

STAR MAKER

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

By Tom Pedulla

When 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.

KEENELAND/PHOTOS BY Z





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.



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 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



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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 ge of 16,267. On-track handle of \$17,793,419 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.

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,



ANNEX M. EPERVA PONT

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.



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

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



PHOTOS BY Z

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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ANNE M. EBERHARDT

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

When everything clicked at Keeneland, Casse knew he was sitting on gold 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.

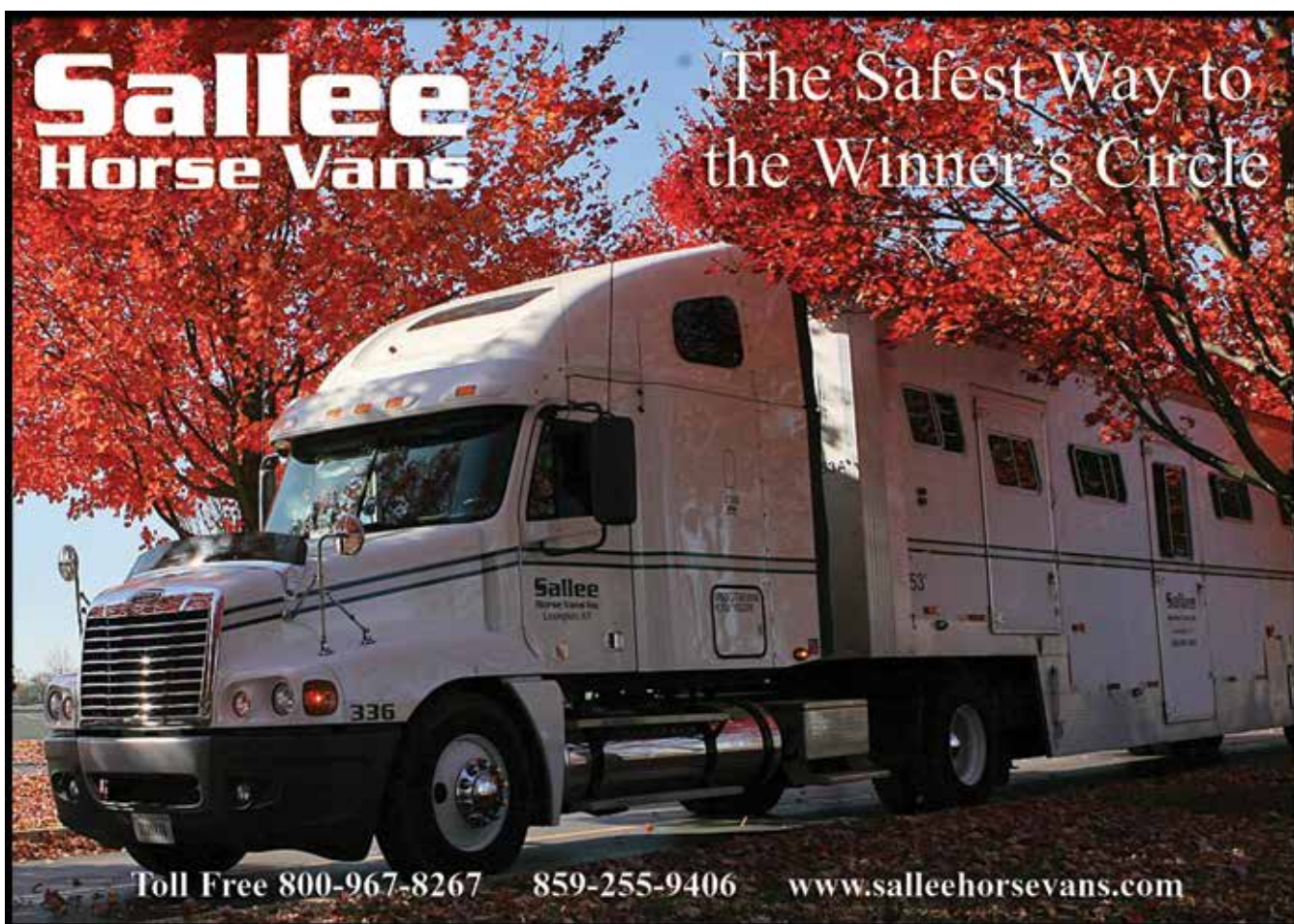
in 2012 led to a peak performance in the Breeders' Cup Mile, where he turned back Kentucky Derby winner Animal Kingdom and set the course record with a time of

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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