



CLASSIC SUCCESS

Training at Keeneland has yielded racing's biggest prizes for this former Olympic show jumper

By Claire Novak | Photos by Anne M. Eberhardt

A typical April morning finds Michael Matz aboard a chestnut stable pony named Messaging accompanying young racehorses to the Keeneland training track. It is a routine that has worked well for the former Olympic medalist, the Lexington oval having served as a springboard to Kentucky Derby and Belmont success. Although Matz bases his string of runners at Fair Hill Training Center in Elkton, Md., he is equally at home in the Bluegrass, where close family ties and an appreciation for high-quality racing keep him coming back year after year.

Matz, 62, has been training racehorses for 15 seasons, having begun his career with Thoroughbreds in 1998 before jumping in full-time in 2000. He is best known as the trainer of 2006 Kentucky Derby winner Barbaro and 2012 Belmont Stakes

winner Union Rags, but when he first visited Keeneland, he was still in the saddle as a top-level equestrian show jumper.

Before turning to the racetrack, the Pennsylvania native rode to six U.S. national championships medaling in such

prestigious events as the World Equestrian Championships, the Pan American Games, and the 1996 Olympics. That year he took home a team silver for show jumping (he was also on the U.S. Olympic equestrian team in 1976 and 1992). He retired in 2000 as the leading money-winning U.S. show jumper in history with earnings of more than \$1.7 million and was inducted into the Show Jumping Hall of Fame in 2005.

"I'm sure I first went to Keeneland either to see Helen's or Mrs. Groves' or a horse of DD's run," said Matz, referring

to the family of his wife, DD Alexander Matz.

DD is the daughter of breeder Helen Groves, whose father Robert Kleberg

owned the famed King Ranch in Texas, and her sister, local horsewoman Helen Alexander, owns Middlebrook Farm near Lexington.



Keeneland served as an important training ground for Union Rags, a highly regarded Triple Crown hopeful in 2012. The colt won the Belmont Stakes.

“We’d go to the sales all the time, and the one thing that worked out great for us with the spring and fall meets is that we’d either be going down to Florida or coming back from Florida,” Matz recalled. “But the first couple of years, I didn’t have horses that I could bring to race at Keeneland.”

As his reputation as a trainer grew, however, the quality of Matz’ stock improved. Three years after striking out full-time, he saddled his first grade I winner in Kicken Kris, who took the 2003 Secretariat Stakes at Arlington Park. Four years after that, he found himself in the Keeneland paddock with 9-1 shot Street Sounds for the 22nd running of the \$250,000 Beaumont Stakes.

The Street Cry filly was a \$400,000 purchase from the 2005 Keeneland September yearling sale for Hidden Creek Farm. Although highly regarded by Matz when making her first start on the dirt at Delaware Park, she finished last of nine, beaten a dismal 57¾ lengths.

“I remember running her that first time; Ramon Dominguez rode her and I told him, ‘Ramon, I think she’s the best filly I’ve got,’ ” Matz recalled. “He came back after they got beat more than 57 lengths and told me, ‘Michael, you might have a long summer ahead of you.’ ”

Switched to turf in the fall of 2006, however, Street Sounds found her stride. After breaking her maiden at Delaware, she ran third in the \$150,000 JPMorgan Chase Jessamine Stakes at Keeneland before winning the Selima Stakes for 2-year-old fillies at Laurel Park.

The Beaumont was her 3-year-old debut and Matz’ first stakes win at the Lexington oval. Street Sounds took down favorite Forever Together, eventual winner of the Breeders’ Cup Filly and Mare Turf and the Eclipse Award as champion turf female.

“She turned out to be a really nice filly, and it’s always special when you buy them at the sale there and come back to win a race. They treat you so nicely at



Matz won the 2011 JP Morgan Jessamine Stakes with Somali Lemonade for sister-in-law Caroline Forgason, far right. Sister-in-law Helen Alexander, left, joined the celebration.

Keeneland; it makes you want to come back for more," Matz remarked.

The trainer did just that in 2008, winning the \$150,000 Rood and Riddle Dowager Stakes with Herboriste, Northern Bloodstock's British-bred daughter of Hernando, and in 2011 when he took the Jessamine with Somali Lemonade, owned by his sister-in-law Caroline Forgason. The latter, a Lemon Drop Kid filly, is coming back from a layup and could appear at the current spring meet.

Matz usually brings between 10 and 20 horses to Keeneland for the spring and fall meets. Reassured by the fact that the Polytrack surface will be ready to go rain or shine, Matz usually ships to Keeneland three or four days before live racing begins.

"Usually you're coming in from Florida. You know you're going to come up and their turf course is going to be good; if it does rain and comes off the turf, you still can run on the Polytrack and there are very few scratches," the trainer re-

marked. "I think the Polytrack works at Keeneland very well."

Matz also appreciates the many ways that Keeneland tries to accommodate horsemen.

"If you take your horse to Keeneland, you know it's going to run," Matz explained. "Usually, if anything, the race overfills, and if it does they really try to make it so that you'll be able to run your horse ... They'll find a race. Some places, you enter and the race doesn't go or you can't get in and that's the end of it. At Keeneland they want to see the horses run, the fans there are just terrific, there are usually big fields and that makes it good with several betting interests, and as a horseman, they make you feel special there."

Although his classic winners did not race at Keeneland, Matz found the Lexington oval a perfect setting for the pre-Kentucky Derby training of both Barbaro, the strapping son of Dynaformer who raced for Roy and Gretchen Jackson's Lael Stable, and Union Rags,

the Dixie Union colt who campaigned for Phyllis M. Wyeth's Chadds Ford Stable. Both put in preparatory breezes at Keeneland in the weeks leading up to the Derby. Although Union Rags did not fare as well beneath the Twin Spires as Barbaro (he finished seventh in the Derby), he found his way to determined victory in the Belmont a month later.

"We were always sure we were going to be able to train the horses. We were never going to miss a morning," Matz recalled of his decision to prep his classic contenders at Keeneland. "You can still get some bad weather in the spring and that could compromise your training at Churchill Downs, but at Keeneland even if it was cold or raining we could get out on the track. It was great for the horses and for convenience's sake, to know if we scheduled a work we were going to work. Both of those horses handled the Polytrack very well, and we were still in time to get over to Churchill and have one work over that track before the Derby."



In addition to a consistent training surface, Keeneland's full fields and enthusiastic fans are draws for Matz.

Kentucky's lush bluegrass also played a key nutritional factor in the springtime development of both horses.

"Those are the things that you can't get at every track," the trainer remarked. "In the spring up there at Keeneland the grass is so good. We want to have that part for them, to go out and graze in the afternoons. It got to the point where the horses looked forward to it. It's like anything else — when you have some success, you don't want to change it."

Assistant Peter Brette concurred.

"What we found first with Barbaro was, when we brought him from Florida to Keeneland, he absolutely thrived," Brette remarked. "He did so well, and so did a lot of the others. It's not humid, the grass is beautiful and lush, and they just seem to

blossom when we take them there."

According to Brette, Matz' approach meshes perfectly with Keeneland's idyllic settings.

"He likes a horse to be a horse, whether it's a racehorse or a show jumper," the assistant explained. "He likes the horse to be turned out and get to graze instead of being stuck in a stall 24-7."

Having horses based at Fair Hill where they train over a similar synthetic surface gives Matz' team a good gauge as to how runners will compete on Keeneland's Polytrack.

Rogers Beasley, vice president of racing at Keeneland, said Matz is the kind of horseman the Lexington oval welcomes with open arms.

"He trains a very high-caliber quality of

horse, and that fits in with our racing program," Beasley remarked. "We're known for our condition book, that it goes, and that's what keeps guys like Michael coming up here. He can earmark races in the book; he knows we're going to fill them and run them with all those kinds of good horses our fans want to see."

"He's patient with his horses like a lot of really good trainers are, and I think that pays off," Beasley said. "He's willing to wait until they're right and happy to run them when they are right. He thinks long-term like a lot of the top trainers do; he knows this is a process. He's made a wonderful transition from Olympic show jumper to training Thoroughbreds, and it's a great pleasure to have him at Keeneland." 