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Building on Momentum

Racing at Fonner Park drew global attention in 2020

ELLIS COLLINS

After finding a way in 2020, Nebraska racing sees opportunity through casino gaming

BY AMANDA DUCKWORTH

IN ADDITION TO the normal chaos of opening weekend, Fonner Park CEO Chris Kotulak and his head of security spent the days leading up to the meet that began Feb. 19 spraying yellow paint on the snow and ice covering the track's parking lot in an effort to create some semblance of organization to guide returning fans.

They knew spectators were coming back to Fonner and not even Old Man Winter would delay their return. Even though the track had gained

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2021 LEADING SIRES IN CANADA

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Rank	Stallion (Foreign foaled), (YOB,Sire), Where Stands	2021 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	BT SWnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2021 Earnings	Foals	Cumulative		
									Stks Wnrs	A-E Index	Comp Index
1	FED BIZ (09, Giant's Causeway), HIGHFIELD	\$4,000	74/13	1/1	0/1	(Zenden, \$50,250)	\$414,293	*336	9	1.02	1.33
2	POINT OF ENTRY (08, Dynaformer), Adena Springs North	\$7,500	64/10	0/0	0/0	(Alhajrafee, \$33,066)	\$351,709	*298	10	1.20	1.70
3	SUNGOLD (02, A.P. Indy), Flying Horse Farm	\$3,000	2/1	0/0	0/0	(Anothersunnyday, \$24,800)	\$30,260	83	9	0.78	1.02
4	SILVER MAX (09, Badge of Silver)	Pnsd	1/1	0/0	0/0	(Maximizer, \$29,460)	\$29,460	59	0	1.04	1.64
5	LEONNATUS ANTEAS (04, Stormy Atlantic)	Died, 2018	4/1	0/0	0/0	(Foxy Belle, \$21,060)	\$27,973	103	2	0.95	1.11
6	RELOAD (09, Hard Spun), Northern Dawn Stables	\$4,000	1/1	0/0	0/0	(Rocket Reload, \$27,600)	\$27,600	73	1	1.96	1.45
7	SILENT NAME (JPN) (02, Sunday Silence), Adena Springs North	\$7,500	7/2	0/0	0/0	(Silent Jet, \$13,840)	\$22,822	*486	27	1.46	1.25
8	WHERE'S THE RING (99, Seeking the Gold), Colebrook Farms Stallion Station	\$3,000	7/2	0/0	0/0	(Neil's Diamond, \$10,726)	\$22,807	370	9	1.28	1.31
9	SOUPER SPEEDY (09, Indian Charlie), T. C. Westmeath Stud Farm	\$5,000	5/0	0/0	0/0	(Il Malocchio, \$10,000)	\$19,370	117	7	1.87	1.53
10	OLD FORESTER (01, Forestry), T. C. Westmeath Stud Farm	\$4,000	8/1	0/0	0/0	(Bayleaf, \$6,480)	\$18,144	510	21	1.44	1.41

2021 LEADING SIRES IN MINNESOTA

Rank	Stallion (Foreign foaled), (YOB,Sire), Where Stands	2021 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	BT SWnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2021 Earnings	Foals	Cumulative		
									Stks Wnrs	A-E Index	Comp Index
1	EYE OF THE LEOPARD (06, A.P. Indy), Osborne Farm	\$1,500	3/1	0/0	0/0	(Eye of a Jedi, \$24,250)	\$32,450	51	1	0.56	1.84
2	KELA (98, Numerous)	N/A	5/0	0/0	0/0	(Roses for Doug, \$980)	\$1,704	*298	4	0.91	0.89

international acclaim for how it handled the trials of 2020 when racing continued without spectators, everyone was looking forward to letting the fans back in at the Grand Island, Neb., track that has always enjoyed strong community support.

"I lost track of how many people stopped me over the course of opening weekend to thank me for not only pushing on with racing last year even though they couldn't attend, but also for allowing people to come to the races this year," Kotulak said. "My response to everyone is that it is a collaborative effort between the horsemen, the staff, and the community."

Fonner was one of the unexpected bright spots in racing last year, and things continue to look up at the track and for Nebraska racing overall as state voters in November approved legislation that will allow casino gaming at tracks. That will

provide a boost for purses and already has spurred investment in track facilities.

That optimism could continue a roll that began after the steepest of hurdles. On March 16, 2020, Roger Steele, mayor of Grand Island, called Kotulak to tell him that the racing season had to be suspended due to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. Kotulak had just become CEO seven months prior.

But how Kotulak and his team handled the news helped propel the track to new heights although they acknowledge those calls were made in 2020 in an effort to survive. Now, they are looking forward, and the track's new-found fame—combined with casino gaming—means Fonner is poised to continue to strengthen its place within its community.

"When the mayor called, saying he needed to shut down our racing opera-

tions, I understood, but then I pitched the idea of continuing to race without spectators," Kotulak said. "It didn't take much convincing. He knew that I had a very important liability on my hands, and that was a full stable of horses and horsemen.

"By attrition we were becoming one of the few tracks that were going to operate. To me it was silly to try and compete against Gulfstream, Santa Anita, and Oaklawn. I thought it would be a good idea to carve out our own little niche."

In an effort to carve out that niche, the track shifted its race schedule from the weekend to Monday-Wednesday to avoid competition with bigger tracks. With local government support, Fonner was granted a two-week trial period that began March 23 to hold a spectatorless meet.

On the first day of the trial period, all sources pari-mutuel handle surpassed \$1.3 million dollars and broke the previous record of \$1.2 million established in 1983. As a result, ADWs, open tracks, and betting services from around the world began to take the Fonner simulcast signal. The track ran an extended meet that concluded May 27 after adapting its standard 11-week racing season into a 15-week season.

A year later—although the pandemic is not over—things have begun to open up to various degrees around the world, including in racing. Fans are allowed to come back to Fonner, and that was something everyone was keen to achieve. Knowing on-track support



CHRIS KOTULAK

Snow and ice greeted Fonner Park's opening in mid February

is a strength, management has returned weekend racing to Fonner.

"Never did I ever have any expectation that we would come back in 2021 and dabble around with a Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday venture," Kotulak said. "We are one of the very few racetracks that routinely sell out for an 11-week racing season. We are not marketing ourselves properly if we are racing at 4 p.m. on a Tuesday afternoon."

If Fonner, which opened in 1954, seems to be a passion for Kotulak, that's because it is. Long before he was CEO, he was the track announcer. Life took an unexpected turn in 2018, leading him to become the COO, and when Bruce Swihart, Fonner's longtime CEO, retired in 2019, he asked Kotulak to be his replacement.

"At age 25, the first race I ever called live to the public was the opening race at Fonner Park in February 1986," Kotulak said. "I was here for 10 years before I ended up going elsewhere. My best friend was Todd Otto. He was working at Fonner when I was there, and he eventually became COO.

"He died suddenly in 2018, and when I came back for the funeral that April, I made an off-handed remark to Bruce if there was anything I could do, please let me know. He said, 'I will talk to the board tomorrow morning.' So, when I was driving back to Oklahoma, where I lived at the time, I told my wife, 'Well, this just happened...'"

Few things seem straightforward these days, and Kotulak's second opening weekend at the helm was put in jeopardy last month, not because of disease but because of weather.

"Mother Nature and Old Man Winter teamed up and had a heck of a double whammy on us, but we fought through it," Kotulak said. "Typically, we will have the main track closed a time or two in January or February leading up to opening weekend, but nothing to the extent of what happened this year. Having the main track closed for two weeks leading up to opening day was almost unheard of."

The less-than-ideal weather meant that not only was Kotulak using spray paint and orange cones to make the parking lot usable, some horses couldn't ship in and field sizes were smaller than expected. However, it didn't keep bettors or fans away. According to the track, the out-of-state handle for opening weekend last year was roughly \$160,000. This year it exceeded \$1.2 million.

"Simulcasting, we just hit it out of the park again," Kotulak said. "There wasn't one racetrack or bet-taking service that didn't renew their contract with us from where we finished off last year. Does that mean they all played with as much enthusiasm and were all those eyes looking and betting on us again? Of course not, but there was still a significant number."

As for the fans, they showed up, too, although with new rules in place. The governor of Nebraska has opened the state up to 100% capacity, but Fonner is opting to stay at 75%, and while the city mandate for masks ended Feb. 23, the track will continue to enforce its own mask rule.

"I don't want Fonner Park to be blamed as the next super spreader in central Nebraska," Kotulak said. "I am OK if we take some flak for it because if someone says they won't come because of it, we have plenty of other people lined up who want to come



NOMINATION DEADLINE APRIL 1, 2021

2021 MTA Stallion Auction Stakes

June 23, 2021 - Canterbury Park
\$60,000 G 6 1/2 Furlongs

All 2018 Progeny of the listed stallions are eligible for nomination, regardless of where they foaled!

<i>American Lion</i>	<i>Malad</i>
<i>Anziyan Royalty</i>	<i>Matt's Broken Vow</i>
<i>Atreides</i>	<i>Micromanage</i>
<i>Bahamian Squall</i>	<i>Midshipman</i>
<i>Bay of Biscay</i>	<i>Mr. Nightlinger</i>
<i>Classy Gent</i>	<i>Native Ruler</i>
<i>Commander's Shoes</i>	<i>New Year's Day</i>
<i>Cougar Cat</i>	<i>Optimizer</i>
<i>Country Day</i>	<i>Paddy O Prado</i>
<i>Cross Traffic</i>	<i>Perfect Soul</i>
<i>D Mac</i>	<i>Pies Prospect</i>
<i>Den's Legacy</i>	<i>Pollard's Vision</i>
<i>Doctor Chit</i>	<i>Power Broker</i>
<i>Drill</i>	<i>Raison D'Etat</i>
<i>El Caballo</i>	<i>Read the Footnotes</i>
<i>Elnaawi</i>	<i>Real Solution</i>
<i>Euroears</i>	<i>Rocky Bar</i>
<i>Escaper</i>	<i>Royal Challenger</i>
<i>Fast Anna</i>	<i>Run Away and Hide</i>
<i>Ford Every Stream</i>	<i>Sam Lord's Castle</i>
<i>Formidable</i>	<i>Save Big Money</i>
<i>Giant Oak</i>	<i>Sebastian County</i>
<i>Golden Ticket</i>	<i>Secret Circle</i>
<i>Gray Meteor</i>	<i>Self Control</i>
<i>Grey Swallow (Ire)</i>	<i>Shackleford</i>
<i>Guilt Trip</i>	<i>Shadow Hawk</i>
<i>Harbor the Gold</i>	<i>Sing Baby Sing</i>
<i>I Want Revenge</i>	<i>Sky Kingdom</i>
<i>Incognito Bandito</i>	<i>Slumber (GB)</i>
<i>Interactif</i>	<i>Smarty Jones</i>
<i>Jersey Town</i>	<i>Stroll</i>
<i>Keep Up</i>	<i>Tale of Ekati</i>
<i>Kela</i>	<i>Telling</i>
<i>King Cha Cha</i>	<i>The Hunk</i>
<i>Kipling</i>	<i>The Visualiser</i>
<i>Kirkendahl</i>	<i>Two Step Salsa</i>
<i>Latent Heat</i>	<i>War Correspondent</i>
<i>Launch Commander</i>	<i>War Dancer</i>
<i>Law Enforcement</i>	<i>Westover Wildcat</i>
<i>Lentenor</i>	<i>Wilburn</i>
<i>Line of David</i>	<i>Woke Up Dreamin</i>
<i>Magic Cat</i>	

\$300 nomination due April 1st!

Nomination Forms available
online at www.minnesotabred.com
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2021 LEADING SIRES IN NEBRASKA

For daily updated sire lists
visit BloodHorse.com

Rank	Stallion (Foreign foaled), (YOB,Sire), Where Stands	2021 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	BT SWnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2021 Earnings	Foals	Cumulative		
									Stks Wnrs	A-E Index	Comp Index
1	COURT VISION (05, Gulch), Pryor Ranch	\$2,500	35/7	0/0	0/0	(Wise Verdict, \$31,600)	\$204,979	*397	8	1.14	1.32
2	EL CABALLO (04, El Corredor), Rogers Ranch	Private	1/1	0/0	0/0	(Hatties Jewel, \$38,030)	\$38,030	36	0	0.47	0.63
3	COUGAR CAT (02, Storm Cat)	N/A	4/1	0/0	0/0	(Bartenders Mistake, \$4,752)	\$8,587	48	0	0.53	0.79

2021 LEADING SIRES IN IOWA

Rank	Stallion (Foreign foaled), (YOB,Sire), Where Stands	2021 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	BT SWnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2021 Earnings	Foals	Cumulative		
									Stks Wnrs	A-E Index	Comp Index
1	STROLL (00, Pulpit), Iowa State University Horse Farm	\$2,000	22/4	0/0	0/0	(Stroll Smokin, \$25,662)	\$124,802	*356	17	1.02	1.22
2	SING BABY SING (03, Unbridled's Song), Madison County Thoroughbreds	\$2,000	9/2	0/0	0/0	(Sombra Negra, \$7,142)	\$23,290	108	3	0.58	0.81
3	NATIVE RULER (04, Elusive Quality)	N/A	5/2	0/0	0/0	(Zella Rose, \$10,752)	\$21,818	78	1	0.91	0.77
4	WOKE UP DREAMIN (00, Holy Bull), Madison County Thoroughbreds	\$2,000	2/0	0/0	0/0	(Paint I Ain't, \$4,800)	\$4,800	203	5	0.77	0.87

who will wear a mask. I am happy the horsemen have been compliant also. They know the drill now; they get it, and they understand."

Kotulak has personal experience with COVID-19, as both he and his wife tested positive in October. However, even before falling ill, Kotulak was keen to do his best to protect those at his racetrack.

"Even going back to last March, I was running back and forth to JoAnn Fabrics buying bolts of fabric," he said. "We were cutting those up and handing them out to grooms so everyone at least had a bandana. You couldn't get masks at the time, so it was the next best thing at that point.

"Opening weekend (this year), I had 150 signs I was taping up saying 'No mask, no wagers,' but I would hope I would have done that even if I had never gotten sick. I had a low-grade version of it, but it was long lasting—nearly a month. I certainly wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. I don't want any fingers pointing back at Fonner Park saying we didn't do our share."

STATE OF GAMBLING

While Fonner's focus is on the current race meet, big changes are coming to Nebraska. In November nearly 65% of voters approved ballot initiatives to change the state's constitution to allow casinos at racetracks.

"The casino initiative that passed, Fon-

ner Park had next to nothing to do with, but we are grateful for it," Kotulak said. "We led the charge for historical horse racing, while (the) Ho-Chunk (Nation) and the Nebraska Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association led the charge for casino gaming, and they got to the wire first.

"They left the gate about two years before we did, and that's fine. We are proud of what they are shooting for, and if it is all for a stronger Nebraska horse racing industry, then I am all for it. We will choose a casino operator, hopefully, before the end of March."

In addition to the race meet, the property is also home to a complex of facilities, including a 6,000-seat arena and livestock expo buildings, which will require planning ahead of casino construction.

"There are a lot of things to consider when it comes to what will still be safe for the training and racing of Thoroughbreds, as well as other events on our property," Kotulak said. "Whatever sort of expansion there is, we have to take that into consideration. The Nebraska State Fair is on our property as well, and the fair will go on.

"We don't plan on raising or dropping a hammer until the state fair has come and gone, so that won't be until after Labor Day. If things fall into place in a timely manner, there's a small chance that by the holidays we could have some form of slot machines

paying off here in our concourse at Fonner."

Outside of Fonner things are moving at a swifter pace. WarHorse Gaming will be responsible for casino management and gaming operations at Lincoln Race Course, Horsemen's Park, and Atokad. Expanded gaming in some form is expected as early as late 2021, with full casino operations up and running during 2022.

"We've been able to survive in our little corner of the world for quite some time now, but I am hoping that within a couple of years we can go from surviving to thriving," said Nebraska HBPA president Robert Moser Jr. "That's what I really want for all Nebraska horsemen and all Nebraska breeders.

"This will lead to increased purses, so Nebraskans can get better stock. We are hoping to have the kind of purses that are competitive with the region and eventually with the nation. We think that this is going to restore Nebraska racing to Ak-Sar-Ben days, which is what the dream is and always has been."

The expectation is that the Nebraska racing calendar will increase as well. To do that, though, the breeding program, which has been in decline, will have to expand. In 2000, 147 Thoroughbreds were registered in Nebraska. That number was down to eight in 2020.

"If we really want to add 100-150 days, the breeding program has to increase or

Special Note For Sire Lists:

For stallions that stand, will stand, or stood (deceased) in the selected region (stallions that have died or been exported prior to the 2016 breeding season are excluded), and have runners in North America. Listed below are all available Northern Hemisphere statistics through February 21, 2021. As supplied to *The Blood-Horse* by The Jockey Club Information Systems, Inc., earnings include adjusted money from Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Adjusted earnings are put on par with average North American earnings from the previous year. For example, the average North American purse in 2019 is \$25,300 or 53% of the 2019 average purse in Japan. To put earnings on par, all Japanese progeny earnings are multiplied by 53% before being credited to a sire's progeny earnings. Hong Kong earnings are adjusted by 17%; Singapore by 85%. Current year stakes winners include all N.H.-foaled black-type stakes winners worldwide. *Foal counts include Southern Hemisphere. Cumulative stakes winners include all countries. (A ¶ indicates a sire represented by his first crop to race).

2021 LEADING SIRES IN OHIO



For daily updated sire lists visit BloodHorse.com

Rank	Stallion (Foreign foaled), (YOB,Sire), Where Stands	2021 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	BT SWnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2021 Earnings	Foals	Cumulative Stks Wnrs	A-E Index	Comp Index
1	SKY KINGDOM (09, Empire Maker), Maro Veterinary Services	\$2,000	25/4	1/2	1/1	(Australasia, \$105,000)	\$173,104	82	1	0.88	0.88
2	ITSMYLUCKYDAY (10, Lawyer Ron), Maro Veterinary Services	\$2,000	36/6	0/0	0/0	(Lucky Peridot, \$33,240)	\$145,278	183	2	0.92	1.09
3	MOBIL (00, Langfuhr), Mapleton Thoroughbred Farm	\$2,000	14/5	0/0	0/0	(Sweet Lemon Drop, \$23,200)	\$114,109	*217	6	1.27	1.26
4	COWTOWN CAT (04, Distorted Humor), Mapleton Thoroughbred Farm	\$2,000	21/5	0/0	0/0	(Milwaukee Cat, \$19,250)	\$109,806	250	5	1.16	1.16
5	KISS THE KID (03, Lemon Drop Kid)	Died, 2020	8/3	0/0	0/0	(Extravagant Kid, \$49,400)	\$102,695	62	1	1.22	1.43
6	DANZA (11, Street Boss), Fair Winds Farm	Private	27/3	0/0	0/0	(Dancing Grace, \$17,370)	\$97,420	140	2	0.66	0.91
7	DRILL (09, Lawyer Ron), Raimonde Farms	\$2,500	23/6	0/0	0/0	(Little Bit Good, \$19,200)	\$88,543	100	1	0.91	1.01
8	FORT LARNED (08, E Dubai), Duncan Farms	\$2,000	25/3	0/0	0/0	(Broad Storm, \$17,325)	\$62,756	*181	2	0.89	1.28
9	AWESOME PATRIOT (08, Awesome Again)	N/A	13/0	0/0	0/0	(Cariblanco, \$53,333)	\$61,453	*205	1	1.01	1.02
10	WESTERN PRIDE (98, Way West), R.C. Cline Thoroughbred Farm	\$1,500	9/3	0/0	0/0	(Cowgirl Chrome, \$17,950)	\$54,550	141	0	0.58	0.98
11	TWINSPIRED (08, Harlan's Holiday), Poplar Creek Horse Center	\$2,500	4/3	0/0	0/0	(Big Al's Express, \$22,300)	\$52,210	35	2	1.26	0.73
12	MEDAL COUNT (11, Dynaformer), Mapleton Thoroughbred Farm	\$2,000	19/2	0/0	0/0	(Hissy Missy, \$8,400)	\$46,811	84	0	0.37	0.88
13	KETTLE CORN (07, Candy Ride), Fair Winds Farm	\$2,500	10/1	0/0	0/0	(Flint Corn, \$19,085)	\$45,239	71	0	0.91	1.16
14	KENTUCKY DANE (00, Danehill), McFadden Farm	Died, 2020	5/2	0/0	0/0	(Estrella de Dane, \$20,300)	\$44,646	46	3	1.08	0.73
15	VAQUERO (06, Orientate)	N/A	8/2	0/0	0/0	(Kiss Me Cowgirl, \$16,500)	\$42,391	31	1	0.85	1.12

2021 LEADING SIRES IN INDIANA

Rank	Stallion (Foreign foaled), (YOB,Sire), Where Stands	2021 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	BT SWnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2021 Earnings	Foals	Cumulative Stks Wnrs	A-E Index	Comp Index
1	READY'S IMAGE (05, More Than Ready), Swifty Farms	\$2,000	12/2	0/0	0/0	(Star of Kodiak, \$33,920)	\$63,951	*399	7	0.82	1.09
2	GREELEY'S CONQUEST (04, Mr. Greeley), Breakway Farm	\$1,500	8/3	0/0	0/0	(Greeley and Ben, \$19,200)	\$46,422	71	1	0.83	0.90
3	CSABA (09, Kitten's Joy), R Star Stallions	\$2,000	8/3	0/0	0/0	(Buc's Investmint, \$11,050)	\$39,124	39	0	0.29	0.92
4	DUKE OF MISCHIEF (06, Graeme Hall)	N/A	11/3	0/0	0/0	(Miss Italy, \$17,132)	\$38,093	65	0	0.42	0.79
5	SANGAREE (05, Awesome Again)	Pnsd	6/2	0/0	0/0	(First Lady Maggie, \$16,575)	\$30,927	50	1	1.04	0.79

we won't be able to fulfill our live days," said Lynne McNally, executive vice president of the Nebraska HBPA. "Without the breeding program, you can't make any of the rest of it go.

"Judy Pryor went to Lexington last year and got some really notable stallions, like Court Vision and Giant Expectations, and she wasn't the only one. There were several other horsemen who spent some time at Keeneland, bought some stallions, bought some broodmares, and we are really looking forward to an explosion in the number of foals that are produced directly in the state of Nebraska."

One concern when it comes to bulking up the numbers of a regional market is that if a casino becomes successful, sometimes all the emphasis is placed on that gaming and the horsemen are pushed out. However, Nebraska is in a unique position.

"That is something that unfortunately has happened too often, but we are going into it with our eyes open," McNally said. "The horsemen's group actually owns the racetracks in the two biggest markets. We are the landlords, so if the gaming company tries to cut the horsemen out, they won't have the contract to conduct gaming anymore. It's a unique insurance policy."

As for Fonner, 2021 is set up to be a



Rendering of a WarHorse Gaming/racing facility

bridge between its unexpected fame in 2020 and the hopes that the influx of casino funds will make for a bright 2022 and beyond. That said, Thoroughbred racing will remain at the heart of what Fonner is, which is perhaps why it resonated with so many in a bleak time.

"All the world started watching us last year, and people have their favorite tracks, whether they are big or small," Kotulak said. "If we can become a favorite track for some people, that's all we can ask for. I could rattle off a dozen tracks that have closed this millennium. There is a tremendous responsibility for a facility that re-

mains open. We coined the phrase last year 'the little track that could,' and that's it. We know where we are on the national scene, and that works for us.

"My dear friend, Todd, I often think, 'Gosh, I sure wish he was here.' Not only to help me through it, but certainly also to be a part of all of this. There are a lot of people who gave their heart and soul to this place that would have never imagined what it is right now and what it potentially could become." **BT**

Amanda Duckworth is a freelance writer based in Lexington.