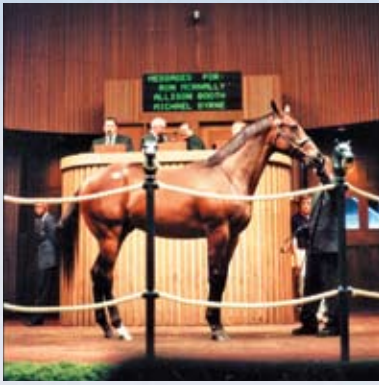


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ALL THE KINGS' HORSES

BY DAVID FEIGE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHELLY STRAZIS

AT KEENELAND RACETRACK'S ANNUAL YEARLING AUCTION, YOU CAN PLACE YOUR BID FOR THE NEXT THOROUGHBRED CHAMPION ALONGSIDE THE EMIR OF DUBAI.



Opposite page: Hip 442, auctioned for \$450,000. This page, background: Unbridled Song's mane frame. Inset, clockwise from top left: bidding for Hip 495; horsing around at Keeneland; taking offers for Hip 496.

IN A PRETTY BARN NEAR KEENELAND racetrack, a nameless horse is about to find out just how much she's worth. In the auctioneer's argot, Hip 442 (identified by the hip tag bearing her auction number) is a dark brown filly sired by the 2002 Dubai World Cup winner Street Cry and born of the highly regarded Clever But Costly. Her one-page entry in the sale catalog lists all eight of her great-grandparents. In Thoroughbreds, lineage is destiny.

Every September, just as the Kentucky heat breaks, Keeneland, perhaps the most scenic racetrack in the country (most of the racing epic *Seabiscuit* was filmed there), plays host to one of Thoroughbred racing's most astonishing rituals: the yearling auction. In just two weeks, more than 4,000 horses will be bought and sold. Hundreds of millions of dollars will change hands, and the fastest horses of tomorrow will be identified by gimlet-eyed buyers based solely on genetics, and what horse people call "conformation," an assessment of a horse's bone and muscle structure. Not a single horse here has run a race. They haven't even been mounted.

Hip 442 started life, as most Thoroughbreds do, in a highly orchestrated and extraordinarily expensive union on a Kentucky stud farm. Though actually born on April 15, 2004, this horse has the same birthday as every other Thoroughbred foaled north of the equator: January 1. Unnamed, wobbly legged, and adorable, 442 spent her weanling months eating grass and gamboling with her mother around Taylor Made, a storied horse farm set on 1,600 verdant acres of rolling bluegrass hills about a half hour's drive from Keeneland.

Taylor Made is a one-stop-shopping system for people looking to buy racehorses. From private sales and consignments to boarding and breeding, they do just about everything but break and train racehorses—and even that they'll arrange.

With her stellar pedigree, there was never much question that 442 was headed for the yearling auction. And as she grew and matured into a 15-hand-tall perfect specimen of a racehorse, her prospects only looked brighter. In June, about three months before the auction, along with hundreds of other horses from the Taylor Made

barns, 442 began her auction prep: regular coat and tail work, and limited exposure to the sun.

On auction day, it's all hands on deck. With about 500 horses to sell daily, the auction is a supercharged trading machine. On average, a horse—often worth nearly a million dollars—will be sold every minute for more than eight hours. Around the pavilion, from the stone cafeteria to the barns, closed-circuit TVs broadcast the action.

About a quarter of a mile from the pavilion, along a pristine dirt path that wends its way around the picturesque barns of the racetrack, 442 is resting in an immaculately kept Taylor Made stall. Flute music is playing quietly in the background. And right about the time that Hip 384 provokes a furious bidding war, pitting Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the emir of Dubai—who arrived in Lexington in two massive 747s (one for him and another for his brother)—against the famed Irish horse magnate John Magnier, resulting in a record-setting price of \$9.7 million, the call goes out to start 442 on her own trek to the auction block. >



Handlers hold their horses in the auction house. Opposite page: one of Keeneland's strapping young yearlings.

As soon as she's led out into the crisp air, four women set to work—one polishes her hooves, another brushes her tail, a third touches up her face, while the fourth sprays Kentucky Sheen on her coat and mane. Within five minutes she's the most beautiful horse I've ever seen. Then, minutes before 442 is to begin her trek to the auction pavilion, Dr. Bill Baker appears with what looks like a small vacuum cleaner for a last-minute inspection for an anonymous buyer. Dr. Baker deftly shoves a tube up her nose, peering through a device that only an otolaryngologist could love. Baker wears a perfect poker face. "OK, good deal," he says, removing the scope and nodding contentedly. The whole process takes less than three minutes.

The "top-off team"—six people now—moves in. One trims 442's whiskers and shines her nose. Two more spray VO5 on her mane and tail. More Kentucky Sheen is applied with a car-polish mitt, the whites of her hocks are baby-powdered, and a mixture of baby oil and mineral oil brings her hooves to a glossy shine.

As if on cue, 442 cranes her neck forward and nuzzles Beth, the handler who'll lead her to the ring, a lock of hair falling demurely in front of her ear. "I dunno," Beth says to me. "I wouldn't be able to sell her." But with 20 hips to go, it's time to do just that. Beth takes a gentle hold of the custom bridle and with the tiniest of nods sets off into the crisp Kentucky sunlight.

With the noise of the auction pavilion rising in the distance, I can feel the horse's nervousness. And sure enough, as she steps off the dirt track onto the first of two large ovals, she delivers a passionate whinny. Beth gives a little



ground, spins her in a tight circle, and calms her down. Four horses parade around each oval as spectators ooh and ah, and potential buyers murmur, making notations in the guides listing each horse. “The Super Bowl of auctions,” famed trainer Bob Baffert mutters to me before sauntering off to ogle Hip 435.

Hip 432 goes for \$850,000, 433 for \$800,000—and 442 moves up an oval. Hip 437 sells for \$270,000, 438 for a cool half million to a man in the back bidding by lifting his coffee cup. The auctioneer’s voice is a blur as 440 racks up another half million—and 442 steps into the chute that leads directly into the auction ring. Beth hands her off to a ring handler, the paperwork is assembled, and, finally, she’s ready.

Inside the pavilion, padded chairs are arrayed along a tiered semicircle. On a raised dais at the base, three auctioneers keep a practiced rhythm as, below them, green-jacketed bid spotters yelp with every new bid. Justin Holmberg is doing the chant, a spellbinding blend of exhortation and enumeration. A second-generation auctioneer and a graduate of the Missouri Auction School, Holmberg is built like a linebacker and sports a diamond-encrusted horseshoe ring. He’s been going to auctions since he was 6 years old. “I still get a rush from it,” he tells me later. (Earlier in the day, he’d sold a \$6 million horse.)

“Hip 442, a dark bay or brown filly sired by the 2002 Dubai World Cup winner Street Cry, out of

Clever But Costly,” Holmberg intones as she’s led into the ring. The bidding starts fast and furious, jumping instantly from \$50,000 to \$150,000. Within 10 seconds it’s to more than \$300,000. 350 ... 400 ... At 425 there’s a discernible pause as Holmberg massages the crowd, looking to get every last dollar onto the tote board above his head. There’s a moment of silence, an audible beat, and then, just before the hammer falls, \$450,000. “Is that it?” Holmberg asks almost rhetorically. It seems to be. The hammer falls, a gate opens, 442 is led out, 443 is led in, and the wild bidding rumpus begins again.

Ten minutes later, with 442 contentedly munching some hay, seemingly oblivious to her half-million-dollar value, Stewart Armstrong, a bank president from San Antonio, and his family come to see their new prize. Armstrong has bought about a dozen yearlings over the years and has had most of them broken in Kentucky. “She’ll stay around here for a few months,” he tells me as his son gently strokes the family’s newest potential prizewinner, “and then we’ll probably send her to do some track training in Florida. By then we’ll know if she’s willing to run.”

“Any idea what you’ll name her?” I wonder aloud. Armstrong glances at his wife. She shrugs. A trailer pulls up, a nameless horse is piled in, and half a million dollars of rippling flesh heads off to a new life as a racehorse. □

ON THE BLOCKS

The Keeneland yearling auctions (www.keeneland.com) are open to the public. Anyone can wander in, inspect the horses, and, after a thorough credit check, bid. But book early. The September yearling sale generates more air traffic into Bluegrass Airport than it gets at any other time of the year. Delta flies there, and most major hotel chains, including Hyatt and Sheraton, have hotels in downtown Lexington, less than 20 minutes away. Depending on blood-stock and conformation, Thoroughbred yearlings can cost anywhere from a few thousand dollars to well over a million (plus 6 percent

Kentucky sales tax). If you’re serious, it’s best to bring your own vet to scope the horse’s respiratory system and inspect the medical charts and X-rays on file in a special office near the auction ring. And remember, from the moment you’ve placed the winning bid and signed for your purchase, you own a living, breathing animal that requires sustenance. While most consigners are good for a little post-purchase hay, the horses need to be moved within 24 hours. The good news? Tex Sutton, a shipping company for horses, has a booth on the premises and can schedule an airlift in no time.