STAR MAKER

Keeneland's Fall Stars Weekend, more popular and lucrative than ever, has produced numerous Breeders' Cup winners

By Tom Pedulla

hen it comes to substance and style, few events resonate throughout the racing world the way Keeneland's Fall Stars Weekend does.

As the name suggests, the best of the best, human and equine, ventures to Lexington every autumn to compete in a cluster of prestigious stakes races that serve as ideal preparation for the season-culminating Breeders' Cup World Championships.

As the name also suggests, this world-

class three-day racing festival is contested against a breathtaking October backdrop of auburn, maroon, and gold. Or as Bob Elliston, vice president of racing and sales, said, "If God had a paintbrush, he would paint what Keeneland looks like on a prototypical fall day — the grounds, the trees with their colors, the coolness in the air that is typically part of that. It just evokes memories of racing at its very best."

Fall Stars Weekend, which sends the meet to a roaring start, features nine graded stakes, including five Grade 1s, worth \$3.75 million in purses. Eight of those races offer an automatic berth in the Breeders' Cup, to be held at Del Mar on Nov. 3 and 4, as part of the "Win and You're In" Challenge Series.



Hometown favorite Wise Dan wins the 2014 Shadwell Turf Mile after running second the previous year and winning the 2012 edition. The Keeneland race helped set him up for consecutive Breeders' Cup Mile victories, in 2012 and 2013.

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The action begins Friday with the \$400,000 Grade 1 Darley Alcibiades (Juvenile Fillies) and the \$250,000 Grade 2 Stoll Keenon Ogden Phoenix (TwinSpires Sprint).

The \$1 million Grade 1 Shadwell Turf Mile — which more than doubled in value as part of the boom since Fall Stars Weekend debuted in 2001 — provides the centerpiece on Saturday with its automatic entry into the Breeders' Cup Mile. The \$500,000 Claiborne Breeders' Futurity (Sentient Jet Juvenile), the \$400,000 First Lady (Filly & Mare Turf), the \$250,000 Thoroughbred Club of America (Filly & Mare Sprint), and the \$200,000 Woodford Presented by Keeneland Select constitute a compelling undercard. The first three races have achieved Grade 1 status; the last two are Grade 2. The First Lady was added to the Challenge Series for the first time this year.

The \$500,000 Grade 1 Juddmonte Spinster (Distaff) and the \$250,000 Grade 3 Dixiana Bourbon (Juvenile Turf) headline Sunday's card.

The Shadwell Turf Mile and Claiborne Breeders' Futurity will be part of NBC's national telecast on Saturday. NBC Sports Network will air the Juddmonte Spinster and



Winning the First Lady Stakes in 2014 prepares Dayatthespa for a Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Turf victory.



Dixiana Bourbon on Sunday.

The three days jump-start a 17-day meet that extends from Oct. 6-28 and ultimately offers 17 graded stakes worth \$5.325 million. And we do mean jump-start. When Keeneland celebrated its 80th anniversary last year, Fall Stars Weekend attracted a record 66,437 fans leading to a fall meet record attendance of 276,543 spectators, a

hefty daily average of 16,267. On-track handle of \$17,793,419 rose 12.5 percent over fall 2016.

The impact on the surrounding area is equally profound. According to Mary Quinn Ramer, president of VisitLex, hotel rooms for Fall Stars Weekend tend to be scarce. Occupancy reached 96.4 percent last year compared to 71.9 percent the weekend before. Local restaurants and retail stores also bustle with welcome activity.

Fall Stars Weekend is born

Jim Williams, Keeneland's former director of communications, said circumstances dictated a sweeping change in the calendar that created Fall Stars Weekend.

"The racing office decided to consolidate the best races on one weekend, and it was necessitated by the fact that the Breeders' Cup was three or four weeks away. The Spinster used to be at the end of the meeting, for instance, and other races were on Saturdays throughout the race meeting," Williams said. "Well,



Runhappy wins the 2015 Breeders' Cup Sprint after his victory in Keeneland's 2015 Stoll Keenon Ogden Phoenix Stakes.

with the Breeders' Cup and those races serving as prep races for the Breeders' Cup, almost of necessity they needed to be earlier in the meeting. So it was decided to run them all on three days and make almost a festival out of it."

As for the name, Kip Cornett of Cornett Advertising, which has long handled

the iconic track's advertising and marketing, describes that as a typical team effort.

"Everybody at Keeneland and in our company was kicking around how we let people know that this is the best of the best.





Left, trainer Charlie LoPresti is congratulated by Shadwell's Rick Nichols after Wise Dan's 2012 Shadwell Turf Mile victory.

In a lot of sports, they refer to the best of the best as All-Stars," Cornett said. "Then we kind of went from there. We didn't want to call it All-Stars Weekend. Understanding we have spring and fall meets, what if we call it 'Fall Stars Weekend?'"



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Trainer Mark Casse targeted the Claiborne Breeders' Futurity for Classic Empire, right, last fall.





It paid off with a victory in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile and a year-end championship.

Discussion ended there. As far as branding was concerned, they knew they had struck gold. "I guess it is a bit of a testament that it stood the test of time," Cornett said. "People get it. It's simple. I do think it's been effective."

From a racing perspective Keeneland struck gold as well. The event invariably provides a glimpse at the Breeders' Cup. Since the championship began in 1984, the winners of 45 Breeders' Cup races, including stars such as Wise Dan and Groupie

Doll, steeled themselves for that international competition by proving their mettle in the race before at Keeneland.

From a business standpoint, Fall Stars Weekend benefits from sponsors that became involved for all of the right reasons.

"Through these partnerships with Keeneland, our sponsors are supporting the entire Thoroughbred industry. That is a very important element to them," said Bonnie Senft, Keeneland sponsorship director. "They are investing in the community, the state, and an industry that is so integral for all of us."

Senft added, "Both Keeneland and our partners derive benefits from combining our brands, and this value is borne out in the longevity of our relationships."

No entity is more unwavering in its support than nearby Shadwell Farm, on course to sponsor the Turf Mile for the 20th consecutive year next season. Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the deputy ruler of Dubai and Shadwell's



Groupie Doll ran third to Judy the Beauty, right, in Keeneland's 2013 Thoroughbred Club of America, then turned the tables in the Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Sprint.





Groupie Doll also won the 2012 Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Sprint after a successful prep in Keeneland's Thoroughbred Club of America Stakes.

owner, was so eager to be included in the event that he dispatched his representatives to Keeneland.

Rick Nichols, Shadwell's vice president and general manager, said Sheikh Hamdan targeted the Turf Mile because of his affinity for that surface and his conviction that horses that succeed at a mile often make the finest stallions and broodmares.

Nichols sees no end to Shadwell's involvement, which helped the Turf Mile become Keeneland's first \$1 million race in 2015.

"As long as we're here, we'll be sponsoring it," he said. "Sheikh Hamdan really enjoys the race. He always watches with great interest."



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Perfect prep

The Shadwell Turf Mile and other major races held on Fall Stars Weekend have emerged as annual targets for many prominent trainers when they plot their course to the Breeders' Cup. Ben Huffman, Keeneland's racing secretary, believes that is relatively easily explained.

"There are a lot of reasons," he said. "But, first and foremost, Keeneland is known for such a good racing surface, both the main track and the turf, and the competition is so good. You're competing against the best, you're seasoned, and by the time they get to the Breeders' Cup with a good stiff prep at Keeneland, they're just ready."

Dora Delgado, senior vice president of racing, nominations and on-site operations for the Breeders' Cup, said of that event's relationship with Keeneland, "They set it up perfectly for us. Almost a third of the runners that start in the Breeders' Cup World Championships have had a start at Keeneland at some point in their careers, and a lot of them are coming off prep races during Fall Stars."

Classic Empire and Tourist added their names to that list a year ago. Classic Empire used a victory in the Claiborne Breeders' Futurity as a springboard to success in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile at Santa Anita. Tourist's third-place finish in the Shadwell Turf Mile lifted him to victory in the Breeders' Cup Mile.

Mark Casse, Classic Empire's trainer, greatly prefers prepping 2-year-olds at Keeneland rather than at New York's Belmont Park as Belmont's mile-and-ahalf track limits juveniles to one turn.

"At Keeneland, they are getting twoturn experience, which then helps them to go on to the Breeders' Cup, where it is a two-turn race," Casse said. "So that is extremely important to us."

The Breeders' Futurity was critical for Classic Empire because he was coming off a misadventure in the Hopeful. He wheeled and dumped jockey Irad Ortiz Jr. at the start of that race. The Pioneerof the Nile colt was given more gate schooling



and was equipped with blinkers for the first time leading to the Futurity.

When everything clicked at Keeneland, Casse knew he was sitting on go in the Juvenile. "I felt after the Futurity that we were the horse to beat out in California," he said.

He was equally confident after Tepin parlayed a seven-length romp in the First Lady into a stirring victory against the boys in the Breeders' Cup Mile in 2015, the first time the Breeders' Cup came to Keeneland.

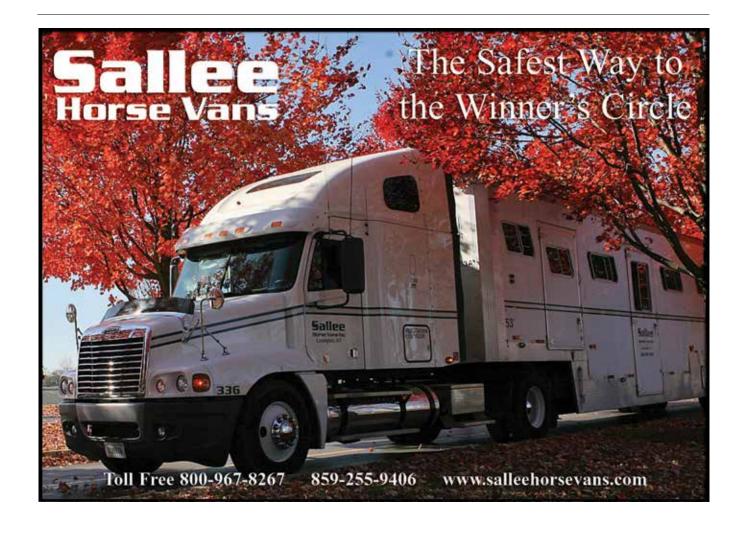
Wise Dan emerged as Horse of the Year in 2012 and 2013. Each time the Shadwell Turf Mile played an integral role. His geared-down Shadwell Turf Mile victory





Wise Dan won consecutive runnings of the Breeders' Cup Mile for Morton and Elaine Fink.

in 2012 led to a peak performance in the Breeders' Cup Mile, where he turned back Kentucky Derby winner Animal Kingdom and set the course record with a time of 1:31.78. Although he placed second in the Shadwell Turf Mile the next season when heavy rain forced the race to be moved off the grass, he still got what he needed to



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Left, Tourist finished third in the 2016 Shadwell Turf Mile, then won the Breeders' Cup Mile; above, Take Charge Brandi finished eighth in the 2014 Darley Alcibiades before annexing the Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies and selling at Keeneland a year later for \$6 million.

repeat in the Breeders' Cup Mile.

The dream of having another Wise Dan drives trainer Charlie LoPresti, who owns Forest Lane Farm in Lexington, where the two-time Horse of the Year now resides. "I would hope to have another horse someday that could compete in those major races on Fall Stars Weekend," Lo-Presti said. "There's nothing like it."

William "Buff" Bradley pondered major races at Keeneland almost from the instant Groupie Doll was born at his Indian Ridge Farm

in Frankfort, Kentucky. "Before she ever stood up, we were thinking 'This is what we've been waiting for," " Bradley said. "She was a nice, big filly."

Groupie Doll strung together victories in the Thoroughbred Club of America



After winning the 2014 Keeneland Phoenix Stakes, Work All Week won the Breeders' Cup Sprint.

Stakes and the Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Sprint in 2012. After a third-place finish in the Thoroughbred Club of America the next year, she successfully defended her Breeders' Cup title.

Bradley said of Groupie Doll's participa-

tion in the Thoroughbred Club of America, "That was the only option on the radar. Sure, there were other races you could have gone to. But we were stabled at Churchill Downs and we didn't have far to go. An hour and a half down the road and we were ready to run. We were in our own backyard, and we felt pretty good about that."

The future of Fall Stars Weekend appears to be blindingly bright. It will only help that Churchill Downs will host the Breeders' Cup in 2018. Elliston ultimately envisions a Fall Stars Weekend that increases in worldwide appeal.

"There are recruiting efforts we are going to undertake to draw international horses to that weekend," Elliston said.

Just when it seemed as if Fall Stars Weekend could not get much bigger, it may do just that. KM

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Hand-smocked racing motifs decorate the dresses and "Jon Jon" of the limited-edition collection.

KEENELAND, BEAUFORT BONNET UNVEIL SPECIAL CHILDREN'S COLLECTION

ressing for the races is a time-honored Keeneland tradition. And the tradition starts at a young age.

Understanding this youthful fashion awareness, The Keeneland Shop has teamed with The Beaufort Bonnet Company to produce a limited-edition Keeneland collection for children.

Keeneland Director of Retail Kyle Cassin said the shop will carry three clothing styles. Though the shop has been carrying Beaufort Bonnet items, Cassin said, "It's the first time we have ventured into a custom line with them. We worked with their designers to create a special-edition Keeneland collection of The Beaufort Bonnet for fall."

The Beaufort Bonnet's strong local connection and loyal following make the collaboration a natural. "We think it's going to be really special for our patrons at Keeneland and for the public," he added.

The Beaufort Bonnet owner and designer Markey Hutchinson is a Lexington native and descendant of Jack Keene, the visionary horseman whose property became present-day Keeneland. She relayed that when a Beaufort Bonnet sales rep met with a Keeneland Shop buyer, the rep mentioned Hutchinson was related to the founder of Keeneland and that her family had inhabited the old Keene Place for many, many years. "That conversation led to the idea of designing a special custom collec-

tion that would only be offered at The Keeneland Shop and on The Keeneland Shop website," Hutchinson said.

Fittingly, the initial collaboration includes a Jack Keene "Jon" or a romper. There are two dresses as well.

"Keeneland embodies tradition and classic style in everything from architecture to interior décor. While horse racing has always been the focus, fashion has unquestionably been a close second," Hutchinson said. "The Keeneland Shop is frequented by people near and far wanting to bring a piece of the high society/equestrian lifestyle home — and purchasing fine apparel

and gifts is an excellent way of doing so."

Hutchinson acquired a South Carolina-based concern that specialized in heirloom bonnets and renamed it The Beaufort Bonnet Company. From its hallmark bonnet, Hutchinson has expanded the line to glowing reviews in major publications and now sells in 300 retail locations as well as online.

The Keeneland limited-edition styles range from \$75 to \$90. As Cassin reminds patrons: "There's a limited quantity available and when it's gone, it's gone."

The Keeneland Shop and Hutchinson look forward to working together again. "We hope to collaborate again for spring 2018 and would like to offer even more limited-edition items for the smallest of race fans," she said. KM



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