

NOT BUSINESS AS USUAL

By Cynthia Grisolia | Photos by David Coyle



Keeneland, horse industry adapt to pandemic times



After canceling its
spring meet in April,
Keeneland conducted
racing without fans
during an unprece-
dented summer meet
July 8-12.

Usually on opening day in April, Keeneland Race Course welcomes fans from across the country for its boutique, 16-day race meet. The spring event attracts thousands of people to Lexington's popular oval to admire the blooming cherry blossoms, sip a bourbon or two, and witness such top-notch contests as the \$1 million Toyota Blue Grass Stakes, an important prep for the just-around-the-corner Kentucky Derby.

But there was nothing at all usual about April 2020, as the nation fell prey to the COVID-19 pandemic that has, through early August, taken the lives of more than 160,000 people in the United States and changed, perhaps for a long time, the way we live. It certainly has changed, at least for the present, the way we race.

In March, in response to the spreading virus, the bricks of mainstream sports rapidly began to crumble. On March 11, baseball, golf, and basketball suspended coming seasons. Within hours, horse racing followed with its own announcements eliminating patrons at tracks across the country. A few days later, racing's biggest blocks collapsed: Churchill Downs postponed the running of the Kentucky Derby, rescheduling the iconic event from the first Saturday in May to Sept. 5. And Keeneland announced it would not conduct its spring meet, slated to launch April 2.

"It was truly a heartbreaking decision," said Vince Gabbert, vice president and COO of Keeneland. "But in communicating with officials, we knew we didn't have a choice. Race meets in Louisiana and Florida were wrapping up, and cases were already spiking," Gabbert added. "In another week we would have brought all of that into Central Kentucky. We knew we needed to make that decision for the greater good."

Righteous as it was, the shuttering of Keeneland — culturally, a hallmark of the season — was, for many, like the loss of an old friend. "I don't think I've ever been so depressed," said Suzanne Mundy, who, with her husband, Dr. George Mundy, operates Canamer Farm, a mom-and-pop breeding-racing operation in Lexington. "This is probably the longest period in my life that I have not been to a racetrack. But with Keeneland closing ... it was just devastating," Mundy said. "The meet has been such a huge part of my life, even growing up." Mundy said that it was so upsetting



With an empty grandstand behind him, bugler Steve Buttleman calls horses to the post during the summer meet.



Keeneland's Gate 1 has remained closed since mid-March. Anyone entering through other gates must undergo medical screening and wear a face covering.

that she would sometimes drive up Lexington's Rice Road and park outside Keeneland's back gate to watch horses from afar.

To ease the pain — and recoup purse money for horsemen — Keeneland made a request to the Kentucky Horse Racing Commission to hold a summer meet. The request was quickly approved, and on May 27 plans for five days of live racing in July went forward. What happened in between, however, not only underscored the integrity but also the tenacity of horse racing and horse people.

Soldiering on

While the outbreak unsettled race schedules, other facets of the industry had no option but to soldier on. The care, training, and breeding of Thoroughbreds await no human — or disease. So for those on the front lines, for whom work-at-home orders were not viable, business went on, even if business now included rubber gloves, N-95 masks, and standing six feet from coworkers.

With the crisis growing grim, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture's Office of State Veterinarian, led



Wearing personal protective equipment, Spendthrift Farm groom Alex Marcias leads Goldencents to the breeding shed.



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Rusty Ford, the state's equine operations consultant, helped the industry establish best practices.



Dr. Natalie Heitz, a field vet with Hagyard Equine Medical Institute, says the industry by its nature has been well prepared for the pandemic.

by equine operations consultant Rusty Ford and veterinarian Dr. Bob Stout, worked at a rapid-fire pace to compile a set of best practices, issued on March 24, designed to stem the spread of the virus while keeping the horse industry afloat. It outlined safety protocols for farms, clinics, and breeding sheds. Things such as temperature checkpoints, limited staff, usage of personal protective equip-

ment, equipment sanitizing — from lead shanks to vans — and social distancing became paramount. Zoom sessions, FaceTime, and video replaced meetings, stallion shows, and, in some cases, even non-critical veterinary visits.

When the pandemic hit at the height of the multimillion-dollar breeding season in Kentucky, there was “true concern,” said Sandy Hatfield, stallion manager

at Three Chimneys Farm, which stands 2017 Horse of the Year Gun Runner. “But we were lucky to have Rusty working on our behalf. The work he did with the state veterinarian and the secretary of agriculture to get the protocols up and in everyone’s hands in a very short period is a testament to the love of the horse and of our industry,” Hatfield said.

Hall of Fame trainer Bob Baffert, who



DUBAI RACING CLUB/MATHEA KELLEY

Horses from around the world already had arrived in Dubai when officials canceled the Dubai World Cup.

is based on the West Coast where COVID cases were far more numerous, also noted that while there were minor changes in training game plans — such as fewer breezes — there was really no choice but to maintain status quo. “Horses have to go out for exercise every day,” said Baffert. “And we already practice most of the protocols put in place. Grooms wear masks to protect against dust; we sterilize racing equipment after every use; and, by nature, horses need a lot of space and distance to navigate. Plus, as a trainer, you’re always on alert for viruses that could spread through your barn.”

Indeed, if anyone were prepared for a pandemic, it just might have been the horse industry. “To horse people, all of this is not new,” said Dr. Natalie Heitz, a field veterinarian with Hagyard Equine Medical Institute in Lexington. “With horses, it’s all about herd health. Horse people are always looking to eliminate the possibility of disease — whether it’s an outbreak of strangles or herpes. This time,” added Heitz, “the pandemic affected humans, so now it’s just a different herd we’re looking out for.” Heitz even noted that the body length of an average Thoroughbred is, well, six feet.

Harder hit

Still, some businesses felt the COVID-19 burn more than others. One was global equine transport, a linchpin of the industry. According to Chuck Santarelli of Mersant International Ltd., it

was not safety protocols but travel bans that threw a wrench into the works. “The issue we faced was having an American groom on board planes,” he said, noting that it is standard practice to ship horses overseas accompanied by trained personnel. “We were not allowed into certain countries. So a groom could ship in with a cargo plane but not get off the aircraft,” said Santarelli.



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Mersant International’s Chuck Santarelli, left, with his brother, Joe, says equine transport has been challenging.

When officials in Dubai announced the cancellation of the Dubai World Cup, slated for March 28, Mersant faced a particularly demanding challenge. Twenty-seven horses had already made the nearly 7,000-mile journey to Meydan Racecourse — among them American runners Tacitus, Sir Winston, War Story, and Mucho Gusto — and they needed to return. “Information was changing by the minute as to what was going to be allowed and what wasn’t,” said Santarelli.

“All the grooms we were using were

European, and they were now not allowed into the U.S., so we had to scramble and send four Americans to Dubai. It was a very stressful period, but the horses got home safely,” added Santarelli, praising the Dubai World Cup Committee and the Dubai government for invaluable assistance. “Without their help we don’t get it done.”

Non-profit Thoroughbred aftercare facilities also found themselves in dire straits as social distancing rules and a failing economy threatened their missions. “Since this virus, donations have all but halted,” said Lynne Sullivan of the Oklahoma-based Thoroughbred Athletes Inc., which retrain and rehomes off-track Thoroughbreds. “Also, we have not put on fundraising events due to social distancing so we are working at half the income for twice the horses.”

Similarly, at Old Friends, the Thoroughbred retirement facility near Georgetown, Kentucky, the crisis froze its public tourism — and the revenue that comes with it. “It came at a time when we have the most visitors, raise the most money, and raise the most awareness,” said Old Friends’ Michael Blown.

Sullivan noted that the organization adapted as necessary, simplifying daily routines in order to keep up quality care with fewer volunteers. Old Friends, like others, turned to social media, implementing “virtual tours” to keep supporters engaged, along with online fundraising and mail campaigns.



Old Friends' Barbara Fossum takes the temperature of a visitor to the Thoroughbred retirement facility. Right, Old Friends alerts visitors to the requirements.



This time it's personal

But as the industry persevered under the cloud of the pandemic, owners, fans, and breeders found themselves victims of an unforeseen byproduct of the times: separation anxiety. Mundy said she was suddenly cut off from her 6-year-old race mare On Probation. "We sent her on a two-week vacation in Florida, but two weeks turned into almost three months," she said. When travel restrictions lifted and the mare returned, owners were still not allowed on most track grounds. "The only way I could see her was through a chain-link fence," Mundy lamented. "It was heartbreaking because these horses are like my children. I follow them everywhere, and I never miss a race."

Illinois-based owner/breeder Charlie Pigg suffered a similar experience with his broodmare, Cora Mesa, who resides at Lexington's Scarteen Stud. "Not being able to visit has been really tough," said Pigg. "I have a habit of being underfoot there several days each year. But I was unable to be there even when her Connect filly was foaled April 29. I finally saw the baby on June 12."

Rising from the COVID ashes

As May flowers faded, so did constraints on U.S. cities, which embarked on reopening plans. Keeneland primed for an unprecedented

spectatorless summer meet that would run from July 8-12. Among the added biosecurity measures: Jockeys were segregated into six separate jock's rooms and tested before their initial ride and again if they returned from another jurisdiction; testing was mandatory for out-of-state horsemen; and a limited number of owners were permitted onsite only for the day of their race, sharing social-distanced-designed grandstand seating and dining areas.



Visitor Dea Barry feeds carrots to Old Friends resident Little Mike.

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LEWIS GARDNER

Jockeys and grooms wear personal protective equipment during the summer meet. At right, Keeneland's outriders sport masks with the track's logo.



JOSEPH REY AU

Masks — on everyone from starters to outriders — were ubiquitous. Despite precautions, two jockeys, Luis Saez and Flavien Prat, did test positive in the final days. But “because we were able to keep everybody segregated, we were able to minimize the spread here,” said Gabbert.

The meet went off with nary a hitch, showcasing 10 graded stakes, among them the deferred Toyota Blue Grass Stakes and the Central Bank Ashland Stakes, both of which saw winners — emerging 3-year-olds Art Collector and

Speech, respectively — crossing the finish line with only an eerie silence emanating from an empty grandstand. “One of the things I don’t think we understood or appreciated, was how much energy we get from fans,” said Gabbert. “It was extremely odd to not have that thrill of fans hollering, that buzz of people.”

The mini-meet was met with enthusiasm by horsemen (“Can we do it every year?” trainer Ken McPeck quipped to BloodHorse) and was history-making in more ways than one. Three-time graded stakes winner Swiss Sky-

diver became just the second filly ever to run in the Blue Grass Stakes at Keeneland; 2019 Preakness hero War of Will made his first mark as a grass horse by capturing the grade 1 Maker’s Mark Mile; Guarana’s win in the Madison gave trainer Chad Brown his 100th grade 1 victory; and Rushing Fall notched her fifth stakes victory at Keeneland with the grade 1 Coolmore Jenney Wiley (only superhorse Wise Dan owns more).

The meet even boasted a particularly robust handle: The five-day all-sources wagering totaled more than \$63 million, which was not unlike surges seen at other tracks across the country throughout the summer. On March 13 New York’s Aqueduct reported an all-sources mutual handle up almost 28 percent over a comparable date in 2019. Similarly, Belmont’s June 3 opening generated a record-breaking all-sources handle.

Such vigorous numbers have led some to believe the COVID-19 crisis actually presented horse racing with an unexpected shot in the arm. Thanks to advance deposit wagering (ADW) systems and hours of added live TV coverage, horse racing, it seems, has filled a void for starving sports fans. “It amazed me, before this began, how far down the list of sports — in the public



Field Pass wins an exciting Kentucky Utilities Transylvania Stakes.



eye — horse racing was,” said TVG host/analyst and longtime handicapper Kurt Hoover. “Then we are the only sport going. By sheer accident,” Hoover added, “we’ve

ended up in a very good spot.”

Gabbert added the pandemic might also have inadvertently thrown a positive light on the game. “Racing gets some hard knocks for not being united, but over the past few months racing has been more united than ever,” he said.

With July in the record books and strategies battle-tested, Gabbert noted that Keeneland expected to move forward with its September yearling sale (Sept. 13-25), its fall race meet (Oct. 2-24), and the Breeders’ Cup World Championships (Nov. 6-7). As of this writing, it was still uncertain whether spectators would be permitted.

“We are developing up to five plans for how we can execute — whether that’s no spectators, whether that’s 25 percent,” said Gabbert. “We feel like we have a template to build on, and we feel good about the plans in place for Breeders’ Cup, even if it’s

a scaled-down model of what people witnessed when Keeneland hosted the Championships in 2015.”

As summer dwindled, the world, and the world of sports, was still reeling from the effects of COVID-19. Additional outbreaks within jockey colonies forced temporary racetrack shutdowns and raised some questions, as baseball, football, and hockey began to emerge from the darkness. But horse racing, if nothing else, had shown its grit — a little like its tenacious equine athletes in a challenging stretch duel.

“You never know,” said Old Friends’ Blowen, who is not only an aftercare advocate but also a former horse owner and longtime handicapper. “Everybody was bleak and pessimistic; then all of a sudden, we were setting records. Horse racing just may be the greatest sport,” he said, “it has always survived itself. And it will again.” **KM**

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