



Winning HIS WAY

*Keeneland-Based Trainer
Charles Lopresti Is “Red Hot”*



By Cynthia Grisolia | Photos by Anne M. Eberhardt

It's a crisp January morning on the Keeneland backstretch. The sun isn't up yet, and most of the barn area is a veritable ghost town. But over on Rice Road, barn 62 is already a beehive of activity. Buckets are being scrubbed, hay nets filled, and horses saddled — their pads displaying a cursive capital “L,” much like the one Penny Marshall always sported on her sweaters in the sitcom *Laverne & Shirley*.

Charles and Amy Lopresti prepare many young horses at their Forest Lane Farm once morning work at Keeneland is over.

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A few of the horses will just walk the shed row today. Others will make their way in the darkness up the hill to the training track. Maybe they will breeze, maybe jog. “I don’t like to train by the calendar but [instead] by what the horse needs,” said Charles Lopresti, the “L” in charge of the 20 Thoroughbreds here. “I always say, ‘A horse should not sit in his stall and know that Day Six is breeze day.’”

There are other things the 54-year-old trainer doesn’t like. He doesn’t like to travel much; he doesn’t like to race in the winter much; and he’d rather go fishing than talk about horse racing — unconventional behavior for a man who’s currently succeeding at the sport’s highest levels. But there isn’t much about Lopresti that’s conventional. What does he like? Racing in Kentucky, breaking yearlings using skills picked up from the cowboys of the Great Basin, and — if the past 24 months are evidence — winning races.

As a trainer, Lopresti is, as they say, “red hot.” Since the summer of 2010 when Here Comes Ben, a homebred for Marianne and Brandon L. Chase, galloped to victory in the Forego Stakes



The Loprestis believe that early lessons on the farm, including gate work, make for better-minded horses at the track. Above, Turallure (left) and Wise Dan go for morning exercise at the Keeneland training track.

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at Saratoga — Lopresti's first ever grade I win — the stakes have kept on coming.

After the Forego, Lopresti went on to earn the leading trainer title at the 2010 fall meet at Keeneland — his year-round home turf — with six wins over the course, including the Fayette Stakes and the Phoenix with Morton Fink's half sibling homebreds Successful Dan and Wise Dan, respectively. The winning season prompted *Daily Racing Form's* Byron King to quip: "Charlie Lopresti loses races occasionally. He must, really ... I just can't seem to remember when."

And it wasn't over yet, even though Ben and Wise Dan finished unplaced in the 2010 Breeders' Cup, Lopresti's first. The day after Thanksgiving, Successful Dan won the Clark Handicap at Churchill Downs but was disqualified.

In 2011 the trainer had a second banner season although Here Comes Ben was retired and Successful Dan was sidelined with an injury. Turallure, another homebred, this one for Donna Arnold's Four D Stables, gave his connections the thrill of victory in the Bernard Baruch Handicap and the Woodbine Mile Stakes. The horse also suffered the agony of defeat when he blew past three-time Breeders' Cup champ Goldikova only to lose the Breeders' Cup Mile by a hair to 64-1 shot Court Vision. "It was so heartbreaking; it was so close," said Arnold, who, like Lopresti, believed the horse had won. "But to tell you the truth, just getting to the Breeders' Cup was a dream."

And Wise Dan picked up his injured bro's proverbial slack by also crushing the competition in the Fayette and the Clark.

If you ask him about his streak, Lopresti says he's just been lucky. "This whole business is luck," he said. Perhaps, but Lopresti's loyal owners would disagree. Said Fink: "The horse comes first with him. And when Charlie's horses run, they're at their best."

"Charlie has the right idea," added Marianne Chase. "He has a very strong opinion, and he knows the horses. I think he speaks to them."

A native of Brooklyn, N.Y., Lopresti has been around horses "as long as he can remember." His uncle had hansom cabs in New York City and once allowed the preteen Charlie to drive Gov. Hugh Carey's daughter on her wedding-day carriage



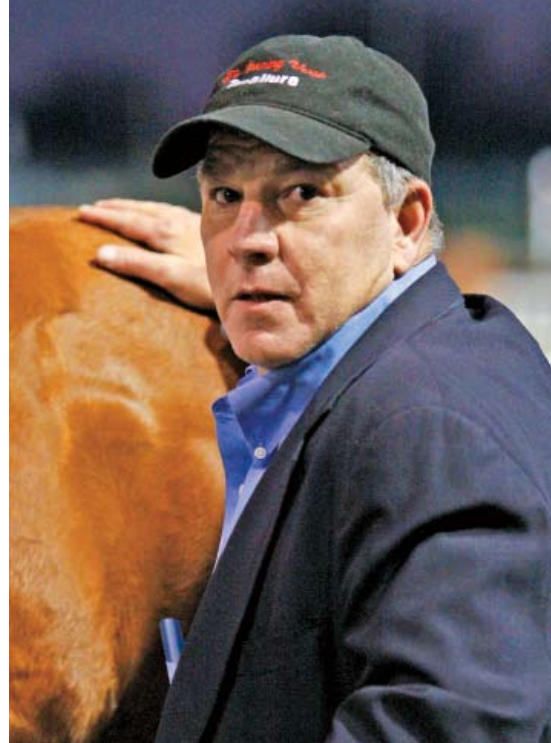
The Loprestis spend plenty of time in the saddle and enjoy cutting and roping.

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ride. Lopresti went on to show hunters and jumpers, and even then the seeds of an equine career were sprouting. “I remember I was no more than 12 and I had my own pony,” he said. “I used to give pony rides. I charged 50 cents to go around the block.”

When he was about 18, Lopresti was lured by the idea of racehorses and got a job working for trainer Joe Cantey at Belmont. “But I wanted to learn about how things were done on the breeding farm,” he said.

So Cantey hooked him up with Ted Carr at Domino Stud in Lexington, Ky. It was there Lopresti met his wife and now training partner, Amy Featherston. A stint as an assistant manager at Allen Paulson’s Brookside Farm followed, but in 1990 Charles



and Amy Lopresti decided to launch their own business: Forest Lane Farm. Around the same time, Lopresti was offered what turned out to be the most propitious opportunity of his career. “Neil Howard, the general manager of Calumet, called and asked if I would be interested in running the training operation there,” said Lopresti, “so I took that job and Amy kept running the farm.”

Lopresti started breaking horses for new Thoroughbred owners Bob and Beverly Lewis. Their eventual Horse of the Year Charismatic would be raised at Forest Lane. “The first winner



Above, owner Morton Fink, jockey Julien Leparoux, and Lopresti shared the winner’s circle after Wise Dan’s victory in the 2011 Fayette Stakes at Keeneland. Right, the gray Turallure finished a close second to Court Vision in the 2011 Breeders’ Cup Mile.



I ever had was for Bob Lewis,” said Lopresti. “It was a horse named Competitive Edge. We got him ready at our farm, and Mr. Lewis said, ‘Why don’t you just take that horse and race him?’ That’s when I took out a trainer’s license [in 1994], and he was my very first winner.”

Henryk de Kwiatkowski, the late owner of Calumet, was so impressed he asked, “Why is that boy — he always called me ‘that boy’ — not training for us?” said Lopresti. “He told me to pick out four 2-year-olds to train. One of them was Mariuka. She was my first stakes winner at Keeneland.”

Winner-circle visits aside, Lopresti concedes his early days as a trainer were tough. “I only had six horses starting off here at Keeneland and thought I would never get any real good horses,” he said. “But I persevered. And the horses started turning around.”

To this day Lopresti counts the late Bob Lewis and Carr as his strongest mentors, but the trainer’s deeper horse sense, he will tell you, comes from a less traditional source. And it seems Marianne Chase just may have been right about talking with the animals.

In the late 1990s Lopresti attended a clinic taught by Buck Brannaman, the real “horse whisperer” behind Robert Redford’s 1998 film, who became even more popular last year with the release of the documentary *Buck*. “I was intrigued with how those guys were doing stuff, so I started going out to Nevada and Oregon,” said Lopresti. “We broke a lot of horses when I worked for Mr. Paulson, and I thought nobody was better at it than me. Then I started going around Buck and watched as 4- or 5-year-old colts that only had 10 rides in them were already branding calves.”

Lopresti brought the ways of the whispering West east and applied them to racehorses, developing a program that includes round-pen and arena work, rides through herds of cows (Lopresti also raises beef cattle), starting-gate training, and lots of turnout. The program, says Amy Lopresti, gives the horses “a lot of exposure and they’re much better socialized.” As a result, the horses are hearty but not so hotheaded.

“Being around Buck, I learned there is a better way horses should behave,” continued Charles. “Whether it’s a grade I winner or a cutter, you can’t do your job on them when they’re

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fly-leaping all over. And so many good racehorses are ruined because people don't take the time to do that."

Lopresti and Brannaman are still good friends and visit each other often. Another of Lopresti's "buckaroos" is Frank Dominguez, a well-known roper from Oregon. Dominguez and his partner, Jymme Martin, spend a few months at Forest Lane every fall breaking horses. "It's really formed the basis for our colt starting," said Lopresti.

Back at Keeneland's barn 62 the sun is finally shining, and Lopresti is introducing his 2-year-olds. "Oh, there goes Successful Dan's and Wise Dan's little sister, Enchanted Lisa," he said, gleefully pointing out the dainty filly as if she's a celeb on the red carpet. Lopresti is most comfortable here at Keeneland. He and his wife have based their stable at the jewel box of a racetrack for the past 10 years, and to them it's simply "home," said Amy



Lopresti. "It's just very horse-friendly here."

Forest Lane is less than a 30-minute drive from the Keeneland backstretch, and the couple spend their mornings at the track before returning to their yearlings, cattle, and Quarter Horses on Forest Lane's 200 or so acres. The Keeneland amenities — round pens, fields for riding — are a natural progression of the Lopresti scheme of things.

And while some will argue the virtues of Keeneland's all-weather track, Lopresti says he can't get enough of it. "I know there's been talk about the better horses don't come, but look at what Blame did here [he won the Fayette in 2009]. He went to Saratoga, went to the Breeders' Cup. Look at what my horses have done here."

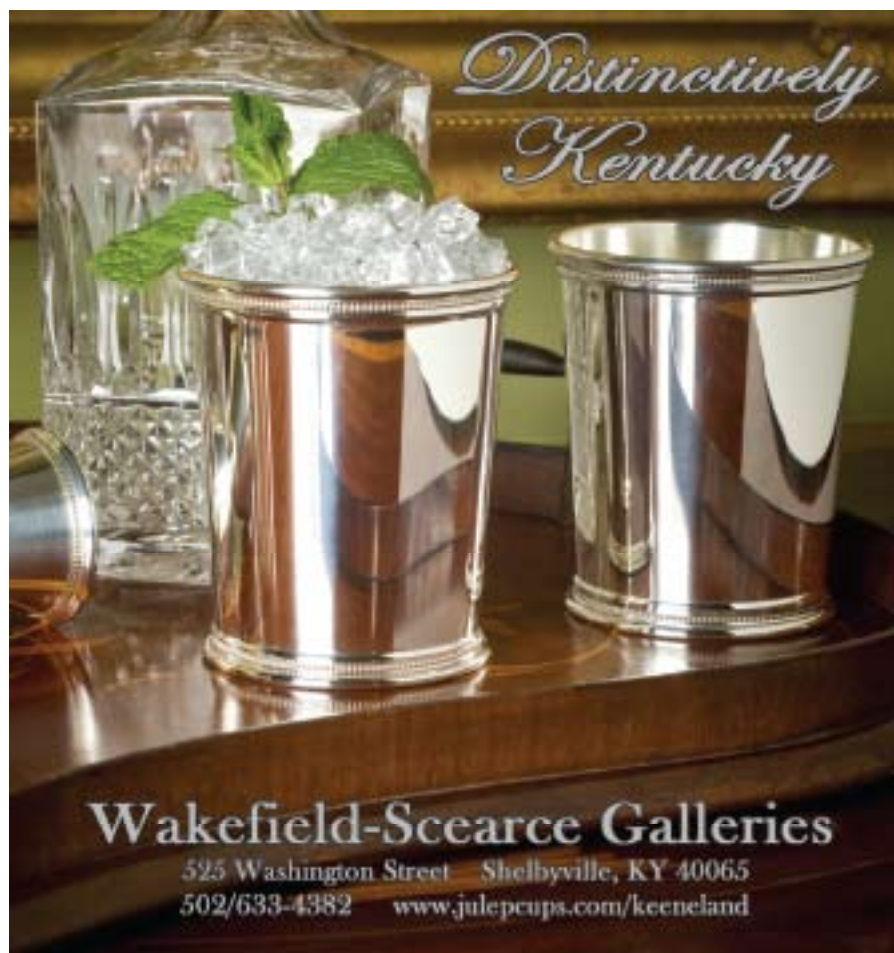
The home-turf advantage has certainly given Lopresti his greatest triumphs. "Successful Dan has never lost at this track," he noted proudly.

According to Keeneland director of racing Rogers Beasley, the venue and Lopresti are a match made in horse heaven. "We so appreciate Charlie being here," said Beasley, who notes that with homebodies such as Lopresti and trainer Rusty Arnold and farms such as Darley pitching their tents here, the track is now realizing a long-planned goal: "Bringing in quality horses that stay with us for the majority of the year."

Even when Keeneland-based trainers win elsewhere, Beasley added, it's a great reflection on the track. "It proves that the horseman we have can compete nationwide at top levels."

The New Year had barely dawned when Lopresti scored his first win of 2012. Elusive Action, owned by the Bob and Beverly Lewis Trust, captured a six-furlong claiming race at Turfway Park. Still, Lopresti says he has set no markers for the coming season. "You take it as it comes," he stated. "I just hope people keep giving us horses and the horses stay healthy."

With Lopresti in charge, you can just about bet on it. 🐾



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