

*Keeneland Served
as a Successful Base for
Trainer Al Stall and Blame*



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By Lenny Shulman

When it came to training Blame, the colt who would become 2010's champion older male, Al Stall Jr. simply employed the tried and true formula that had worked so successfully in his own life: split time between the great Crescent City of New Orleans and the pungent bluegrass of Kentucky. That blueprint worked, as you'd expect from the trained geologist who once mapped out possible oil explorations at the Gulf of Mexico.

Above, Blame thrived in his training at Keeneland, where he was stabled for much of his racing career.

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Stall had toiled away as a trainer for nearly 20 years before Blame, owned by Claiborne Farm and Adele Dilschneider, put him on the map, winning the 2010 Breeders' Cup Classic and, in the process, becoming the only horse that would ever defeat the superstar mare Zenyatta.

Stall was bred for the task at hand. Stall's grandfather and father, in addition to being involved in geology and oil exploration, owned and bred Thoroughbreds. As such, they had steady occasion to



ALEXANDER BAROFF PHOTOS

Preparation is the key to Stall's success as a trainer.

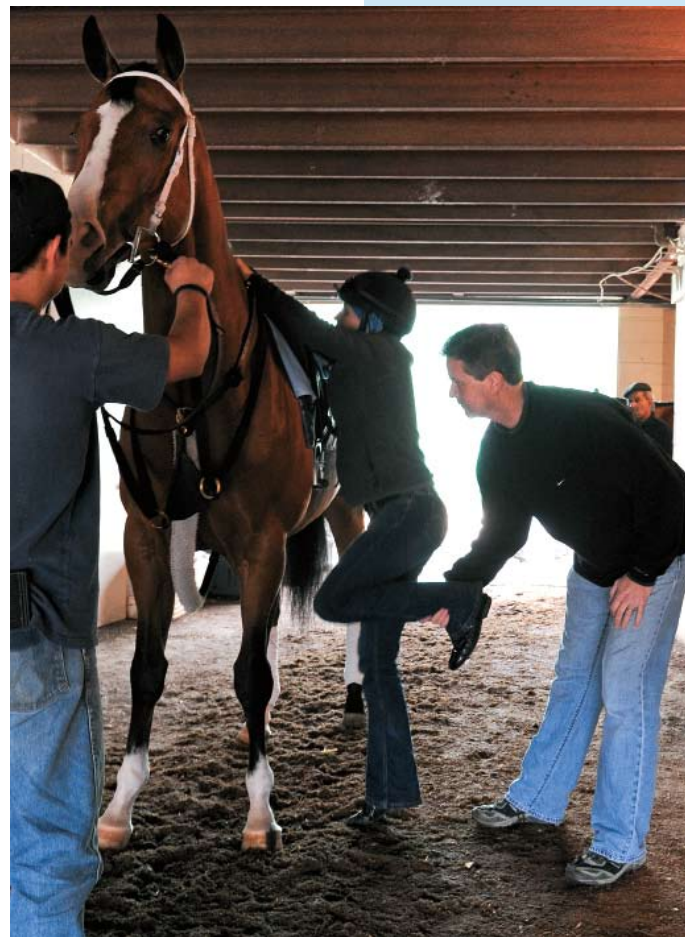
pack the family up for visits to the Bluegrass, where they did business at Claiborne with A.B. "Bull" Hancock Jr. The Benjamin family of Big Sink Farm and the Walden clan, then ensconced at Dearborn Farm, were fast friends with the Stall clan. Stall remembers horsing around with Elliott Walden, now of WinStar Farm, as kids.

"We'd watch the foals being born on his family's place, and it was a really enjoyable experience," noted Stall. "Horses and fun was all it was. It made for a great first impression of the area."

Although young Stall worked summers and holidays for trainer Frank Brothers, who conditioned Al Stall Sr.'s racehorses, he attended and completed college at Louisiana State University, then worked several years for an oil exploration company. Only when the company's local office closed did Stall set sail for the backstretch, assisting Brothers for five years before hanging out his own shingle at Fair Grounds in 1991.

For a few years Stall's circuit was Louisiana to Chicago and back, but around 1995 he began incorporating Kentucky into his itinerary between Fair Grounds in the winter and Saratoga in late summer. Keeneland and Churchill Downs have remained on his schedule each spring and fall. Although Stall earned a series of minor stakes wins, mostly in Louisiana, through the early years, Joyeux Danseur became his real breakthrough horse of the 1990s.

"I raced at Keeneland a lot, but back in those days it was



FOUR FOOTED PHOTOS

Left, Joyeux Danseur was a "breakout" horse for Stall, shown below with his father, Al Sr.

just regular manes-and-tails kind of horses," Stall said. "But Joyeux Danseur won an allowance race at Keeneland by 10½ lengths on the turf, and you don't see that too often."

Joyeux Danseur would go on to win the Early Times Turf Classic at Churchill Downs and the Explosive Bid Handicap at Fair Grounds, both graded stakes.

When Brothers, who had been training for Claiborne, took a private training job in 2002, he recommended Stall to Claiborne president Seth Hancock. (Brothers, who retired from training in 2009, is now a member of the Keeneland sales team.) Soon, Stall was conditioning the Claiborne horses that weren't up to the major circuits and doing well with them. Bill Mott was getting the A-list stock from Claiborne, but when he began spending more time in New York, Hancock looked for someone who could be more hands on with his horses in Kentucky.

When Stall fielded the call from Hancock to meet with him,



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he figured he was being fired. Instead, Hancock handed him the entire Claiborne string to take down to Fair Grounds for the winter and told him a crop of 2-year-olds would be showing up the following spring.

At the same time, Claiborne took 20 stalls and a barn just across Rice Road from the Keeneland training track, allowing

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Stall and Claiborne Farm president Seth Hancock savor the moment after Blame won the 2010 Breeders' Cup Classic, left.



Stall to set up shop in Lexington by the beginning of April each year and remain until heading back to New Orleans after Thanksgiving.

That first bunch of juveniles Stall received in the spring of 2008 included Terrain, who would go on to win the Arlington-Washington Futurity, and a colt out of the Claiborne broodmare Liable named Blame.

Although Blame did not run at Keeneland in 2010 (his victory there in the Fayette Stakes in 2009 gave Stall his first graded stakes win in Lexington), the oval was key to his success, as he spent large chunks of his three racing seasons there.

When Blame first showed up in Stall's Keeneland barn in May of his 2-year-old season, Stall decided to leave the big, solid-looking son of Arch there for the summer rather than ship him to Saratoga to race, believing it would have been a tight fit to get him ready.

"He came to hand really fast while we were up at Saratoga," remembered Stall, "so we decided to run him once before the autumn meet at Keeneland."

Blame finished third at Turfway Park in that initial outing, then came back to break his maiden at Keeneland in an effort that gave Stall confidence Blame

"The Keeneland track is always the same, and it's been a good fit." — Al Stall Jr.

fit on the Triple Crown trail. But a foot abscess threw a wrench into those plans once they were back in New Orleans, so Blame was given time off, then returned to Keeneland to train for the beginning of his belated 3-year-old campaign. He ran well in his comeback at Churchill Downs, finishing third, and then, as Stall said, "it was on after that."

Training at Keeneland, Blame again vanned to Churchill Downs in July and won an allowance contest. He motored back to Keeneland, hung out there a few weeks, then went to Saratoga and took the Curlin Stakes before returning to Keeneland.

"We'd always go back to Keeneland," said Stall. "We tried to fly him to his races, and that's the beauty of Keeneland, too — the plane is right there. We flew to Louisiana for the Super Derby (a second-place finish) and then back to Keeneland, where he won the Fayette and then the Clark Handicap (at Churchill) after training at Keeneland."

Stall and Hancock mapped out a plan for Blame as his 2009 season came to a close, and they decided to concentrate on the second half of 2010. Blame was let down for a while in New Orleans and then slowly returned to training. When Stall had him ready, going five-eighths of a mile, he brought him back to Keeneland in the spring and finished Blame's training there.

"We popped over to Baltimore and won the William Donald Schaefer Stakes, came back to Keeneland, then popped over to Churchill and won the Stephen Foster," said Stall. "We went up to Saratoga 19 days before the Whitney Handicap (which Blame won by a nose over Quality Road), and we were going to bring him back to Keeneland, but the heat there was really tough, so we decided to keep him in Saratoga until the weather broke in early September.

"He trained for the Jockey Club Gold Cup a solid month at Keeneland, and that was really nice because it was during the September yearling sale, so he literally had the place to himself. We'd breeze him every Sunday, and there were never more than a half-dozen horses on the racetrack. Maybe he got too relaxed there," Stall added, referring to Blame's second-place finish in the Jockey Club Gold Cup.

There is much to be said for keeping horses in a

routine, and Stall said Blame benefitted from being in the same location at Keeneland over the years.

"He watched them build that new runway at Bluegrass Airport across the street," Stall said. "Blame would stand there and turn his head to the right with his ears straight forward, checking out that heavy equipment, day after day."

The trainer took his star to Churchill Downs 10 days before the Breeders' Cup to get him accustomed to the hoopla surrounding that event. Stall, alluding to the fact that many of the last-minute shippers did not perform well, pointed to that move as a key to Blame's success.

"He really settled in and got comfortable after three or four days," the trainer stated. "With all the people and distractions and tents and stuff, I thought the time there helped him to get nice and relaxed going into the race."

That race, of course, was the Classic, in which Blame defeated the previously perfect Zenyatta. Afterward, it was right back to Keeneland, where Blame was shown off to potential breeders during the November sale. He left Keeneland for the final time for his new home as a stallion at Claiborne shortly thereafter.

"It is fantastic having Claiborne here, and Al has utilized that barn well," said Keeneland director of racing Rogers Beasley. "They have led the charge of good horses training here by showing the benefits of doing so. Blame is the poster boy as horses like Forego Stakes winner Here Comes Ben and multiple graded stakes winner Apart have followed the same path."

Added Stall, "Keeneland has been great. It works out well since I have a home in Louisville, and with the Polytrack you can come over and breeze all your horses in one day without worrying about needing to work them right after the renovation break and before the track gets chopped up. The Keeneland track is always the same, and it's been a good fit."

Soon, Stall will be coming north to Keeneland with a fresh crop of horses, including Blame's sister Might, who looked sharp when she finished second in her debut in late February. It's now a tried-and-true formula for success. 🐾