "Those folks invest at a high level and expect a handsome return for that stake, and Mike delivers time and time again."

Ryan's talent for sizing up a good horse was, for all intents and purposes, inherited. He grew up in Ireland, just west of Dublin in County Meath. His parents, both second-generation horsemen, raised Ryan and his siblings on their breeding farm. "We sold yearlings at



Good horses have an aura about them; they're smart. Horses come in all shapes and sizes, but one thing all good horses have is a brain." — MIKE RYAN

Newmarket [England] and all the major sales,” said Ryan in his jaunty brogue. “I was very young, but we were a working family, my brothers and I. It was very natural for me.”

Siren song of Kentucky

Originally, Ryan thought he wanted to be a veterinarian, but the idea of extended schooling didn't really appeal to him. Little did he know that he would, nevertheless, spend his life as a student, learning from the very best in the business.

As a teenager in the late 1960s and early '70s, Ryan began to notice the impact American-bred horses were having in Europe — horses such as Epsom Derby winners Sir Ivor and Mill Reef — and he became intrigued by what was going on across the pond. “Being proud Irish, of course, I thought no horse in the world was as good as an Irish-bred,” Ryan said with a laugh, “but I really wanted to come over and see what I could learn.”

In 1973 Ryan was introduced to renowned breeder E.P. Taylor, and soon after landed a job at Taylor's Windfields Farm in Oshawa, Ontario, Canada, birthplace of legendary sire Northern Dancer. After a few years with Taylor, Ryan joined North American Bloodstock, a Toronto-based company owned by the Canadian breeder and philanthropist Jean-Louis Levesque, who made his mark campaigning such horses as Canadian Horses of the Year La Prevoyante and L'Enjoleur, among others.

But despite Ryan's successes in the Great White North, he had other aspirations.

“I always wanted to come to Kentucky,” said Ryan. “On my summer vacations I'd come down to the Keeneland July sales — Windfields would annually top the sales thanks to the offspring of Northern Dancer — and it was always my dream to return.”

By the late 1970s, Ryan had left the agency and begun working on his own. In 1979 he bought his first yearling for a client from Robert Clay, whose Three Chimneys Farm was then a fledgling operation. Clay would become not only a business associate but a life-long friend and one of the key influences in Ryan's career.

“I bought the horse and asked Robert if I could ship it back to his farm,” said Ryan. “He said, ‘Sure, and why don't you come out and see the farm?’ I did, and we got to talking and became friends. He knew that my ambition was to move to the States, and so he helped me tremendously.”

“I was pretty young at the time, too,” said Clay, “but I was just really impressed early with Mike's work ethic. I had a good feeling about his judgment.”

The Clay family helped Ryan attain his green card and relocate to Lexington. Soon after Ryan and Clay formed their own agency, Top Yield Bloodstock, which stayed in business until the late '80s when Ryan went out on his own and Clay began to devote more time to running Three

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Ryan co-bred Always Dreaming with Gerry Dilger.



Once sales catalogs are published ...



... Ryan will visit up to 55 farms to inspect horses.

Chimneys. “Mike has continued to help me along the way,” said Clay, “giving me good advice on mares to select, then later on colts to look at as stallion prospects. I always was, and I still am, impressed by him,” he continued. “I think he’s one of the hardest-working guys in the business.”

To say “hard working” just might be another one of those understatements. These days Ryan, 64, will look at nearly 3,000 horses annually before deciding on the 80 or so fillies and colts he will purchase for clients or pinhook with his other partner, Florida-based horseman Niall Brennan.

While he divides his time between Lexington and Florida, Ryan says, these days he makes his living mostly at the Keeneland sales. (At the 2017 September yearling sale, for instance, Ryan purchased 16 horses in one day with gross receipts of \$3,350,000.)

He hits the ground running as soon as the catalogs come out. “That’s when I start looking at horses on the farms,” said Ryan, who makes about 55 farm visits before the yearling sales, some days going from dawn ‘til dusk. On the farms the horses are “fresh, happy, and not stressed, so you get an honest read on them,” Ryan said. “I’m thankful to all the farms that show me these horses,” he added. “There’s no doubt that has been a huge part of my success.”

Second sight

When it comes to judging a horse, Ryan considers himself very open-minded and doesn’t always bend to the rules of conformation. “I’ve seen a lot of very good horses that were not correct,” he noted. Still, he does have some firm criteria. “I like horses that are light over the ground. If they walk and hit the ground heavy, they’ll do the same when they’re

galloping. The other thing I look for is what I call the ‘class factor.’ Good horses have an aura about them; they’re smart,” Ryan said. “Horses come in all shapes and sizes, but one thing all good horses have is a brain.”

And while nothing in the horse business is an exact science, one thing is pretty certain: Ryan knows a gem when he sees it. “He’s always had a certain confidence,” said Clay. “If he sees a nice horse, he’s confident it’s a nice horse. He doesn’t have a lot of doubt.”

Those most impressed with Ryan’s diligence are, of course, his clients. Bob Edwards, who entered the racing business in 2015, admits it’s Ryan’s Midas touch that has quickly built his e Five Racing Thoroughbreds from start-up to industry powerhouse. “From day one I didn’t expect to have as much success as we’ve had,” said Edwards, who captured those three Breeders’ Cup races with New Mon-

ey Honey, Rushing Fall, and Good Magic, the latter a colt owned with Stonestreet Stables. "Mike has an unbelievable eye, he really does." Good Magic, a powerful chestnut, has continued to score for the team, earning an Eclipse Award, winning this year's Toyota Blue Grass Stakes over the Keeneland oval, and finishing a game second behind Justify in the May 5 Kentucky Derby.

And Edwards is quick to add that Ryan has done more for him than just sign sales tickets. He has hooked him up with top trainers (such as Chad Brown) and advised him on everything from breaking and development to dealing with injuries. Ryan, clients agree, is great on the follow through. "You buy a horse for somebody, I think it's more than putting the commission in your pocket," said Ryan. "I think it's my job to stay connected."

Like his father before him, Ryan has now spawned a new generation of horsemen within his own family. His wife, Mary, is a teacher at Sayre School in Lexington, but the accomplished horsewoman is often the motor behind the business, moving through the sales ground and handling client rela-

tions with their office assistant, Anna Thompson. And three of his five children have landed key positions in the equine industry. Oldest daughter Sarah is a sales coordinator at Indian Creek Farm in Bourbon County, where many of Ryan's broodmares are boarded. His son, Sean Paul, is an assistant trainer at the Eddie Woods Training Center in Ocala, Florida, while daughter Allaire is the director of sales at Lane's End Farm near Versailles. (The lone hold-out, daughter Emily, is a teacher at The Lexington School while youngest child Amelia is 11.)

The business, it seems, was hard to avoid. "Horses were ingrained in our everyday lives from a very early age," said Allaire. "I worked summer sales ever since I could effectively sweep a broom."

And while she and her siblings have learned much from her successful dad about assessing horses and working a sale, he's passed on to Allaire an even more important lesson: "He instilled in me that in an ever-changing landscape like the Thoroughbred industry, integrity is everything."

And that's something you just can't buy. **KM**



Ryan makes extensive notes in sales catalogs. These catalogs from his archives show notes on the pages of future champions Fusaichi Pegasus and Speightstown.

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Ryan and his wife, Mary, mix business with pleasure at the Keeneland races.



Ryan pick Cloud Computing, outside, won the 2017 Preakness over Ryan-bred Always Dreaming, rail.

winning seasons

Mike Ryan has experienced multifaceted success as a breeder (Kentucky Derby winner Always Dreaming and grade I winner Laragh), an agent, and a top-notch pinhooker, even as an owner. A few highlights from nearly four decades of achievement:

Fly So Free — Bought by Ryan for \$80,000 at Keeneland July for New York theater producer Tommy Valando, Fly So Free capped his 2-year-old season with a victory in the 1990 Breeders' Cup Juvenile and an Eclipse Award as champion 2-year-old male. A favorite for the 1991 Kentucky Derby, Fly So Free finished fifth. He skipped the remainder of the Triple Crown races and instead went on to win the grade 3 Riva Ridge and grade 2 Jim Dandy stakes. Racing until age 5, he retired to stud at Three Chimneys Farm with more than \$2.3 million in the bank.

Caressing — Ryan signed the ticket at the 1999 Keeneland September yearling sale for this daughter of Honour and Glory for \$180,000 for Hermitage Farm's Carl F. Pollard. The filly earned more than \$955,000 and captured the 2000 Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies, the 2001 grade 3 La Troienne Stakes, and the Eclipse Award for champion 2-year-old filly. The gift that has kept on giving, Caressing is the dam of 2017 champion 3-year-old male West Coast.

Saint Liam — The bay son of Saint Ballado was bought by Ryan as a \$130,000 yearling for owner William K. Warren. Saint Liam got on a roll in 2004, winning the grade 2 Clark Handicap, the 2005 grade 1 Donn Handicap, and the grade 1 Stephen Foster. He ended his career with a victory in the 2005 Breeders' Cup Classic, Horse of the Year honors, and a bankroll of more than \$4.4 million.

Hot Dixie Chick — Ryan and partner Gerry Dilger bred this daughter of Dixie Union who sold as a yearling for \$340,000. In 2009 Hot Dixie Chick won the grade 3 Schuylerville Stakes and grade 1 Spinaway Stakes for Barbara Banke's Grace Stables.

Palace Malice — A son of the now-mighty Curlin, Palace Malice was a modestly priced yearling (\$25,000) nabbed by Ryan and pinhooking partner Niall Brennan at Keeneland. He sold at Keeneland's April 2-year-old sale the following spring for \$200,000 to Dogwood Stable. The multiple graded stakes winner took his new owners for a romp on the 2013 Triple Crown trail and into the winner's circle for the Belmont Stakes.

Nyquist — A son of super sire Uncle Mo, Nyquist had a circuitous ownership path, with Ryan sitting smack dab in the middle. Gerry Dilger bought Nyquist in partnership for \$180,000 as a weanling in 2013 (Keeneland November). Dilger's Dromoland Farm consigned him as a yearling, where Ryan and his other partner, Niall Brennan, bought him for \$230,000 (Keeneland September). Brennan and Ryan pinhooked the 2-year-old Nyquist for \$400,000. Nyquist maintained his undefeated record through the Run for the Roses in May 2016.

Hunter O'Riley — Ryan has also had great success as an owner. Co-owned with Sean Shay, the now 5-year-old son of Tiz Wonderful is a graded stakes winner with four victories on his resume. He most recently captured the grade 2 Bowling Green Stakes at Saratoga and will run again in 2018, but, says Ryan, his children already have their eye on him as a future eventer.