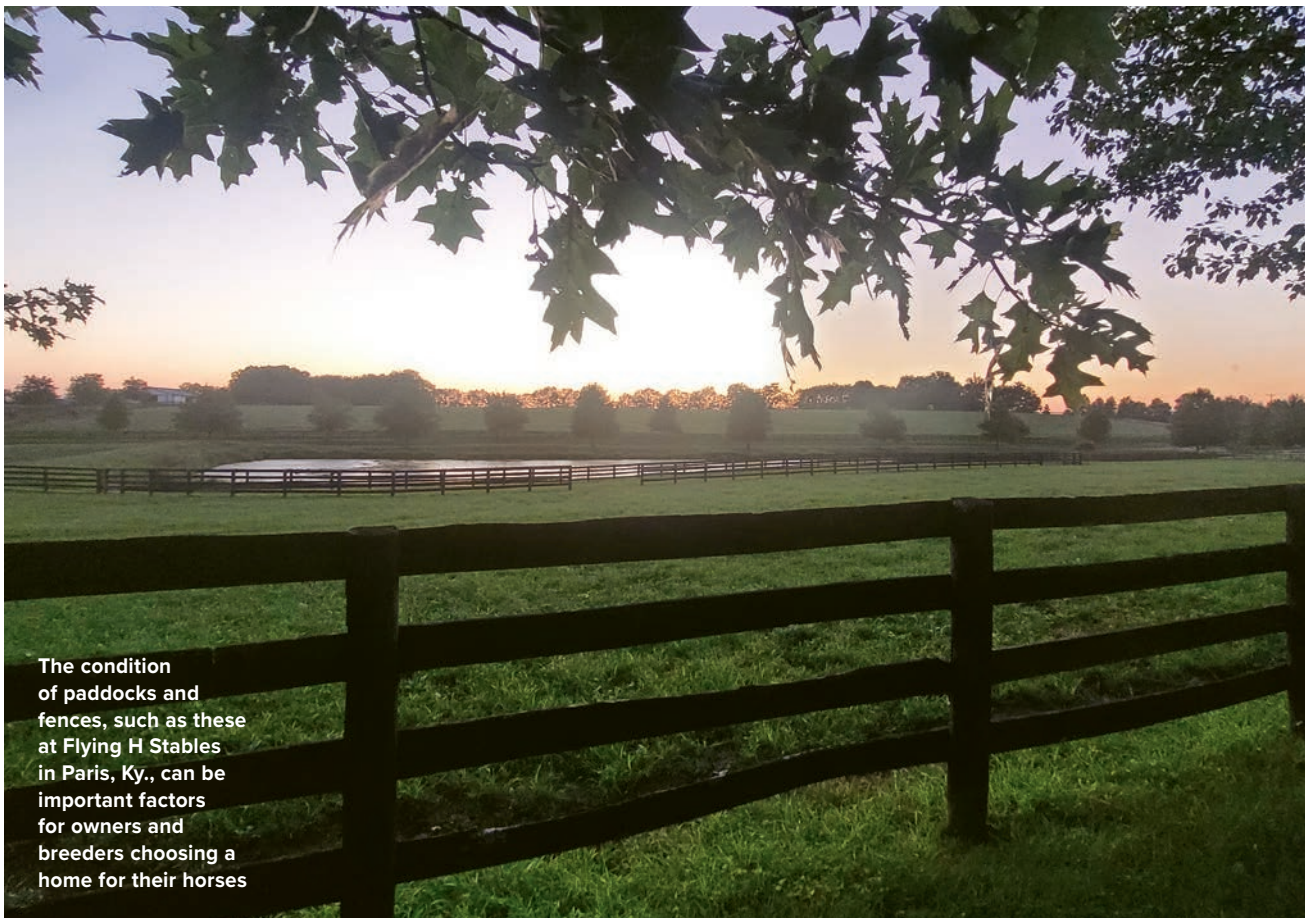


# FINDING THE RIGHT FIT

## BOARDING



The condition of paddocks and fences, such as these at Flying H Stables in Paris, Ky., can be important factors for owners and breeders choosing a home for their horses

## AT BOARDING FARMS ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

By CYNTHIA McFARLAND

**F**or every homebred raised on a private farm, there are many more Thoroughbred owners and breeders who place their horses at boarding farms—a decision that can be critical in a horse's development.

From large commercial operations to midsized and smaller family-owned and -operated farms, myriad boarding options are available for Thoroughbreds at all ages and stages of development.

What works for one owner might not be ideal for another. Fortunately for both horses and humans, there are plenty of choices. To find out what owners are looking for and what farms offer, we went straight to the sources, speaking

with Thoroughbred owners and breeders and farm owners in three different states.

### PART OF THE TEAM

After 24 years of working with Thoroughbred farms to market their stallions and services, Tandra Downs decided she wanted in the game herself.

The owner of Oxygen Advertising based in New Smyrna Beach, Fla., Downs has had her own agency since 1987. Although she has owned horses for trail riding for many years, in 2019 she wanted to be more active in the breeding and racing side of the Thoroughbred industry.

Currently, Downs owns two in-foal brood-

mares, one weanling, and one yearling about to go into training.

“The facilities where I board now are all from connections with people I’ve met and known through my work, and from recommendations of area horsemen I trust,” said Downs, who has long worked with Ocala, Fla., area operations and chose to board in that area. “From working with them, I knew their integrity and how well they took care of their horses.”

For foaling and boarding until mares are checked in foal, Downs uses Pleasant Acres and Stormborne Stallions. Both of her mares are currently in foal to stallions that stand at Pleasant Acres. For boarding of mares, foals, and weanlings, she relies on Stanley Meadows and Christine Jones. For breaking and training, her yearling is heading to Lisa McGreevy at Abbie Road Farm.

In choosing farms, Downs researched the staff’s experience and examined the condition of the pas-

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**—TANDRA DOWNS, OWNER**

tures, fencing, and barns.

“These facilities are part of your team, so you want to pick them carefully,” Downs added. “My horses are an investment, but they are also like family to me, so it’s important that they have happy, healthy lives. I want their homes to be nice and safe.”

Price is important because no one wants to overpay, but Downs emphasized that she expects to pay a competitive, comparable rate. While Downs keeps an eye on rates, she wouldn’t sacrifice in the areas previously mentioned—farm condition, quality staff—to save money.

Another crucial selling point for Downs is the opportunity to stay connected with her horses.

“The places where I board send me videos and photos, and I try to go see my horses in person a couple of times a month,” she said.

Because she doesn’t live in Ocala, Downs says it was essential for her to board at farms that are



Tandra Downs enjoys visiting Song On the Radio, her Long On Value yearling at Stormborne Stallions near Citra, Fla.

amenable to owner visits.

"I always coordinate visits ahead of time because I want it to be convenient for them; plus, I'm driving two hours," Downs said. "Sometimes, I set up photo shoots for my horses and for client horses, and all of these farms have been extremely gracious, and their staff are very helpful."

## FINDING A GOOD FIT

For Manny Cadima of Louisville, Ky., finding the right boarding facilities is an important aspect of his business, Thoroughbred Racing Nation, which offers affordable breeding and racing partnerships.

"We have horses at all different ages and stages of development. Unless a horse is retired, they are in a syndicate and right now we have 17 horses," Cadima said. "We breed almost all of our horses. When I had my own farm in Shelbyville, Ky., I'd raise them to yearlings, send them out to be broke, and then on to the race-track. I sold my farm a couple years ago, so now all of our horses are boarded out."

Cadima currently has mares and young horses at Pleasant Acres outside Ocala; mares at Sparks View Farm near Paris, Ky., and Edition Farm in Hyde Park, N.Y.; and horses in training at Churchill Downs and Belterra Park.

For Cadima, word of mouth has led to his finding good facilities.

"I know a lot of trainers and people in the industry, so I ask," he said. "Most of the places I board now I found based on the recommendation of people I respect."

He likes to visit the operation in person so he can get a good look at the facilities.

"I prefer block—not wood—barns and metal roofs for fire safety. It's a plus if there's a sprinkler system," said Cadima, who also likes to take a look at the hay and feed. "Since I had my own farm, I'm big on these things."

When it comes to non-negotiable attributes, Cadima says it all boils down to well cared-for horses, a quality feed program, and low turnover of experienced and happy staff.

"I have to have a good relationship with the person running the farm, and they need to be comfortable communicating with me," Cadima said. "I put

all my horses into individual syndicates, and any one horse can have many owners. Some of the syndicate owners like to visit the farms, not individually, but I like to be able to set up group visits and bring them out to the farms."

Like all other owners, Cadima wants to be kept informed about his horses, especially if there's a veterinary emergency. Cadima says that although price matters, an owner doesn't necessarily want to go just to the cheapest place because "you get what you pay for."

"If you are breeding and raising foals, it's great to have a farm that takes care of The Jockey Club and state registrations, breeders' awards, etc.," Cadima said. "Each state has somewhat different regulations and forms. The administrative filings and record-keeping stuff can be challenging, but it needs to be done. Managing these administrative requirements is a great service if a farm does this and then all we owners need to worry about is paying the fees."

## HELPING HORSES DEVELOP

Located near Paris, Ky., Flying H Stables was founded by Kent and Tracy Hersman in 2011, although

they were active in the Thoroughbred industry prior to that.

"Our core competency is foaling, mare care, and raising babies. That's our bread and butter, and we also do quite a bit of sales prep for weanlings and yearlings," said Kent Hersman, a lifelong horseman and 20-year military veteran.

Although he served in the Air Force and then flew helicopters and airplanes in the Army, Hersman says nothing he's done is as satisfying as having a horse he's foaled and raised go on to success.

"Early on we did a lot of advertising, and lately we've done some advertising again, but word of mouth has carried us a long way in the last several years," Hersman said. "One of our biggest advertisements are the horses when they're in the hands of the trainers. In the long run, horses with the mental capability to go to the track are the ones trainers want. We want to turn out horses that trainers will say, 'Where did this horse come from? He's got a brain!'"

One way of developing that mental fitness is their "pool training package," which includes 10 trips to



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RACING NATION

a nearby equine swimming facility. Hersman has found the van rides back and forth, the time in the pool, and the extra handling invaluable for yearlings preparing for a sale or going into training.

“We see the results quickly. The pool is good for exercise, but also a lot of desensitization takes place,” he noted. “We put a lot of emphasis on doing things right the first time. If you lay the groundwork, the client is happy, and in the end the horse does better at the track.”

The farm emphasizes price, personality, and professionalism.

“You need a realistic price for the client; personality that makes for an open, receptive relationship; and professionalism to turn out the best product,” said Hersman. “We’re willing and able to do specialized care when a mare needs extra help. Some of them have to be fussed over to make it to that foaling date.”

For a nominal charge, the farm routinely files paperwork and submits registration photos so clients are ensured these tasks are done correctly and in a timely manner.

The Hersmans typically take photos about once a month to help clients keep up with their horses. They always welcome owners to schedule a visit to see their horses and relax in the Bluegrass.

## PRIME LOCATION

Bonita Farm has been in business since 1960 when it was started by *Baltimore Sun* racing editor William Boniface and his wife, Mary Louise. Today the 396-acre farm continues its tradition as a full-service operation, with Boniface’s son J. William (Bill) Boniface at the helm.

Bonita Farm offers breeding and foaling, mare and foal boarding, breaking, training, and lay-ups. The facility is home to about 85 horses and typically foals about 30 mares each year. The farm stands two freshman sires—Alliance and Kobe’s Back—whose first crops are running this year.

“We like to advertise that we’re a one-stop facility. From breeding and foaling to raising and training, and then horses can return here to do it all over again,” said Bill Boniface. “We try to get the most bang for our buck from advertising, but I would say word of mouth has been more success-

ful than advertising. A client who has a horse here brings a friend by and then that person becomes a client. We try to do a good job and people recognize it. We have a number of really longtime clients, and I think they appreciate everything we do here with their horses.”

A big bonus is that the farm has 350 acres of pasture, which stay in prime condition because fields are never overcrowded.

Since a number of clients live out of state, Boniface says it’s routine practice to take photos of their horses, especially foals, and to update the owners by emailing photos. When clients are able to visit, Boniface says the farm keeps an open-door policy.



Mares and foals in a paddock at Flying H Stables, where owners Kent and Tracy Hersman put an emphasis on foaling and raising babies

“Owners can come by and see their horses any time we’re here, which is seven days a week,” he said. “And, of course, if anything happens with a horse veterinary-wise, owners are notified immediately.”

Bonita Farm facilitates all necessary paperwork so owners don’t have to worry about keeping up with deadlines.

“We do the micro-chipping, fill out foal registrations on all the client horses here, and transfer the foal certificates,” said Boniface, noting that clients are very appreciative of this service.

There are multiple reasons that Bonita Farm’s

clients are happy with the operation. Location plays a big role.

“We’re in the mid-Atlantic region, and we’re very close to interstate highways and have access to many different racetracks. This makes it easy to move horses, and that’s a unique thing for us,” Boniface said. “We (Maryland) have intense competition from Pennsylvania and bordering states. Every state wants to capitalize on its program, so it’s a very competitive game for mares as these program



Mares and foals enjoy individual paddocks at veterinarian Jean White’s farm near Reddick, Fla.

incentives work to keep mares in those states.”

He notes that a good number of Bonita Farm’s clients breed to race.

“The Maryland fund program is still good. We took a bounce with COVID like everyone did, but (the industry) is coming back,” added Boniface. “With state programs and purse structures today, it’s feasible for an owner to get their investment back when raising and racing a homebred.”

## A VET’S EYE

Smart horsemen know that one of the best boarding options in the Ocala area is with Jean White.

Although the longtime veterinarian doesn’t have a fancy farm name, owners trust that horses sent to her place are in good hands.

White maintains three farms in the northwest section of Marion County, two of which are her boarding facilities. The “home farm” where White resides is a 43-acre facility focused on mare care, foaling, and sales prep. Nearby is an 85-acre, 38-stall operation she uses specifically for lay-ups and horses that need extra veterinary care. The third location is her retirement farm for horses living

out their golden years.

White has never advertised her farm services but stays full.

“It’s all been word of mouth. I also get referrals from veterinarians at large equine practices for clients sending horses to me because they still need a high level of care. Some of these are complicated cases where the client can’t take the horse home, but it doesn’t need to be at an equine clinic,” said White, adding that she has the staff to handle such horses.

She knows that her staff are a prime reason for client satisfaction and repeat business.

“My people are all lifelong horsemen who truly love the horses. The clients have seen the same faces for the last 10 to 14 years. It inspires confidence and a sense of continuity,” she said. “This is something I’ve always wanted to do. I don’t know that practicing alone would be as fulfilling if I couldn’t do the caretaking part as well.”

White’s veterinary expertise sets her facility apart from other boarding farms. Situations that could potentially become emergencies don’t tend to get to that point when a veterinarian is present.

“Having someone knowledgeable on hand means that some things can remain in the husbandry realm and not cross over into veterinary services,” said White, who is present for every foaling. “Caring for broodmares is normally boring unless it’s tragic. It’s important to have things go as well as possible and to minimize the things that go wrong. When something goes wrong, it’s going to end as well as it can because a vet is on hand.”

Some clients are involved in multiple aspects of the horse industry. Knowing their mares and foals are taken care of allows them to concentrate on other aspects of their business, such as 2-year-old sales.

Registration, regional breeders’ awards, and nominations paperwork are filed by the farm on behalf of clients.

“It is a lot to keep track of and, for me, it’s a big part of the service we provide,” said White, who makes it a point to remind foal owners to take advantage of the Florida-bred opportunities.

White finds that many owners like to visit during foaling season, but COVID-19 has changed that for some clients, especially older owners who live out of state.

“I don’t have an employee in charge of social media, but for people who are social media savvy, I try to set up private groups with that client so I can post photos for them,” said White. **BH**