

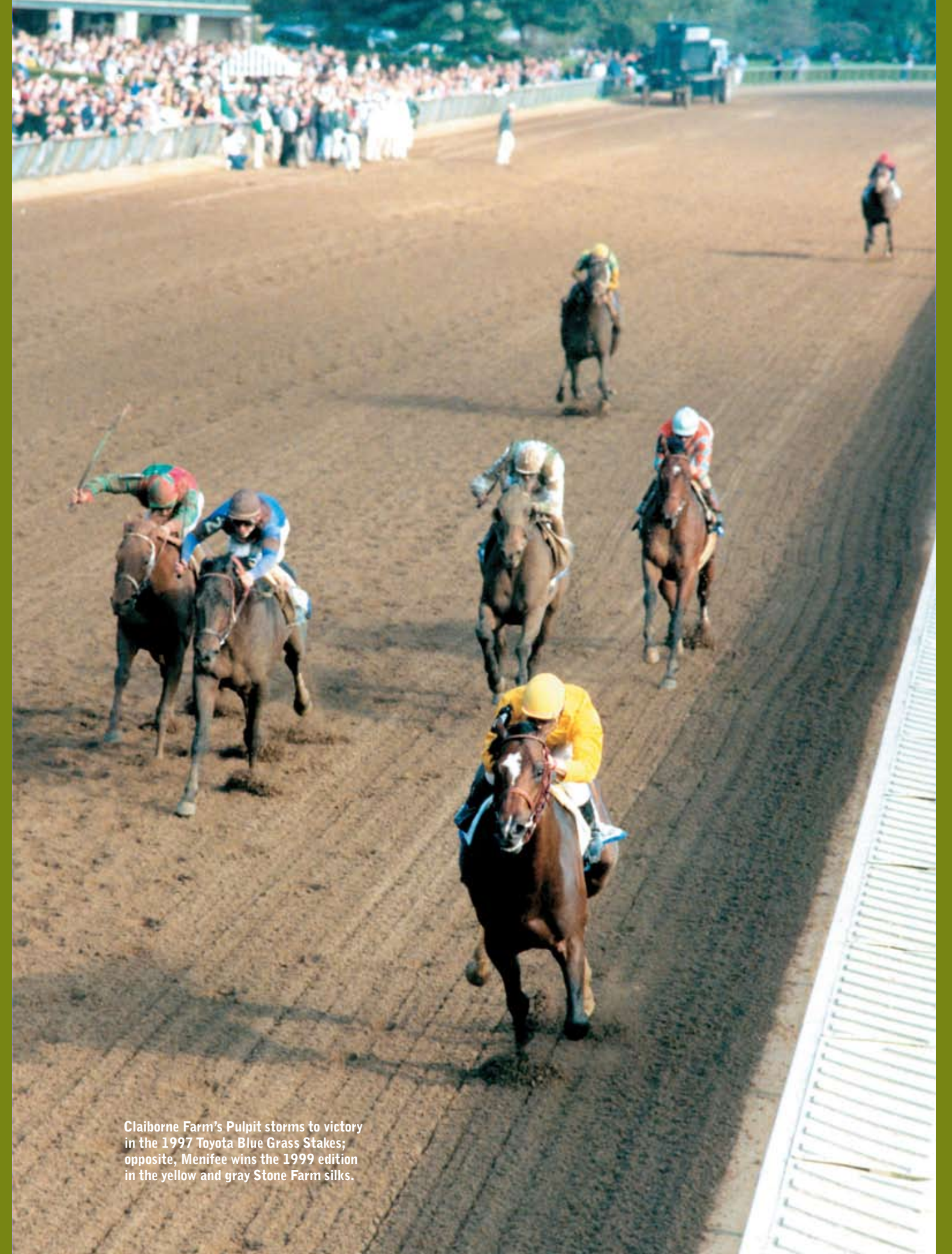


# RAISING THE STAKES

*Winning the Toyota Blue Grass with a Homebred Is a Special Triumph*

By Scot T. Gillies | Photos by Anne M. Eberhardt

The Toyota Blue Grass Stakes, Keeneland's premier contest for 3-year-olds, serves as an important prep race for the Kentucky Derby. The connections of the winning competitor reign as near-royalty at the Lexington racecourse and can be assured their sophomore star will be among the favorites for the upcoming Triple Crown classics. For those owners who also bred the victors, an accomplishment of which only a handful of breeders have been able to boast during the past 25 years, the delight is even greater.



Claiborne Farm's Pulpit storms to victory in the 1997 Toyota Blue Grass Stakes; opposite, Menifee wins the 1999 edition in the yellow and gray Stone Farm silks.

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In the decades following Keeneland's founding in 1936, the landscape of American racing began to shift. As yearling auctions surged, many breeders altered their primary focus from breeding runners that would carry the farm's colors to victory to raising potentially profitable prospects for the yearling sales. Over the years it has become less common for breeders to prepare their own foals for the races, and the history of the Blue Grass Stakes illustrates that trend. In the first 25 years of Keeneland's management of the spring landmark, 14 winners were homebreds; in the most recent quarter-century that number has dropped by half.

As the achievement becomes increasingly rare, those homebred runners that develop into graded stakes winners earn a special place in American racing but even more so in the hearts of their breeders. Only a small number will achieve success on the level of the Toyota Blue Grass Stakes, and few experiences are as prized as watching a homebred colt win Keeneland's most prestigious race in front of a roaring crowd of friends and neighbors. Just ask Arthur B. Hancock III, whose Stone Farm-bred Menifee captured the 1999 edition of the annual contest.

*"It's in front of the home folks, it's where you were raised, it's very special."*

— Arthur Hancock, Stone Farm

was worthwhile."

He recalled how proud he was watching Menifee defeat Cat Thief by 1¼ lengths, his friends and colleagues with him in the stands.

"I remember after the race, it was a good, warm feeling," he said. "It's not easy to do."

From the family of renowned breeder Richard Hancock and Claiborne Farm founder Arthur B. Hancock Sr., Arthur Han-



## Stone Farm, 1999

The Toyota Blue Grass Stakes serves as a homecoming of sorts for Central Kentucky horsemen. Hancock ranks Keeneland's springtime grade I contest second only to the Derby on the list of stakes he covets.

"My father was one of the founders of Keeneland, and I was on the board," he related. "I have a special place in my heart for Keeneland — makes it feel like all the hard work



Arthur Hancock, second from right, celebrates victory with family and friends after Menifee, above, wins the Toyota Blue Grass Stakes.

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cock is a fourth-generation horseman who has built his own racing empire. In 1970 Arthur Hancock struck out on his own to develop a new breeding operation not far from Claiborne in Bourbon County. What started out as a 100-acre plot became known as Stone Farm, and by 1996, when Menifee was foaled, Hancock had expanded the farm to 2,000 acres and Stone Farm had bred two Kentucky Derby winners. (In addition to Derby success in 1982 with Gato Del Sol and in 1989 with Sunday Silence, Stone Farm also co-bred 2000 winner Fusaichi Pegasus.)

While Hancock's accomplishments were made at a new farm, the bloodstock practices he employs reflect the wisdom gained over four generations of breeding.

"We always have thought that if you have an older mare, you should breed her to a younger stallion, something I learned from my father and grandfather," he said. He followed this advice with Menifee's dam, Anne Campbell, who was 23 when she foaled the bay colt to first-year sire Harlan. A homebred son of Storm Cat, Harlan stood at Stone Farm until his death in 1996.

Hancock's ambition was not to produce a Toyota Blue Grass Stakes winner for Stone Farm but instead to pay off some of the farm mortgage by breeding a sales yearling, a more pragmatic

goal. Fortune intervened, however — the colt's slightly offset knees made bidders cautious when Menifee went through the ring at the 1997 Keeneland September yearling sale and Hancock chose to retain half ownership rather than sell a yearling he was especially fond of for what he considered an unacceptably low price. This decision led to an arrangement to race the colt with new co-owner James H. Stone, a partnership Hancock calls "especially meaningful" because of its long history.

"When I was little, Jimmy took me to the betting window to make my first bet," the Stone Farm founder remembered. "I was about 7 or 8. To win with him was really full circle."

While Hancock can recite every moment of the race — how the bay colt came from behind to earn the win, how jockey Pat Day skillfully plotted the horse's route, how exciting it was to see Menifee's "long length" margin of victory over Cat Thief — his fondest reminiscences are about the accomplishment of having bred and raised the grade I winner. The owners received "so many calls from friends the next day. It's a warm memory — I'll always cherish that."

The family connection to Keeneland that Arthur Hancock enjoys had already been victorious in the venerable track's Toyota Blue Grass Stakes before Menifee's 1999 effort, including a win by Pulpit, campaigned by the Hancock family's Claiborne Farm in 1997.



## Claiborne Farm, 1997

Reflecting on the importance of nearby Keeneland to Claiborne's heritage, owner Seth Hancock asserts that "all things being equal, we'll always

*"All things being equal, we'll always race at Keeneland. It's home."*

— Seth Hancock, Claiborne Farm

race at Keeneland. It's home."

One of the region's most successful breeders, the Paris, Ky.-based Claiborne Farm had already won the Blue Grass (in 1974, with homebred Judger) when Pulpit arrived on the scene. The son of A.P. Indy enjoyed considerable acclaim that started with his first race, a seven-length romp in a maiden contest only three months before he journeyed to Lexington for the nine-furlong event. As a result, the colt was sent off as the overwhelming Blue Grass favorite, and he did not disappoint.

Jockey Shane Sellers and Pulpit on their way to the winner's circle after their 1997 win.

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Pulpit's bloodlines were crafted from generations of breeding; by the time he ran in the 1997 Toyota Blue Grass Stakes, Claiborne Farm had more than four decades of development invested in the bay colt. Pulpit's bloodlines trace to Knight's

stands in Italy after spending his first three years on the Claiborne roster and whose first 2-year-olds hit the track this year. Additionally, highly regarded Corinthian starts his career this season at Gainesway.

Hancock has future generations of great runners on his mind when he evaluates Pulpit's success in the breeding shed. "He



Pulpit's victory brings three generations of the Hancock family to the winner's circle.

Daughter, a Claiborne foundation mare that Seth's father, Bull Hancock, had purchased from England's King George VI.

Hancock recalled the excitement leading up to Pulpit's Keeneland triumph. The colt did not race at 2, but after a whirlwind start to his 3-year-old campaign, "we put him on the fast track, and the Blue Grass was the next logical progression."

When race day arrived, "everything went pretty much according to plan," Hancock recalled. "He ran like we hoped he would — Pulpit pretty much controlled the pace and looked like a winner all the way."

Hancock considers Keeneland the home track for Claiborne and reveled in the prestigious win. The day was even more special because "my two children were both there and old enough to appreciate it."

Pulpit continues to impact racing. Standing his 11th season at Claiborne in 2008, he has a couple of exciting runners in his current crop of 3-year-olds. His son Pyro followed up a second-place effort in the 2007 Bessemer Trust Breeders' Cup Juvenile with a convincing win in this year's Risen Star Stakes and appears to be on the Kentucky Derby trail. Daughter Bsharpsonata started the year with two black-type victories including a graded win in the Forward Gal Stakes.

Pulpit also has several sons at stud, including Stroll, who

got a lot of really good mares — we hope he stands the test of time." And the Claiborne legacy of Pulpit's dam is still in play: "We have five daughters of Preach," said Hancock. "She's going to carry on."

More than a decade before Pulpit's victory, Seth Hancock's influence contributed to another homebred Blue Grass winner, although this one was for a family friend rather than for Claiborne Farm.

## Star Crown Stable, 1985

In 1981 Seth Hancock urged his friend Carl Rosen to send the well-bred mare Six Crowns to a stallion entering stud at Claiborne. Rosen acquiesced, and the bay colt that resulted from the mating became one of the first stars for young sire Danzig.

When Andrew Rosen took control of Star Crown Stable following Carl Rosen's death in 1983, one of the first decisions he made was to name the Six Crowns foal, then a yearling, after his father. The colt was special to the Rosen family as he was out of their homebred mare Six Crowns, who was herself a Secretariat daughter of the elder Rosen's first Keeneland

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sales yearling purchase, the champion filly Chris Evert. Andrew dubbed the colt Chief's Crown in memory of his father, who was affectionately known as "the Chief."

Rosen remembers a trip to Claiborne in late fall 1983 to watch the early training of the yearlings on the farm. Noticing Chief's Crown jogging on the track, he recalled that the colt had "a very workmanlike fashion, galloping with his head

down," but he concluded that the special colt was probably "no different than the other 25 yearlings training that day."

"None of us could have predicted what this neat little bay horse would accomplish."

A precocious colt, Chief's Crown won six of nine races as a 2-year-old. A win in the inaugural Breeders' Cup Juvenile capped his first year of racing and positioned him as a favorite for the classic races in 1985. The Star Crown Stable colt had been syndicated to Three Chimneys Farm immediately prior to the 1984 Breeders' Cup.

Trained by Roger Laurin, the 3-year-old won his first two outings of 1985 leading up to his entry at Keeneland. Running as the favorite in the Blue Grass Stakes, he took control of the small field of four runners and was never really challenged after the first turn, finishing 5½ lengths ahead and only a tick off the stakes record.

The Keeneland victory would be Chief's Crown's only win in Kentucky and was, therefore, especially significant to his connections at the commonwealth-based Star Crown Stable and Three Chimneys. The Blue Grass effort was perhaps Chief's Crown's finest race as a 3-year-old and was run in front of a hometown crowd as well as members of the Rosen family.

Chief's Crown had the unusual distinction of being the favorite in the Kentucky Derby, Preakness, and Belmont Stakes in 1985, without winning any of the three classics. He continued to compete and win against top company, however, and after his retirement from racing, he enjoyed a successful stud career at Three Chimneys Farm.

Andrew Rosen thinks back to the triumphs his family enjoyed with Chief's Crown and is amazed by "what is possible at the height of horse racing when you have a truly amazing horse with a big heart." 🐾



Chief's Crown's victory in 1985 had sentimental value for the Rosen family and their Star Crown Stable.