One-Stop Shop

Keeneland Gift Shop is a Little Slice of Equine Heaven

By Patti Nickel

When you think of most racecourses in America, you think of jockeys in colorful silks fading into Impressionist blurs atop horses born to run. You think of spectators who fall into one of two categories — those who read the *Daily Racing Form* with the same expertise a doctor reads an X-ray, and those who think a day at the track is as good an excuse as any to play hooky from the office.

What you probably don't think of is high-end shopping — where the merchandise bears such prestigious names as Tiffany & Co., Waterford, Barbour, Match, and Longchamp of Paris. Unless, that is, you are shopping at the Keeneland Gift Shop, considered by many to be the world's finest equine gift shop.

"Keeneland is all about quality and tradition, two factors that guide us in selecting our merchandise," says Jolene Dawkins, the shop's director of retail operations for the past 11 years.

The quality is obvious, with shelf after shelf of merchandise eliciting "ooohhhs" and "aaahhhs" from even the most jaded shopper. Cashmere clothing so soft you could cocoon in it; crystal, pewter, and silver to send a bride-to-be into raptures; museum-quality art such as crystal and bronze horse statuettes and paintings by New Zealand artist Peter Williams; a fragrance created for Keeneland exclusively by Lady Primrose; and a selection of hats just perfect for Millionaires Row on Derby Day.

As for tradition, the shop is stocked

PHOTOS BY KIRK SCHLEA

Shoppers admire the Keeneland Gift Shop's collection of rings.

with specialty items from established companies with long histories, such as the bespoke equestrian attire from Barbour, the revered British brand.

When you factor in the wide assortment of books, home décor, and a range of merchandise specially designed for little colts and fillies (that's children in non-horsespeak), the 2,800-square-foot boutique overlooking the paddock area is to a shopaholic what a candy store is to a kid.

During the April and October meets the gift shop can burst at the seams with shoppers, rivaling the paddock area and the betting windows for traffic.

In case you get the idea, however, that it's necessary to win the trifecta to shop here, Dawkins is quick to set you straight. "I like to tell people that in our gift shop you can buy anything from a $1 postcard to a $15,000 18-carat gold bracelet," she says. "We try to cater to all levels of customers, whether it is someone on a tour bus in search of a souvenir or someone who's just bought a million-dollar horse."

"Whatever they buy, we want it to reflect the experience they have here at Keeneland," she adds.

From the Beginning

What may come as a surprise considering the gift shop's success today is that it really did not come to fruition until 1991 when Norma Greely, wife of then-president Bill Greely, thought it was important for Keeneland to have not only its own gift store but one reflective of Keeneland's brand.

"At that time, Keeneland stuff was being sold throughout Lexington, but it had grown to the point of needing more formalized oversight," Greely notes, "At the same time, we recognized that there was a market for high-end merchandise bearing our name and logo."

She was able to change that. Although the shop Greely opened was considerably more modest than the current one (her office was in the former stalls where Jack Keene once kept his horses), the commitment to excellence was a hallmark from the beginning.

"People were hungry for things with Keeneland's logo, and there was definitely a market for high-quality equestrian items," she says.

High quality was what they got as Greely, accompanying her husband on his trips to Europe, often stayed behind to visit with craftspeople.

"Much of our early merchandise came from England and Germany, where it was specially made for the shop," she says, recalling, in particular, a chess set — not in the usual black and white, but in the colors of racing silks, where miniature horses and jockeys served as pawns, and the king and queen were fashioned after Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip.

Greely proved to be on target in her belief that if you build it and then stock it with the right merchandise, they will come. "They" certainly did — not just loyal local customers such as former Kentucky governor Martha Layne Collins and socialite Marylou Whitney, but a steady stream of celebrities including Reba McEntire, Glenn Close, and Robert Urich.

Over the years as Keeneland has grown so has its gift shop,

Merchandise ranges from logo wear to accessories such as ties to designer-label purses.

with 32 full and part-time employees, and a staggering array of merchandise. Dawkins and her manager, Amber Arnold, who started as a part-time employee at 16, attend the Atlanta Gift Show twice a year, and Arnold also makes bi-annual visits to the American Equestrian Tack Association trade show in Philadelphia to find just the right items for the store.

The scope of the merchandise Arnold purchases for the shop is broad.

"Everything from home décor and accessories to costume jewelry and fine sterling silver," Arnold says, "and, of course, equestrian-themed items are always a big seller."

Dawkins adds that 80 percent of her customers are interested in purchasing equestrian-related merchandise.

"Since so much of our business is driven by the race meets (nearly half of sales revenue comes during the April and October meets), it stands to reason that people are looking for something equine-related to remind them of their experience here," she says.

Dawkins notes that Vineyard Vines logo ties and scarves are signature items, as are jockey silks table items, from dinnerware to cheese boards and trivets, but adds that the No. 1 seller is "anything with our own logo on it — coffee mugs, Christmas ornaments, key chains, baseball caps, sweatshirts, T-shirts — you name it.

"If it says Keeneland on it, it's going to sell."

Famous Customers Galore

One of the joys of shopping at the Keeneland Gift Shop — aside from the quality merchandise, of course — is that you just never know who will be shopping alongside you. It may be University of Kentucky head football coach Joker Phillips trying on a cap for size or fashion guru and *Dancing With the Stars* contestant Carson Kressley rummaging through the selection of hot pink and mint green logo ties.

Jolene Dawkins says the shop caters to all levels of customers.

"Carson is one of our most loyal customers," says Dawkins. "He's a great fan of the Bluegrass region and visits us three or four times a year."

When pressed, she admits that two of her favorite customer stories involve former UK and current Houston Rockets basketball star Patrick Patterson and new University of Kentucky president Dr. Eli Capilouto.

She remembers Patterson being in the shop a few years earlier, admiring the wide selection of designer Derby hats for women.

"He inquired about the price — it was one of our more expensive hats — and when I told him, he said maybe he could afford it after he signed his NBA contract. We both laughed about that," recalls Dawkins.

Capilouto wasn't looking for anything quite so grand when he popped into the shop on a surprise visit to Lexington while a candidate for the UK presidency. He left with a Keeneland T-shirt, one that Capilouto now considers his lucky T-shirt, according to Dawkins.

"He told me that the day he got the phone call notifying him he had the UK job, he was wearing his Keeneland shirt," she says.

Keeneland and Beyond

The Keeneland Gift Shop is not the only place shoppers can stock up on logo wear and other signature products. These days, merchandise, including a large selection of 75th anniversary items, is available at such Lexington locations as Joseph Beth Booksellers in Lexington Green, the gift shops at Blue Grass Airport and the Marriott Griffin Gate Resort, and as of last year, a 500-square-foot satellite location in the Lexus Show Room on the corner of New Circle and Liberty roads.

"We felt this was a natural for us," says Dawkins, "as Lexus is a sponsor of one of our races (the Raven Run Stakes for three-year-old fillies) and their brand meshes perfectly with ours."

Add to that the annual Keeneland Holiday Wonderland, a mini-version of the Christmas Boutique, held Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend in the Keeneland Entertainment Center, and you have more places than ever to come away with a gift to remind you of your own Keeneland experience.