



HE RULES

FOR TOP THOROUGHBRED STALLION  
TAPIT, EVERY DAY IS ON HIS TERMS

By Cynthia Grisolia / Photos by Anne M. Eberhardt

The daily ritual for North America's leading sire consists of a roll in his oversized paddock, meticulous grooming, and presentation to prospective breeders. During the breeding season this routine is augmented by trips to the Gainesway breeding shed.



Rolling and getting as dirty as possible rank among Tapit's favorite activities, according to those who know him.

**If he could, Tapit might tell you the best part of his day is about 7 a.m.** That's when Gainesway Farm's superstar sire is set free in his roughly two-acre paddock — an enclosure designed longer than it is wide to accommodate a good gallop now and then.

The stallion, who is the color of a lightning bolt, exhales some cold January air, surveys his dusky surroundings, and nibbles some grass. But this is all just an overture to the main event, when he'll knock back some ground then stop, drop, and roll in a designated dusty parcel near a tree. "He really likes to roll," noted all of his close handlers.

As mellow as the morning sounds, Tapit's routine is not without its own set of executive orders, which come from the horse himself. He must go out last as he will not tolerate other stallions being paraded in front of his paddock. When it's time to come in, he will not surrender without some reward (a handful of grain will do). He will politely agree to being shown to potential breeders, but don't expect him to acknowledge the common folk. Instead, he will cast his near-black eyes above the crowd.

"He's not hard to get along with at all," insisted Gainesway stallion manager Carl Buckler. "We just figure out what he wants, and we do it."

A Thoroughbred stallion of the highest acclaim, Tapit has earned the right to call the shots. He is the No. 1 commercial sire in North America and has been for three consecutive years.

To date, Tapit's offspring have earned more than a staggering \$109 million on the racetrack (and that number changes as often as a tote board during a telethon).

Among his progeny raking in the bucks in 2016 were not one, not two, but three sons in the Kentucky Derby (one, Creator, went on to win the Belmont Stakes); daughters Pretty City Dancer and Sweet Loretta, who — with equally powered Y chromosomes — dead-heated in the Spinaway Stakes; Ring Weekend, who set a course record in the Bernard Baruch Handicap; and Frosted, whose 14¼-length victory in the Met Mile was considered by many to be the performance of the year.

In the business of breeding Thoroughbreds, Tapit is a superhero, an equine with seemingly godlike powers when it comes to makin' babies. Consequently, he is the highest-priced stallion on the continent with a fee of \$300,000. "He's obviously a brilliant stallion," said Michael Hernon, Gainesway's director of sales. "He has this innate ability to keep producing horses of the highest caliber. He's the golden goose."

A little after 11 a.m. it's time for Tapit to get ready for company. Each afternoon Gainesway offers an open house to potential breeders to peruse the team. The farm's nine stallions include Empire Maker, Hat Trick, and Afleet Alex. Tapit's groom, Pedro Venegas, carries a bucket of grain to the pasture to coerce his charge. Meanwhile, neighboring stallion Hat Trick (whose near-black coat appears like a dark yin to Tapit's silvery yang) is



Once Tapit's requisite roll and pasture time conclude, groom Pedro Venegas leads the stallion back to the barn, where he gets vacuumed and brushed.

snapped with a lead shank but must wait until Tapit is ready to proceed. They walk in simultaneously, respectfully, one behind the other. Said Venegas: "He likes to let you know he's the main guy."

The main guy shares stallion barn No. 4 with his son Tapizar, who is fast becoming a top sire in his own right. Each barn — designed by Gainesway founder John Gaines in 1981 — has the old-world feel of an Italian villa or a Spanish casita: arched wooden ceiling beams, stone walls, terra-cotta tiles. Yet 21st century video monitors keep watchful eyes on the million-dollar residents. If it's cold, Venegas uses an equine vacuum to groom Tapit; in warmer temps, the horse gets a strong hose.

Afterward, Venegas puts Tapit back in his vast 15-by-15-foot stall and takes his temperature, which is done to all of the stallions twice a day to monitor health. Then the leading sire in North America dives into a verdant pile of timothy hay.

"He likes to hit his hay hard," said Ian Tapp, who's in charge of bloodstock development at Gainesway, "and then he'll drift off into this drowsy state."

Indeed, a little while later the horse appears to be in a food coma as he quietly waits until about 12:30, when Buckler's booming voice calls the stallions up as they are requested by visitors: To Honor and Serve! Birdstone! Anchor Down! ... Tapit!

The son of Pulpit out of the Unbridled mare Tap Your Heels, Tapit was a Keeneland sales grad, dropping the hammer at



\$625,000 in 2002 at the September yearling sale — the same arena where today his offspring light up the bid board. Consigned by Fred Seitz/Brookdale Farm, agent for breeder Oldenburg Farm, Tapit was purchased by David Fiske, agent for owner Ron Winchell of Winchell Thoroughbreds. His racing career was brief but memorable: three wins out of six starts, including victories in the Laurel Futurity and the Wood Memorial en route to a trip in the Kentucky Derby. Then Tapit entered stud at Gainesway in 2005, and, as they say, he came out of the box running.

His first crop was highlighted by the flashy champion Stardom Bound, who thrilled crowds with her late-running style while capturing five career grade 1s, including the 2008 Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies. A year later Tapit's fly won the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies Turf, and in 2011 the colt Hansen was the Breeders' Cup Juvenile winner and 2-year-old champion male. In 2014, the first year Tapit topped the general sire list, his daughter Untapable won both the Kentucky Oaks and Breeders' Cup Distaff, and became the champion 3-year-old filly.

This steady stream of winners has earned Tapit top stud fees and top-notch dates with a stellar cast of mares (such as 2010 Horse of the Year Zenyatta and Littleprincessemma, who produced Triple Crown winner American Pharoah), but, say breeders, there's more to him than just a high percentage of stakes winners.

"He's really one of a kind right now," says Whisper Hill Farm owner Mandy Pope, who has bred several of her broodmares to Tapit, including 2009 Horse of the Year Havre de Grace and two-time champion and Breeders' Cup winner Groupie Doll. "For the industry, it's kind of reminiscent of the Northern Dancer era," she added, referring to the 1964 Kentucky Derby winner who is considered one of the most influential sires of the 20th century. "You know, the whole heart and soul of racing is a dream; it's a hope; and you can't control too much of it," Pope added, laughing. "So he offers that brass ring that one day you might produce, or race, or own a stallion that has the potential to be another Tapit."

Catherine Parke, who owns and operates Valkyre Stud in Georgetown, Kentucky, agrees the son of Pulpit is nothing short of a "super sire — in the vein of Mr. Prospector and Danzig. He's certainly not out of a grade 1-winning champion, but there is something very amazing going on," noted Parke, who has raised such winners as turf star Riskaverse and two-time Santa Anita Handicap winner Milwaukee Brew.

More importantly, though, Tapit's success, well, it's helped make America great again. "To have a horse this good is very important to us internationally," said Parke. "Whether he can compete across the water or not doesn't really matter, just like with [European sires] Frankel or Galileo — they don't necessarily become superstars over here. But Tapit waves a flag for us to the Europeans, to the Australians, to the Japanese. It shows the international market that we have a top-class breeding program."

A day in the life of Tapit in January is a lazy one — like a grade schooler on summer vacation. Other than turnout, feeding time, and being shown, his schedule is only occasionally interrupted by, say, a visit from the farrier or a walk to the covered ring, known as the pavilion, to be weighed twice a month (another health-monitoring safeguard). But come the middle of February, it's time to put that dominant DNA back to work.

At Gainesway, breeding is scheduled three times a day beginning at 9 a.m. When a mare is brought to Tapit, it's as if Clark Kent has torn off his specs. The mild-manner horse rolling peacefully in his paddock earlier in the day is transformed into 1,300 pounds of alabaster muscle on a mission. He's not just

powerful; he's aggressive.

"When he's about to breed the mare, you can almost see steam coming out of his nostrils," said Tapp. "In the shed you can see all that intensity and competition that he puts into his offspring." While the session is a workout for the handlers, who must safely harness all that libido, there is no arguing that "he does his job very well," added Tapp.

Perhaps the goal of most breeding farms is that their stallion's few feverish moments in the breeding shed will reverberate throughout the industry for decades. In this respect it appears Tapit is poised to live up to those comparisons to legendary sires.



Tapit expresses his pleasure at the thorough grooming job performed by Venegas.

"You have to believe that he's going to emerge as a very significant broodmare sire," said Hernon. "He's breeding such top mares that his daughters have terrific female lines. I also think the expectation is high that he will be a sire of sires, too."

At the end of his day, Tapit returns to his palatial stall for a good meal — about two quarts of a grain mix that is custom designed for maximum nutrition and weight control — and a good rest.

When Buckler and Venegas head home, night watch staff keeps an eye on things and feeds an early breakfast around 4 a.m. And all will be well until the next day's turnout time as long as everyone remembers one thing: to remove Tapit's showy stallion halter. It seems the oils used to supple the leather will irritate and blister the horse's skin behind his ear and along his cheek. Well, what respectable superhero doesn't have a weakness? **KM**