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Bill Straus

## Seize the day

A racehorse's schedule on the day he races  
is geared to producing a winning effort

By Liane Crossley

Fans who want to see the Thoroughbreds before a race begins can watch them in the saddling paddock behind the Keeneland grandstand. The horses will enter from the adjacent barn area through a stone archway and settle under trees that correspond to their program number.

Each racehorse's daily preparation began well before his trainer places the tiny saddle on his back. The horse was wide awake before dawn when he ate a light breakfast and was walked around his barn to limber up. Horses rarely go to the track to exercise on race day because their conditioning preparations are complete and trainers want them to reserve their energy for the race.

### Ready to race

On the day of his race, our horse Williamsberg quietly munches hay in his stall, watching the activity around his barn and taking time to snooze. The track-designated veterinarian arrives to examine the colt's legs to make sure he is sound to race and clears him for competition. A short time later, the blacksmith checks his shoes to make sure no last-minute adjustments are needed.

Experienced horses sense when they

will be racing in the afternoon, perhaps because they did not go to the track that morning or their routine changed when they received a light lunch earlier than usual. Sometimes they sense the excitement of the people around them.

As Williamsberg relaxes while he waits for his race, his trainer and other stable employees are busy with such details as making sure his owner's silks are in the jockeys' quarters and his paperwork is in order. All racehorses must have health certificates that prove their vaccinations are up to date; their registration papers must be on file in Keeneland's racing office and their owners and trainers must be properly licensed with the Kentucky Horse Racing Authority.

There is no fee to enter a horse in a race at Keeneland unless the race is a stakes such as the Toyota Blue Grass Stakes (G1), but the horse must meet certain standards. For example, if he has never raced or has not raced in the past few weeks, he must have a record of officially timed workouts. A horse that has never raced must prove to track officials that he is capable of bursting from the starting gate on cue. The trainer is responsible for supplying the necessary paperwork.

### More than saddle and bridle

In Williamsberg's barn, preparations

for the race continue. A stable employee consolidates the bridle and other racing equipment he will wear. Trainers with large stables keep detailed records of equipment because each horse's racing gear is individualized. Williamsberg wears a typical D-style bit named for its resemblance to the letter. Like most horses, he wears a tongue tie—a piece of cloth that fits snugly around his tongue and underneath his chin to keep his airway clear while he races—and blinkers to keep his attention focused in front of him.

As race time nears, Williamsberg's groom dusts the colt's coat and removes any stray pieces of straw his mane or tail might have attracted while he napped. The trainer or his assistant then wraps Williamsberg's legs with thin disposable bandages to protect his leg from abrasions and add support. The bridle is placed on Williamsberg, and then he and his groom begin their walk to the Keeneland saddling paddock. A stable hand carries a bag containing Williamsberg's tongue tie, blinkers, a foam channel that fits under the saddle girth and a suede chamois that is placed under the saddle to prevent slipping.

Williamsberg's trainer walks with him or meets him in the paddock. The valet, whose main responsibility is to care for a jockey's equipment, arrives with the saddle that Williamsberg will wear and helps the trainer secure the girth from the opposite side of the horse. After Williamsberg is



Bill Straus

At Keeneland, fans receive a unique view of the horses as they are saddled in the paddock.

fitted with blinkers and a tongue tie, he is led to the walking ring, where his jockey awaits.

### A winning effort

The paddock judge shouts "Riders Up" and the horses head to the track. In the tunnel adjoining the track, Williamsberg joins up with his designated lead pony that will escort him through the post parade. Pony riders are independent contractors who work for trainers, and their mounts help calm often high-strung Thoroughbreds. Because the pony rider helps restrain Williamsberg, his jockey can reserve strength for the race.

*continued on page 28*

## Racehorse time

### Race-day schedule for a horse in a Keeneland race:

**4 a.m.**—Nighwatchman feeds horse breakfast of oats.

**5:30 a.m.**—Groom removes protective overnight bandages from horse's legs. He gives horse warm bath with soapy water and rinses with warm water and liniment. Hot walker walks horse for 30 minutes, then returns animal to his stall where he eats hay and naps.

**8:20 a.m.**—Blacksmith inspects condition of horse's shoes.

**8:45 a.m.**—Veterinarian designated by racetrack inspects horse to ensure soundness.

**8:55 a.m.**—Groom applies protective bandages to horse's legs.

**9:30 a.m.**—Horse receives early lunch of oats and begins leisure time in stall.

**2:40 p.m.**—Groom brushes and wipes off horse. He wraps horse's legs with protective racing bandages.

**3 p.m.**—Stable employee fits and adjusts bridle on horse before groom leads horse to saddling paddock.

**3:20 p.m.**—Groom and horse arrive at paddock where identifier checks horse's lip tattoo to ensure correct identity of animal.

**3:35 p.m.**—Horse is saddled by trainer and jockey's valet.

**3:40 p.m.**—Horse is led to walking ring where trainer gives leg up to jockey.

**3:43 p.m.**—Horse and jockey meet lead pony for post parade and head to starting gate.

**3:53 p.m.**—Race begins.

**3:56 p.m.**—Winning horse appears in winner's circle for quick ceremony and photograph.

**4:05 p.m.**—Winning horse arrives at "test barn" and cools out.

**4:35 p.m.**—Horse returns to barn and grazes before returning to stall.

**5:30 p.m.**—Groom applies poultice and protective bandages to the horse's legs and feeds him dinner. Horse relaxes in his stall, sleeps and eats hay until the following morning.

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## Seize the day

*continued from page 27*

While his connections cheer him on, Williamsberg wins his race! The jockey guides him back to his groom and they enter the winner's circle for a brief ceremony and have their photograph taken. Williamsberg is unsaddled and his groom leads him back to the barn area. But the celebrations will have to wait a bit.

### Business to complete

Winners and selected other horses in each race must first go to the official test barn, where Williamsberg is bathed and cooled for about 30 minutes under strict supervision. When the colt urinates, an employee of the Kentucky Horse Racing Authority collects the sample in a cup, which is labeled and sealed to be sent to a laboratory and tested for medications that aren't permitted. Williamsberg is then free to return home.

Back at his barn, Williamsberg grazes for a time, and then once his trainer deems he is cooled out, he is returned to his stall where the groom covers the colt's legs with a soothing white poultice and wraps them with thick protective bandages. If Williamsberg has missed his traditional dinner time, he next will enjoy a hearty meal.



Pat Lang

Winning a race is one of the rewards for many hours of hard work and dedication.

Meanwhile, the barn crew works to complete the chores around the stable and is done by the time the nightwatchman arrives in the evening. As the sun begins to set, the Thoroughbreds enjoy tranquil surroundings before they settle down for a good night's rest. 🐾

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



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