

Building a better athlete

A racehorse's day begins early in the morning with breakfast and a workout



Photo by Z

By Liane Crossley

Fans who venture to Keeneland early in the morning to watch the horses gallop on the racetrack or to attend Keeneland's popular Breakfast with the Works program on Saturdays might wonder if the horses they see gallop on the track are the same horses they will see race that afternoon.

The answer is probably not. The horses scheduled to race today usually have completed their morning conditioning program. In fact, most horses won't even go to the track on the day of their races. Instead, they generally are walked around the barn before sunrise then spend most of the day relaxing in their stalls—eating hay and napping—while waiting for their chance to run.

Let's follow a racehorse we named Williamsberg on a morning at Keeneland.

Oats for breakfast

Around 4 a.m., depending on his stable's schedule, Williamsberg is served a breakfast of oats by the nighwatchman, who looks after the stable before the regular crew of grooms, exercise riders and other workers arrive. Williamsberg's groom arrives at 5 a.m. The groom has three other horses to look after, but he turns his attention first to Williamsberg. He enters Williamsberg's stall, where he removes the protective overnight bandages from the colt's legs.

Thoroughbreds customarily are bathed on the morning of the day they race. One reason is so they will look their best for the fans, but some trainers use the opportunity to cleanse hors-

continued on page 30



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continued from page 29

es in liniment to limber their muscles. After the groom gives Williamsberg a sudsy, warm bath, another barn employee called a hot walker will walk the colt about 30 minutes while the groom cleans his stall and adds fresh straw. If the weather is too chilly for a bath, the groom will thoroughly brush Williamsberg.

When Williamsberg completes his meander, he is returned to his stall. Barn activity continues around him, and Williamsberg begins his wait until his race.

Training when not racing

On the days Williamsberg does not race, he will have a more active schedule. His groom will brush him, and he will be saddled and bridled. An exercise rider employed by Williamsberg's trainer will ride the colt to the track.

Most exercise riders pilot the same horses every day so they get to know each



Matt Anderson

other. As a result, an exercise rider is a key player in a Thoroughbred's career. By handling the horse repeatedly, a rider becomes accustomed to how the animal moves and can detect any subtle changes that might foreshadow a possible injury—all of which he relays to the horse's trainer. An exercise rider also offers opinions about how a horse is progressing or suggests to the trainer something that could improve a horse's performance—such as a different type of bit or the addition of blinkers.

Typically each morning, Williamsberg will trot for a half mile and then gallop for 1 1/2 miles. Once or twice a week, depending on his fitness level, he will be asked to incorporate a quick burst at race speed for about a half mile. These drills are timed and included with Williamsberg's past performance information in the program.

After his racetrack work, Williamsberg returns to his barn, where the exercise rider will remove his saddle and bridle. His groom will give the colt a bath, then the

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Matt Anderson

Get up with the horses

Waking up early on Saturdays in April has a number of rewards if you accept Keeneland's invitation to visit the track. During Breakfast With the Works, you can step inside the world of Thoroughbred racing — and start your day off right with a Southern-style breakfast.

Jim Williams, Keeneland's Director of Communications, hosts the popular program that will take you trackside to watch horses being exercised on the racetrack and on to the paddock to meet a member of the industry who will share unique insight about racing at Keeneland.

Breakfast With the Works

Date: Every Saturday during the spring meet

Schedule: 7 a.m. to 8:30 a.m.

Southern-style breakfast for \$5 in the Equestrian Room.

Kids 3 and under eat free.

7 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. Free children's activities.

7:45 a.m. to 8:45 a.m. Trackside commentary.

8:45 a.m. Demonstration in the paddock with a special guest.

Racehorse time

A racehorse's typical schedule on a non-race day:

4 a.m.—Nightwatchman feeds horse breakfast of oats.

5 a.m.—Stable workers arrive. Groom cleans, saddles and bridles the horse.

5:20 a.m.—Exercise rider mounts the horse.

5:30 a.m.—Track opens for training.

5:30-5:50 a.m.—Horse trots and gallops on the track per trainer's instructions.

5:55 a.m.—Horse returns to his barn to be untacked and receives a bath or sponge bath depending on weather.

6:05-6:35 a.m.—Horse walks or "cools out" until he stops drinking water. He grazes before returning to his stall, relaxing and nibbling at an all-day supply of hay.

8:30 a.m.—Groom brushes the horse and wraps the horse's legs with protective bandaging.

10:30 a.m.—Horse receives lunch of oats and spends the next few hours enjoying hay, napping and watching barn activities.

3:15 p.m.—Stable hand picks out manure piles and fluffs stall, and gives horse fresh water.

4 p.m.—Horse eats a dinner of oats, molasses, corn, barley, vitamins, minerals, carrots and bran. Meanwhile, his appetite is monitored. If he is reluctant to eat, his temperature will be taken. After dinner, the horse relaxes in his stall, sleeps and eats hay until following morning.



David Robertson

Mornings at Keeneland are full of activity, but racehorses receive time to relax and enjoy the surroundings.

hot walker will walk or "cool out" Williamsberg for 30 minutes, giving him a chance to drink water. If time allows, the hot walker will lead Williamsberg to one of Keeneland's abundant grassy areas and let him graze. This activity offers minimal nutritional value, but serves as a treat and a relaxing alternative in the racehorse's routine.

Winning away from home

Not all horses who race at Keeneland live at the track during the racing season. A good portion of them, roughly 30 percent, arrive the day of their race from surrounding tracks and training centers such as Churchill Downs in Louisville or Keeneland's The Thoroughbred Center training facility on Paris Pike in Lexington.

Racehorses who are stabled away from Keeneland will have the same morning routine on the day of a race as Williamsberg, but instead of relaxing at home while waiting for race time, they will board a trailer or van and travel with their grooms to a special barn at Keeneland that

is reserved for "ship-ins." Horses that live at Keeneland might seem to have an advantage over their rivals who ship in for a race, but the truth is a solid number of winners each day make the trip from surrounding areas.

Thoroughbreds in training spend about 23 hours a day in their stalls. They are eager to leave their stalls for morning exercise or for a race, but they also relish returning home to their stalls. Racehorses enjoy a life of luxury with room service and housekeeping, specialized nutrition and exercise programs and daily beauty treatments. These all combine to give the horse the best possible chance to reach the winner's circle.

To learn about a racehorse's routine on the afternoon when he races, check the story titled "Seize the day" in the Keeneland program from April 18-27. 🐾

Freelance writer Liane Crossley, who spent years as an exercise rider and assistant trainer, never strays too far from the Keeneland barn area.