



Matt Anderson

Winning colors

Silks are part of the pageantry and history of Thoroughbred racing

By Steve Bailey

Owner Ken Ramsey, who has captured three leading owner titles at Keeneland since 2002, remembers the days when he and his wife, Sarah, actually had two sets of racing silks.

Back when the Ramseys got started in Thoroughbred racing in the mid-1990s, the two competed against each other and had separate colors for their riders and horses.

“I designed the ones we use now—the white shirt with the big red ‘R’ and the red cap

with the small white ‘R’ on it—for myself,” said Ramsey, who with his wife owns and operates Ramsey Farm about 10 miles south of Lexington near Nicholasville. “My wife’s silks were sort of a Mardi Gras pattern—purple, yellow, and white—sort of like (Louisiana State University’s) colors.

“That year, if we had run our horses together, we would have tied for the owner’s title at Churchill Downs. We decided then and there that we’d be in better shape if we started a partnership.”

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Notable silks at Keeneland



John Amerman



Augustin Stables



Claiborne Farm



Dogwood Stables



W.S. Farish



Godolphin

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That decision was simple. The next one ... not so simple.

"We went back and forth; I wanted to run in my silks and, of course, she wanted us to run in hers," Ramsey said. "She told me hers were a lot prettier, but in the end she decided that her name was Ramsey, too, so we might as well go with the big red 'R.'"

"It sort of inflates my ego when I see that white 'R' on the jockey cap and the big red 'R' bouncing up and down as my horse is coming down the stretch. It's really is a tremendous feeling."

Silks are the colorful jackets worn by a jockey during a race. Anyone who has watched a full field of horses charge around the turn and power through the stretch at Keeneland knows just how important a jockey's apparel can be. As a tidal wave of bold colors cascades over the track during a race, silks are one way that fans—as well as race callers—can quickly spot a horse and identify the runner in a crowd from any vantage point.

Equine i.d.

Chariot drivers in Rome during the time of the gladiators might have been among the first to sport racing colors. They wore brightly colored capes and headbands to identify themselves for the raucous crowds in the Colosseum.

The origin of modern silks comes from England. The English Jockey Club in 1762 mandated that owners at Newmarket submit specific colors for their riders to wear to distinguish them among a field of horses or to settle disputes that might arise. The Duke of Devonshire chose "straw," which still is registered to the family and is the oldest continuously used color in racing.

Most silks today are not actually made out of silk, but are composed of Lycra or nylon for comfort and durability. Depending on the material and who makes the silks, a set can run anywhere from about \$100

or \$150 to close to upwards of \$500. In New York, the rules of racing require that owners also must register their silks (as well as their stable name) with The Jockey Club, following guidelines regarding eligible designs. As a result, an owner is guaranteed the exclusive use of the silks and the stable name when racing in the state. Other states do not require silks to be registered, but owners are expected to follow standards of good taste when creating their designs.

Over the years, many colors and patterns have become a part of the rich fabric of Thoroughbred racing. Among the most familiar are the devil's red and blue of Calumet Farm, worn by the jockeys of eight Kentucky Derby winners; the green and yellow spotted attire worn by riders on horses running for Cot Campbell's Dogwood Stable; and the star-spangled red-white-and-blue colors of the late Allen Paulson, which were carried by jockeys aboard multiple champions Cigar and Azeri.

Color coordinated

On race days, a jockey who rides every race on a card potentially could wear as many as 10 or 11 different sets of silks. At Keeneland, Jennifer Rosas is in charge of making sure each jockey is paired with the colors of the correct owners for each race.

"What I do is enter all of the owners' names in the computer, pull all the silks for each race and hang them on pegs so the jockeys can find them easily," said Rosas, whose official title is Colors Coordinator. "The colors represent all of the people that own the horses."

A Baltimore native, the 38-year-old Rosas grew up around horses and racing and has worked in the silks rooms of several other tracks, including Lone Star Park in Dallas, Sam Houston Race Park in Houston and Fair Grounds in New Orleans. Although she says the job is not overly hard or stressful if you are detail-

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Heiligbrodt



G. Watts Humphrey



Juddmonte Farms



Beverly Lewis



Robert LaPenta



Mrs. John Magnier



Overbrook Farm



John C. Oxley



Allen Paulson



Ogden Mills Phipps



Pin Oak Stud



Kenneth Ramsey



Sam-Son Farm



Shadwell Farm

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oriented—which she most certainly is—it can get a bit hectic on busy race days.

“The jockeys don’t have a lot of time between races, and they are usually in a hurry,” Rosas said. “It’s my job to make sure that everything is where it needs to be and they can prepare for their next race without any problems.”

In addition to memorizing which silks go with which owners, Rosas over the years has learned likes, dislikes and superstitions of many of the

country’s top owners, trainers and riders.

“You get to know all of the jockeys and owners pretty well, and a lot of them have their favorite sets,” she said. “Some have lucky silks; others have ones that are new or fit them just right ... you just learn those things over time and commit them to memory.”

Rosas is now working her third meeting at the picturesque Central Kentucky track. “I can’t wait to get to get to Keeneland,” she said in March. “The best horses, the best jockeys. It’s the cream of the crop.”

Ramsey said he also looks forward to Keeneland’s spring meeting each

year, if for no other reason than to see his big red ‘R’ once again prominently displayed in the winner’s circle.

“They say marriage is all about compromise, but I’m glad she came around to see things my way,” Ramsey chuckled when referring to his wife’s decision regarding the couple’s silks. “I think an owner’s silks become a part of his or her identity.

“Sure it’s ego-driven, but most successful people are that way. And I want to be as successful as I can possibly be.” 🐎

Steve Bailey is deputy news editor of *Thoroughbred Times*.



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Stonerside Farm



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