

BACK TO SCHOOL

Buying a yearling is the easiest part of acquiring a racing prospect. Next for the young Thoroughbred lies many lessons to be learned, with patience and experience going a long way toward ensuring these lessons are taught well. Aside from merely accepting a bit, a saddle, and a rider, the developing racehorse needs to become accustomed to the routine of the backside, the tight quarters of a starting gate, and how to relax when racing in company. Equally important, the young athlete must be fit and ready to compete when it moves on to the track. In this special section are insights into some of the country's leading training centers and what makes their programs successful year after year. With research, finding a quality training center can be the second-easiest decision an owner can make.

BENCHMARK

Texas Chrome is the most recent success story to come out of Benchmark Training Center in North Texas. The son of Grasshopper won the Texas Stallion Stakes at Lone Star Park May 15 and has since finished third in the Matt Winn Stakes (gr. III) at Churchill Downs and second in the Iowa Derby (gr. III) at Prairie Meadows.

Benchmark is owned and operated by Gerwyn "Taffy" Jones. The training center covers 100 acres near Quinlan, Texas, which is about 40 miles east of Dallas. Benchmark is not only close to Lone Star Park but centrally located to the region's other top racetracks, including Oaklawn Park in Hot Springs, Ark.; Remington

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Park in Oklahoma City, Okla.; and Harrah's Louisiana Downs near the Texas border in Bossier City, La.

Jones is a lifelong horseman who began his racing career more than 35 years ago in Wales. He worked extensively on the East Coast of the United States before taking his talents to Texas. Jones has been building the foundation of successful racehorses at Benchmark for 19 years.

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Benchmark's facilities, highlighted by its five-furlong training track and multi-stalled starting gate, make it an ideal spot for conditioning young horses.

"Slow education is good education," said Jones. "We like to keep our horses happy, and training on our own track without interference is a huge advantage."

The farm recently added a new barn, giving it three modern-style facilities with all the right amenities. Benchmark also features a Eurociser and offers a variety of turn-out paddocks that range from one to five acres, which allow layups to return to the track in top condition.

The Benchmark team is keen on sales prep as well, having already made a name for the training center at auctions throughout Florida, Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma.

Jones estimates that 80-90% of horses that receive their early lessons at Benchmark win once they get to the track. He believes the training center's stellar results are the reason the facility has clients from all over the country.

"Our percentage rate of winners has been a key to our success," Jones said. "Because of word-of-mouth about the successful way we turn out horses, clients send them to us from all over the country. We get them ready to go to the track, and once they show up, they're close to ready to start running. We have a reputation of doing a good job and producing a good horse."

WES CARTER TRAINING

When preparing young horses to make their way to the racetrack, Wes Carter has his own mantra.

"Our training ideology is mind, body, and spirit," the South Carolina horseman said. "We just don't get them fit and speed crazy. It's more about having them as mentally capable as they are physically conditioned. That's the most important part of it, in my opinion. You can get them fit, but once they get to the racetrack they could wash out in the paddock or wash out in the gate, and they won't perform up to the level they are capable."

Carter's training grounds near Bamberg, S.C., puts about 40 horses a year through



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Most training centers for young horses focus on fitness and education

their early paces. While the facility is 65 acres, Carter has leased an additional 700 acres behind his center that he uses to trial-ride on. His focus is on education.

"We have a relaxed atmosphere and try to offer a little more education before they get to the racetrack," he said. "It's a hectic life at the racetrack and babies don't learn as well as they do at the farm. We've got starting gates and we have a little turf course, and we've got a lot more options. We have turnout paddocks for everybody so they can run it out a bit before we start on

them in the morning. They generally learn better in that atmosphere. They're well educated when they leave my place."

One of Carter's main advantages is the size of the operation.

"We're small...I know all the horses by their first name," he said. "That's important. A lot of the training centers today have 200-head or so and they might lose track of some and some horses might get overlooked. The big training centers handle so many horses they're going to have a high number of stakes horses and that stuff but it is more because of their numbers than their procedures."

Carter, who has owned the training center for more than 25 years, evaluates each horse and is never in a rush.

"We spend the first month just educating them on how to carry the tack, carry the rider, turn, and stop," he said. "They are broke well enough that you can lead them out of the stall by yourself, get on a bale of hay, put your foot in the stirrup, and step up on them. Most people don't go to that extent of educating horses these days."

Carter's expertise goes beyond breaking and training young horses. He also offers sale consulting, representation, and prep and is knowledgeable in Thoroughbred pedigrees to offer analysis.

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BREAKING & TRAINING SPECIAL ADVERTISING SECTION

The training center is only 45 miles from the Aiken training center and Carter noted the experience of working at Aiken allows horses to receive more of a racetrack atmosphere early on in their training.

KIRKWOOD STABLES

Kip Elser keeps things pretty simple when describing his Kirkwood Stables near Camden, S.C.

"We've got a long, proven history of producing a good product," he said succinctly. "A lot of good horses have come out of here."

And he's right. Elser and the Kirkwood team have selected and trained a long list of top runners. Grade II winner Tom's Ready was selected by Elser and given his early education at Kirkwood as was New York Derby winner Hit It Once More. Recent graduates include Recepta, who was just narrowly beaten in the July 23 Diana Stakes (gr. IT) at Saratoga and has earned nearly \$700,000.

Grade I winners Plum Pretty, Winter Memories, and Marsh Side are just a few in the parade of hit makers to get their early schooling done at Kirkwood.

Not only starting and training horses, but bringing horses to major sales over the years, Kirkwood has consigned sale-toppers at Calder, Barretts, Keeneland, and Tattersalls, including a then-record \$4.5 million Fusaichi Samurai. And Elser continues to be hands-on with all of the horses that come through the gates. His experience and expertise continue to bring success to Kirkwood Stables, the horses and all of their connections.

Elser, a former steeplechase rider, has been involved with Thoroughbreds for more than 40 years and knows how to prepare them for their racing career.

"We're trying to build confidence and create a racehorse that's a willing participant, so the mental education is just as important as the physical," he said.

"Horses are not machines that respond uniformly to mass-produced training regimens; rather, they are individuals who require patience, tailored programs, and

knowledge, which comes with experience figuring out what makes the great ones tick."

The Kirkwood staff is headed by assistant trainer and South Carolina native James Layden Jr.

"He's a top-notch horseman in his own right, and we have a good and loyal staff that has been with us a long time," Elser said.

Layden previously worked for Jane B. Dunn's Holly Hill Training Center and was involved with starting and training stars such as Eight Belles and Blame.

Another key to Kirkwood's success is its location within Springdale Race Course.

"The main thing is we have lots of room," Elser said.

Kirkwood consists of two dirt tracks: one is a mile in circumference; the other is five-eighths of a mile. There are also miles of turf gallops.

"We've got 500-plus acres owned by the state of South Carolina to train on, and it's all meticulously maintained," Elser said.

A proven history, location, and results—Kirkwood's winning trifecta.

MARGAUX FARM

Much of what makes Margaux Farm a top-notch breaking and training center is obvious. Immediately apparent while touring the 640 rolling acres in Central Kentucky are the farm's three different training tracks, an arena, spacious paddocks, and Eurociser walkers.

Below the surface, however, is an equally essential reason for the farm's success—a commitment to clear and open communication between owners and the staff, which is as important as the high level of care the facility provides each horse.

"Whenever your horse is here, you'll always know how it is doing," said Michael Hardy, general manager of Margaux Farm, which is owned by Jim and Susan Hill. "Everything is extremely transparent. We have a lot of owners, breeders, and bloodstock agents in the area who are involved with these horses, and we encourage them to come out to the farm and watch their hors-

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es train. They should get as much pleasure out of the training as they do racing.”

The staff keeps thorough records on each horse’s progress and provides clients with weekly notes and regular phone calls.

“Communication is easy, ongoing, and always informative,” said client Laurie Benson with Dunwoody Farm.

Margaux’s three different training tracks are unique among training centers. The farm has a 1¼-mile turf course; a 1½-mile Tru-Stride synthetic; and a five-furlong undulating synthetic circuit, where horses do a lot of jogging to build up muscle and stamina. The 1½-mile track is a straight strip that allows for speed work prior to sending a horse on to the racetrack. Also available is a five-furlong turf gallop with a three-furlong straight and an uphill bend. In addition to breaking and training, the farm accepts horses for layups, rehabilitation, and freshening.

Some of Margaux’s top graduates include grade I stakes winner Divisidero, who captured the Woodford Reserve Turf Classic (gr. IT) on Kentucky Derby day this year. Trained by Buff Bradley and owned by Gunpowder Farms, the Kitten’s Joy colt also won the American Turf Stakes (gr. IIT) one year earlier at Churchill Downs. Other top runners include the Hills’ own grade I winner Grand Arch and graded stakes winners Lightstream, Avanzare, Delightful Joy, and

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Solid Appeal.

Margaux is equipped to handle mare care and foaling, making it a full-service operation for owners/breeders as well.

“It is a great opportunity for owners to retire their race fillies here and come full circle,” Hardy said. “We can be the small owner’s big farm and can raise a horse from birth until their departure to the racetrack. They can have the confidence that this is their farm with a team that looks after everything.”

NANCY TERHUNE TRAINING CENTER

Training racehorses has been all Nancy Terhune ever wanted to do. After finishing college in Virginia, she headed straight to Kentucky where her first job was with trainer Mark Fredwest.

By 1983 she had her trainer’s license and began following her passion on the back-sides of racetracks throughout the Midwest. Just as her career was progressing, illness derailed her dream. Several surgeries followed and the demands of the racetrack became difficult to manage.

“I needed an easier way to get back into the business,” Terhune said.

A longtime friend and college classmate

of Terhune’s mother would open the door to her next opportunity. The friend, Sandy Dubose, owned a farm near Camden, S.C., and had her eyes on retirement, but she didn’t want just anyone taking over her farm.

Terhune and Dubose met for the first time in 1997 and quickly reached an arrangement that allowed Dubose to live out her retirement on the 55-acre farm while Terhune assumed ownership of the breaking and training business.

The operation was turn-key with a five-furlong track, three barns, a starting gate, several one-acre paddocks, and pastures between three and seven acres. When horses are ready for longer gallops, Terhune has Springdale Race Course only five minutes away. Home to the Carolina Cup and Colonial Cup steeplechases, Springdale has a one-mile dirt track, a two-mile European-style turf course, and a seven-furlong turf course.

“We do a lot of gate work, pretty much every day, and for a two-minute lick, we can go to Springdale,” Terhune said.

Terhune’s training center is rich in experience, too. Assistant trainer Juan Preciado has worked at the training center for 15 years, and exercise rider Patricio Guarda handles the breaking and works



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ANNE M. EBERHARDT

A well-trained, veteran staff is a hallmark of the top training centers

year-round with layups.

Grade III winner Thorny Crown is among the top horses to come out of the training center's program. Raced by Dubose, he earned \$461,271. Other top horses include multiple stakes winners Silver Heart, who earned \$596,824; and Aspenglow, who won four stakes and earned \$465,698. Both raced for Terhune.

"The greatest feature of the training center is its location," said Terhune. "The weather is perfect here in the winter. It is cold enough where it is natural for the horses, but we don't have to deal with frozen ground. We might lose up to seven days, but for the most part you can train every day."

WOODFORD THOROUGHBREDS

Woodford Thoroughbreds' Central Florida facility is a model for success in the field of breaking and training because of a unique approach that combines swimming with under-tack work. The combined regimens produce physically complete horses that are well-rounded in speed and stamina.

The 2015 addition of a dock alongside the pond at the center of Woodford's recently resurfaced five-furlong dirt track has proved to be a wise addition. Regular swimming sessions are easy on young horses' joints and bones, while still building the juveniles' cardiovascular strength.

"It's certainly added to their fitness," said farm general manager Matt Lyons.

"After their morning routine on-track, the horses swim several times a week. It's really helped our gallop-out times at the 2-year-old sales as well."

The operation also features a 1½-mile European-style turf course carved into the surrounding woods and recently added three new paddocks and an exercising free walker.

"It is a great place to start out young horses," Lyons noted. "They get to see a little bit of everything when they go out there, including turkey and deer."

Woodford continuously evaluates its program to identify and manage any obstacle on the path to producing horses that are "gate-ready."

Farm trainer John Gleason said: "Early on we do a lot of ground work, line driving, getting them used to passing other horses before they get on the track. We've got a really kind surface, and we put a lot of miles on the horses. We train Christmas Eve and the day after Christmas—there's no four-day weekends around here. We have an ample staff with time and energy to pay attention to every horse's smallest detail."

After training season, the multi-functional farm transforms into a yearling prep facility, allowing Woodford's staff to stay together throughout the year.

The 1,000-acre facility, once home to Cloverleaf Farm, was reopened and rebranded by owner John Sykes in 2009. The seven-year-old operation hasn't wasted any time producing some of racing's elite horses that have found success both in the sales ring and on-track, headlined by Longines Breeders' Cup Distaff (gr. I) winner Stopchargingmaria. Woodford Thoroughbreds also sold a 2-year-old daughter of Tapit for a record \$1.9 million in 2015 at OBS April, and 2016 highlights include Fun (grade III stakes-placed in the Schuylerville Stakes at Saratoga July 22), Let It Ride Mom, R Incredible Life—all three winners in their first starts—and \$200,00 Florida Sire Desert Vixen Stakes (Aug. 6) winner Cajun Delta Dawn. **BH**

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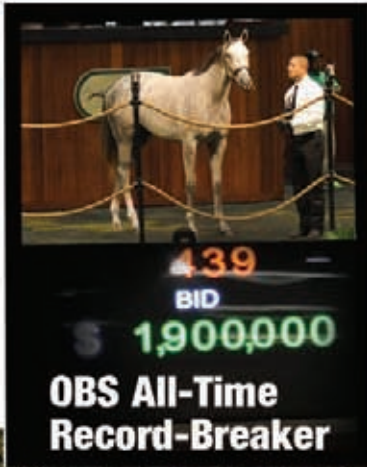
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