



In the eyes of the beholder

Keeneland is special to Thoroughbred racing and Kentucky for many reasons

By Edward L. Bowen

Some years ago, the late Louis Lee Haggin II mused during an interview that, “Somehow I just can’t quite put my finger on exactly what makes Keeneland.”

Here was a man who had devoted much of his adult life to the executive management of the track and sales pavilion, following with reverence in the footsteps of his father-in-law, founder Hal Price Headley. Haggin roamed the Keeneland grounds in the morning, made minute decisions on trees and buildings, influenced the racing program and probably sized the lettering on the doors of Keeneland’s motor vehicles.

Yet, even he found elusive the articulation of Keeneland’s essence. To anyone who from time to time might be tempted, or asked, to describe Keeneland, Mr. Haggin’s precedent is comforting: He could not put his finger on it, so we need not feel badly over a similar failing.

Having stipulated that the precise description is beyond our powers, let us retreat to what we can observe about Keeneland.

Firstly, it was founded on sporting principals, as well as business imperatives. Its founders and their successors have been men and women attuned to the beauty, pageantry and thrill of Thoroughbred racing and to the elegance and nobility of the Thoroughbred himself.

Secondly, Keeneland is beautiful. The appreciation for staunch but graceful architecture, placed in pastoral opulence, might be innate in the human breast or conditioned by Western cultural heritage. Either way, Keeneland typifies the phenomenon.

continued on page 8

In the eyes of the beholder

continued from page 6

In the 40-plus years that we have been personally enthralled by Keeneland, a series of major additions have been constructed. In each case, by the time a second race meeting rolls around, we find it difficult to describe just what the change was, so seamlessly do the new piles of Kentucky River limestone, arched vistas and arboreal touches blend with what was in place before them. Even the advent of Polytrack took little adjustment. Rather than the charcoal-dust imagery we had expected, the contrast of the tans of today with the richer soil hues of yesterday was reconciled in a single afternoon.

The presentation of the horses at Keeneland is more akin to that of racing in England—its land of origin—than at almost any other North American track. The horses appear first on a spacious lawn, each assigned to circle a particular tree or slipped discreetly into a saddling stall. Once equipped for the race, they proceed to the walking ring, where their brightly



In 1957, Hal Price Headley (left), Duval A. Headley and Louis Lee Haggin II enjoyed the racetrack they nurtured.

dressed riders await. In the telling, this ritual seems little different from that of each of some 55,000 Thoroughbred races held annually in the United States. At Keeneland, though, a quiet dignity pervades the scene.

Of course, no track, however beautiful in design or intent, could maintain high stature without quality racing. From the

beginning of racing at Keeneland in the 1930s, sporting owners set a high standard for quality of horse presented local racegoers. That standard has been kept high, perhaps even heightened in recent years.

The spring brings the bustling, building crescendos headed toward the Kentucky Oaks (G1) and Kentucky Derby

continued on page 10

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This year, Keeneland's spring meet covers 15 days from April 6-27.

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continued from page 8

Presented by Yum! Brands (G1) as fillies prep in Keeneland's Ashland Stakes (G1) and Derby-bound colts square off in the Toyota Blue Grass Stakes (G1). The autumn meeting finds contenders in many divisions vying for status in upcoming Breeders' Cup races, as Keeneland fans can savor such Grade 1 races as the Juddmonte Spinster Stakes, Shadwell Turf Mile, Lane's End Breeders' Futurity and the Queen Elizabeth II Challenge Cup. To date, 25 Breeders' Cup World Championships race winners had made their last previous starts at Keeneland, among them 2006 winners Street Sense and Miesque's Approval, and six of the last 12 horses voted Horse of the Year have made at least one start at the Lexington track.

Because Keeneland lies in the heart of the Blue Grass country, surrounded by the leading concentration of quality breeding farms, it is natural that the breeding and racing segments are intertwined in the track's history. As early as 1938, Blue Lea won the Blue Grass Stakes prior to a triumphant career at Calumet Farm as America's leading sire in five separate years. Another Keeneland favorite of the 1930s, Myrtlewood, lives on in spirit as ancestress of modern horses such as Keeneland stakes winner and 2003 Horse of the Year Mineshaft. In more modern eras, the phenomenal stallions Northern Dancer and Mr. Prospector both raced at Keeneland.

Similarly linked to the racing is Keeneland's sale segment, which has evolved from a modest outdoor experiment into the world's leading auction scene. No fewer than 50 Breeders' Cup winners have been sold at Keeneland auctions. In American Triple Crown races, the tally is 16 Kentucky Derby winners, 15 Preakness Stakes winners, and 13 Belmont Stakes winners. Five winners of England's historic Epsom Derby are also Keeneland sale graduates.

So, we come back to Louis Lee Haggin II. Perhaps in stating he could not describe his Keeneland, he did so best of all. 🐎

Edward L. Bowen is president of the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation and author of 18 books on Thoroughbred racing.