

NORTHEAST/MID-ATLANTIC

Better With Backer

*William Backer has enjoyed Thoroughbreds
 for more than five decades*

BY ESTHER MARR

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Over the years William Backer has discovered that things go better with racing. The retired songwriting guru, known during his professional career as the man who coined many famous slogans and jingles for Coca-Cola, including “Things go better with Coke,” is now highly regarded for an entirely different reason—his successful Thoroughbred stable.

Backer remembers around 55 years ago helping a friend purchase a horse for foxhunting and seeing a small Thoroughbred weanling in its stall. On a whim he decided to buy the horse and put it into training.

“We had the horrible thing that happens to a lot of us in that we had beginner’s luck and thought (horse racing) was easy,” said Backer. “That was back in 1954, and I just stayed with it ever since.”

Backer named his first horse Wink Proof. By Proof Coil, out of the American Flag mare American Wink, the resilient horse had an 11-year campaign and finally retired after 132 starts.



William and Ann Backer at Keeneland

ANNE M. EBERHARDT

TOP "SIDER"

The first foal sold from the first crop by **STONESIDER** brought nearly **FIVE TIMES HIS STUD FEE** at auction in October. He was bred and raised by New York's leading trainer, Gary Contessa.

STONESIDER had the 4th largest New York book of mares in 2009.



3/20/09 colt by Stonesider
o/o Debrah's Debut



STONESIDER

Giant's Causeway-Added Gold, by Gilded Time • \$3,000 live foal

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HIGHCLIFF FARM

Inquiries to Suzie O'Cain or C. Lynwood O'Cain DVM, Farm Mgr & Resident Veterinarian
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2009 Leading Sires in New York

State sire lists updated daily online.
Go to <http://breeding.bloodhorse.com/sirelists.asp>

For stallions that stand, will stand, or stood (deceased) in New York (exported stallions are excluded), and have runners in North America. Listed below are all available statistics for the Northern Hemisphere through November 4, 2009. As supplied to The Blood-Horse by The Jockey Club Information Systems Inc., earnings exclude monies from Japan and Hong Kong. *Foal counts include Southern Hemisphere. Cumulative stakes winners includes all countries. (A ♯ indicates a sire represented by his first crop to race).

Rank	Stallion (Foaling Year, Sire), Farm Standing	2010 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	Stakes Wnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2009 Earnings	Cumulative			
								Foals	Stks Wnrs	*A-E Index	*Comp Index
1	FREUD (98, Storm Cat), Sequel Stallions New York	\$7,500	117/61	8/11	4/8	(Future Prospect, \$238,659)	\$3,066,231	254	17	1.79	1.34
2	GOLDEN MISSILE (95, A.P. Indy), Milfer Farm	\$7,500	168/83	3/6	1/3	(Stealth Missile, \$96,666)	\$2,450,793	*453	11	1.10	1.83
3	CONGAREE (98, Arazi), Highcliff Farm	\$10,000	90/38	3/3	0/3	(Mythical Power, \$458,000)	\$1,854,309	136	5	1.19	1.42
4	GOLD TOKEN (93, Mr. Prospector)	Died, 2006	92/51	2/2	2/2	(Gold for the Queen, \$139,657)	\$1,624,612	*279	8	1.34	1.15
5	HOOK AND LADDER (97, Dixieland Band), Sequel Stallions New York	N/A	86/40	0/0	0/0	(Early Response, \$109,740)	\$1,371,129	150	6	1.37	1.55
6	WESTERN EXPRESSION (96, Gone West), Highcliff Farm	\$5,000	82/42	1/2	0/1	(I Lost My Choo, \$166,600)	\$1,351,829	255	4	1.24	1.32
7	A. P. JET (89, Fappiano), Sugar Maple Farm	Pnsd	78/34	1/1	1/1	(Livin Large, \$128,336)	\$1,280,517	446	15	1.15	1.33
8	KING CUGAT (97, Kingmambo), Questroyal at Dutchess Views Farm	N/A	72/39	2/7	0/2	(Mambo Meister, \$199,070)	\$1,241,721	*416	8	1.26	1.16
9	DISCO RICO (97, Citidancer), Keane Stud Operations	\$5,000	59/34	3/5	2/3	(Dance Gal Dance, \$113,270)	\$1,216,862	138	7	1.58	1.25
10	READ THE FOOTNOTES (01, Smoke Glacken), Sequel Stallions New York	N/A	54/32	2/2	2/2	(Rightly So, \$160,600)	\$1,092,877	97	3	1.47	1.24
11	REGAL CLASSIC (85, Vice Regent)	Pnsd	77/35	1/2	1/1	(Joe Corrigan, \$132,138)	\$1,048,921	*960	44	1.43	1.55
12	AMERICAN CHANCE (89, Cure the Blues)	Died, 2004	43/24	2/5	2/2	(Mor Chances, \$184,265)	\$1,036,293	*409	30	1.51	1.29
13	PRIME TIMBER (96, Sultry Song), Sez Who Thoroughbreds North	N/A	73/29	1/2	0/1	(Silver Timber, \$193,740)	\$1,024,024	179	5	1.20	1.36
14	ELTISH (92, Cox's Ridge), Keane Stud Operations	N/A	62/34	0/0	0/0	(Hurricane Heat, \$109,190)	\$1,016,981	236	12	1.25	1.40
15	SMOOTH JAZZ (99, Storm Boot), Buckridge Farm	\$3,000	46/20	1/1	0/1	(Smooth Air, \$380,000)	\$980,375	82	1	1.56	1.10

*A-E and COMPARABLE INDEX: The lifetime Average-Earnings Index indicates how much purse money the progeny of one sire has earned, on the average, in relation to the average earnings of all runners in the same years; average earnings of all runners in any year is represented by an index of 1.00. The Comparable Index indicates the average earnings of progeny produced from mares bred to one sire, when these same mares were bred to other sires. Only 32% of all sires have a lifetime AEI higher than their mares Comparable Index.

2009 Leading Sires in Pennsylvania

State sire lists updated daily online.
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1	JUMP START (99, A.P. Indy), Ghost Ridge Farms	N/A	162/97	8/12	1/8	(Rail Trip, \$742,790)	\$4,127,457	289	18	1.53	1.45
2	CAT THIEF (96, Storm Cat), Penn Ridge Farms	\$5,000	144/81	4/7	0/4	(TheThiefatmidnight, \$119,614)	\$2,463,950	*353	14	1.27	1.79
3	PARTNER'S HERO (94, Danzig), Northview	\$2,500	111/42	4/5	1/4	(Heros Reward, \$158,530)	\$2,002,487	346	17	1.34	1.42
4	WISEMAN'S FERRY (99, Hennessy), Dana Point Farm	\$3,500	106/64	0/0	0/0	(Swilly Ferry, \$340,717)	\$1,986,697	*171	3	1.21	1.08
5	DELAWARE TOWNSHIP (96, Notebook), Penn Ridge Farms	\$2,500	110/61	2/4	0/2	(Victorina, \$143,493)	\$1,830,459	218	6	1.21	1.34
6	BUDDHA (99, Unbridled's Song), Unknown	\$3,500	205/99	1/1	0/1	(Hisse, \$58,800)	\$1,782,447	*467	4	0.65	1.50
7	TRUST N LUCK (00, Montbrook), Penn Ridge Farms	\$2,000	74/40	2/6	1/2	(Trust Or Bust, \$321,186)	\$1,597,365	*143	4	1.09	1.26
8	GREATNESS (99, Mr. Prospector), Ghost Ridge Farms	\$5,000	65/40	0/0	0/0	(Jenny's So Great, \$103,005)	\$1,463,007	100	1	1.28	1.08
9	ALBERT THE GREAT (97, Go for Gin), Pin Oak Lane Farm	\$3,500	74/39	2/2	1/2	(Albertus Maximus, \$420,000)	\$1,398,284	*224	5	1.32	1.22
10	SNOW RIDGE (98, Tabasco Cat), Regal Heir Farm	\$5,000	95/42	1/1	0/1	(Bebob, \$74,398)	\$1,199,270	208	5	1.08	1.28
11	LITE THE FUSE (91, Buckaroo), Pin Oak Lane Farm	\$3,500	95/31	2/3	1/2	(Going Ballistic, \$150,330)	\$1,161,441	431	22	1.32	1.24
12	ZAVATA (00, Phone Trick), Unknown	\$3,500	70/41	0/0	0/0	(Dakota Phone, \$104,810)	\$1,129,377	*159	1	1.02	1.14
13	WHEATON (90, Alydar)	Died, 2006	47/23	1/6	0/1	(Russell Road, \$445,635)	\$1,093,784	326	14	1.30	1.07
14	REAL QUIET (95, Quiet American), Penn Ridge Farms	\$6,000	78/35	0/0	0/0	(Quiet Again, \$121,850)	\$976,060	*437	12	1.23	1.28
15	CHANGEINTHEWEATHER (99, Gone West), Xanthus Farms	\$3,000	49/27	0/0	0/0	(Run for Shelter, \$68,925)	\$631,255	88	1	0.92	1.23

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2009 Leading Sires in Maryland

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Rank	Stallion (Foaling Year, Sire), Farm Standing	2010 Stud Fee	Rnrs/ Wnrs	Stakes Wnrs/ Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2009 Earnings	Cumulative			
								Foals	Stks Wnrs	*A-E Index	*Comp Index
1	NOT FOR LOVE (90, Mr. Prospector), Northview Stallion Station	\$25,000	207/115	12/19	6/12	(Not for Silver, \$263,020)	\$5,403,411	680	61	1.84	1.49
2	LION HEARTED (96, Storm Cat), Northview Stallion Station	\$3,500	170/84	6/6	6/6	(Aspenglow, \$142,937)	\$3,024,244	*385	14	1.28	1.33
3	OUTFLANKER (94, Danzig), Maryland Stallion Station at Bonita Farm	\$6,500	116/70	3/4	0/3	(Apple Special, \$124,080)	\$2,313,871	374	18	1.45	1.16
4	LOUIS QUATORZE (93, Sovereign Dancer), Murmur Farm	\$5,000	156/68	5/6	3/5	(Dancin Banker, \$126,408)	\$2,176,196	*813	21	1.19	1.46
5	TWO PUNCH (83, Mr. Prospector), Northview Stallion Station	N/A	97/46	1/1	0/1	(Rhythmn Master, \$92,255)	\$1,377,671	*944	52	1.48	1.45
6	GO FOR GIN (91, Cormorant), Bonita Farm	N/A	63/29	2/6	2/2	(Banrock, \$345,900)	\$1,298,016	*334	13	1.43	1.50
7	MOJAVE MOON (96, Mr. Prospector), Bonita Farm	N/A	78/37	2/3	1/2	(Sumacha'hot, \$197,660)	\$1,268,730	178	2	0.84	1.29
8	ROCK SLIDE (98, A.P. Indy), Maryland Stallion Station at Shamrock Farms	\$4,000	56/24	2/3	1/2	(Ariana D, \$139,800)	\$1,087,023	108	3	1.15	1.33
9	ALLEN'S PROSPECT (82, Mr. Prospector)	Died, 2003	52/26	1/3	1/1	(All Giving, \$194,400)	\$902,678	1049	69	1.30	1.33
10	DOMESTIC DISPUTE (00, Unbridled's Song), Northview Stallion Station	\$3,500	69/28	0/0	0/0	(Domestic Bliss, \$96,440)	\$891,582	*146	0	0.77	1.29

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2009 New York Sires By Winners

Sire	Rnrs	Wnrs
Golden Missile	168	83
Freud	117	61
Gold Token	92	51
Western Expression	82	42
Hook and Ladder	86	40
King Cugat	72	39
Congaree	90	38
Regal Classic	77	35
A. P. Jet	78	34
Eltish	62	34
Disco Rico	59	34
Read the Footnotes	54	32
Prime Timber	73	29
Phone Trick	53	29
Roaring Fever	52	26
Outofthebox	72	25
Jade Hunter	62	24
Desert Warrior	56	24
Rizzi	45	24
American Chance	43	24
Wheelayway	96	23
Smooth Jazz	46	20
Say Florida Sandy	49	19
Mayakovsky	48	18
Key Contender	29	15
Smokin Mel	19	13
Take Me Out	36	12
Distinctive Pro	20	12
Millions	18	12
Talk Is Money	31	11
Performing Magic	23	11
Anasheed	21	11
Badge	17	9
Raffie's Majesty	30	8
Well Noted	22	8
Personal Flag	13	8
David	12	8
One Nice Cat	15	7
Northern Spur (IRE)	14	7
Comeonmom	11	5
Peruvian	11	5
Manlove	16	4
Griffinite	12	4
Kettle Won	11	4
Stanislavsky	9	4
Radio Star	7	4
Captain Red	9	3
Legion Field	9	3
Aristotle	7	3
Midas Eyes	7	3
American Standard	6	3
Dixie Brass	5	3
Preacherman	5	3
Emigrant Peak	3	3
Polish Pro	12	2
Carry My Colors	9	2
Crusader Sword	9	2
Mighty Magee	8	2
Adios My Friend	7	2
Cozy Drive	6	2
Dark Mystery	6	2
Nunzio	6	2
Squall Warning	6	2
Danzatame	4	2
Galloping Gael	4	2
Scarlet Ibis	4	2
Watch the Bird	4	2
Makhbar (GB)	2	2

Backer is a man of tradition, and his involvement in the storied game of fox-hunting as a young boy in his native South Carolina and later as a serious competitor in Virginia, eventually piqued his interest in the Thoroughbred business.

The thrill of tracking and chasing a fox throughout the wooded northeastern country was coupled with a new form of excitement in his post-college years: watching his horses carry his silks to victory.

Similarly, the biggest pleasure of horse racing for Backer, much more than the money it brings, has been the pursuit of success and seeing the results of his laborious breeding decisions come to fruition.

After marrying his college sweetheart, Ann, around 25 years ago, Backer, who formerly owned a smaller foxhunting farm, decided to purchase a more sizable breeding operation near The Plains, Va. Situated on 700 acres, with another 700-acre parcel of land about a mile away, the newlyweds named their property Smitten Farm.

"We were smitten with each other and smitten with the land, and it just seemed like a cute name," said Backer, who despite his accomplishments, which include owning more than a dozen stakes winners over the years, including 2009 Virginia Oaks (gr. IIIT) victor Blind Date, humbly shuns public attention and prefers not to have his picture taken.

Backer, who remarked that he is "on the wrong side of 80," speaks slowly, but clearly. His tone is full of vigor and enthusiasm as he talks about his horses like they are his "raison d'etre." And instead of mentioning the possibility of slowing down his business during his golden years, he relates only his lofty goals for the future.

When asked why he has stayed a part of the ever-changing Thoroughbred world the last 55 years, Backer said, "It's because of the fascination of horses and breeding, and doing something worthwhile with your land."

The Thoroughbred and fox hunting enthusiast noted that he is also president of

the land conservation organization Piedmont Foundation.

Backer, who currently keeps around 20 broodmares at the farm, and another two dozen horses in training with Hamilton Smith, has a simple breeding philosophy that centers on inbreeding superior female families through different individuals.

"A long time ago it was cheaper to buy into good families than pay the stud fees for fancy horses," he said. "So I just began to collect mares from certain families, and I've been trying to inbreed to those mares. It's called the Rasmussen factor, but I didn't know it then. I just thought it made some sense to double up on the great families."

Backer keeps around eight full-time employees at the farm and hires some extra help during haying season as he grows his own hay—instead of buying it—to feed his horses.

Smitten's best mare is undoubtedly the dam of the aforementioned Blind Date, 15-year-old Snit (by Fit to Fight), whose big win for Backer came in the 1997 Cotillion Handicap (gr. II) at Philadelphia Park.

Snit's dam Princess Roberta (by Roberto), third dam Queen Ribot (by Sir Ribot), and fourth dam Eblouissante (by Bolero) were also stakes winners. Backer bought Queen Ribot as a yearling in 1972.

In addition to Blind Date, Snit is also the dam of dual stakes winner Sales Tax (by High Yield) and stakes-placed Bitter Lemon (by Lemon Drop Kid). Among her most recent foals are a yearling Mineshaft colt and a Malibu Moon colt, born May 28. She is currently carrying a foal by Smart Strike.

Some of Smitten Farm's other exceptional mares include homebred Art Fan (by Lear Fan), who won the Virginia Oaks before it was graded in 2004 and is now the dam of two foals; and stakes winner/stakes producer Art Student (by El Prado), whom Backer purchased for \$52,000 as a yearling in 1995.

"Almost all of my mares are either stakes winners or stakes producers,"

2009 New York Sires By 2-Year-Old Winners

Sire	2yo Rnrs	2yo Wnrs
Freud	57	22
One Nice Cat	34	15
Roaring Fever	47	18
Read the Footnotes	45	19
Hook and Ladder	52	18
Golden Missile	49	20
Prime Timber	52	16
Midas Eyes	24	7
Outofthebox	40	17
Congaree	46	23
A. P. Jet	16	8
Gold Token	23	5

2009 Pennsylvania Sires By Winners

Sire	Rnrs	Wnrs
Buddha	205	99
Jump Start	162	97
Cat Thief	144	81
Wiseman's Ferry	106	64
Delaware Township	110	61
Partner's Hero	111	42
Snow Ridge	95	42
Zavata	70	41
Trust N Luck	74	40
Greatness	65	40
Albert the Great	74	39
Real Quiet	78	35
Lite the Fuse	95	31
Changeintheweather	49	27
Wheaton	47	23

2009 Leading Sires in Virginia

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1	TWO SMART (94, Two Punch)	Died	10/6	1/2	0/1	(Researcher, \$446,359)	\$547,829	34	2	1.27	0.84
2	HAY HALO (84, Halo), Avonlea Farm	Died, 2008	22/9	0/0	0/0	(Shannon H, \$41,005)	\$190,111	*312	13	1.12	1.09
3	MAGIC PROSPECT (87, Mr. Prospector), Albemarle Stud	\$1,000	12/7	2/3	0/2	(Fun Runner, \$38,235)	\$116,381	213	11	0.85	1.08
4	AARON'S GOLD (90, Slew o' Gold), Mortgage Hall Farm - Mrs. Calvin E. Rofe	\$1,000	7/6	0/0	0/0	(G. B's Girl, \$39,980)	\$100,581	66	0	0.50	0.95
5	MINER'S MARK (90, Mr. Prospector)	Pnsd	12/3	1/1	0/1	(Coal Dust, \$21,000)	\$59,886	*306	10	1.07	1.39
6	RARIFIED (00, Deputy Minister), Mid Atlantic Stallion Station	N/A	6/1	0/0	0/0	(Eli Fied, \$35,962)	\$45,822	8	0	0.45	0.44
7	MR. EXECUTIONER (93, Deputy Minister), Grey Lady Farm	N/A	7/1	0/0	0/0	(To Catch a Star, \$28,290)	\$42,300	25	0	0.37	0.69
8	TOM COBBLEY (86, Seattle Slew)	N/A	7/2	0/0	0/0	(Cobbleys Jingle, \$23,656)	\$41,947	69	2	0.78	1.52
9	RED TAIL HAWK (00, Devil's Bag), Mortgage Hall Farm - Mrs. Calvin E. Rofe	\$1,000	4/2	0/0	0/0	(Gone Baby Gone, \$26,450)	\$38,768	11	0	0.34	1.31

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1	BLACK TIE AFFAIR (IRE) (86, Miswaki), O'Sullivan Farms	Pnsd	73/29	2/2	1/2	(Rollicking Affair, \$168,135)	\$1,250,166	*827	36	1.40	1.50
2	LUFNIKUS (96, Meadowlake), Taylor Mountain Farm	N/A	62/22	1/1	1/1	(Peaceful Bliss, \$158,600)	\$1,082,239	171	5	1.12	1.06
3	PRIZED (86, Kris S.), O'Sullivan Farms	\$3,500	53/23	4/7	2/4	(Brass Hat, \$256,796)	\$1,024,764	*678	26	1.40	1.40
4	BOP (97, Rahy), O'Sullivan Farms	\$2,500	36/21	3/5	3/3	(My Sister Margaret, \$297,282)	\$976,726	67	4	1.43	0.96
5	DURING (00, Cherokee Run), O'Sullivan Farms	\$2,500	55/30	0/0	0/0	(Spina, \$83,190)	\$830,551	98	0	0.83	1.21
6	HOUSEBUSTER (87, Mt. Livermore)	Died, 2005	55/25	0/1	0/0	(Shaunna, \$84,380)	\$714,279	*725	31	1.37	1.65
7	MEADOW MONSTER (91, Meadowlake), O'Sullivan Farms	\$2,000	59/14	1/1	1/1	(Green Suede Shoes, \$117,470)	\$683,727	299	9	1.03	1.13
8	CIVILISATION (98, Gone West), Naylee Farm	\$3,500	53/19	0/0	0/0	(Swish Maravich, \$81,900)	\$614,475	131	0	0.67	0.77
9	KOKAND (85, Mr. Prospector)	Pnsd	61/24	0/0	0/0	(Cynthia's Angle, \$48,980)	\$534,803	*460	10	0.98	0.93
10	MAKIN (90, Danzig), O'Sullivan Farms	N/A	50/20	0/0	0/0	(Trouble Makin, \$50,460)	\$508,531	177	3	0.80	0.76

*A-E and COMPARABLE INDEX: The Lifetime Average-Earnings Index indicates how much purse money the progeny of one sire has earned, on the average, in relation to the average earnings of all runners in the same years; average earnings of all runners in any year is represented by an index of 1.00. The Comparable Index indicates the average earnings of progeny produced from mares bred to one sire, when these same mares were bred to other sires. Only 32% of all sires have a lifetime AEI higher than their mares Comparable Index.

said Backer. "There are very few exceptions. There is only one or two that were not solid race horses. My own feeling is that if you're going to be an owner/breeder and race your own, you better race them out of mares that showed you they could race sound and tough. They don't necessarily have to be stakes winners, but mares that really tried and gave you everything they had and have some pedigree that excites you. Almost everything I have is in that category."

Before embarking on his triumphs in racing, Backer was famous for the mark he left upon the advertising world, which in turn allowed him to invest in the Thoroughbred business.

Backer, who met his wife while attending Yale University, started a small music company upon graduation where he wrote jingles for commercials. He then became heavily involved in the advertising business, where he quickly rose through the ranks, and with a partner eventually started his own New York-based company called Backer Spielvogel Bates Worldwide.

In 1971, as an advertising copywriter, Backer conceived and developed the famous Coca-Cola ad that features an in-

ternational group of people singing "I'd like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company."

"We made enough money to afford

to lose it in racing," joked Backer, who retired from his advertising business around 18 years ago. "We had almost a half-billion dollars in billing; we were



Backer in the winner's circle with Wink Proof at Garden State Park in 1955

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very successful.”

The idea for the Coca-Cola commercial originally came to Backer while working as a creative director for McCann-Erickson, who handled advertising for the soft drink company.

Backer, who was traveling to London to meet two other songwriters, was unexpectedly delayed at Shannon Airport in Ireland due to heavy fog. The forced layover induced hot tempers among passengers, many of whom had to spend the night in the airport.

But the next morning Backer observed the same travelers conversing and joking over bottles of Coke while awaiting clearance to fly. It was then that he was inspired to scrawl the words “I’d like to buy the world a Coke and keep it company” upon a napkin, which he later shared with his fellow songwriters.

The song eventually became so popular it was re-recorded by The New Seekers and the Hillside Singers as a full-length song, dropping references to Coca-Cola, and became a hit record.

Backer’s farm manager Susan Dunham described Backer as “one of the most positive men you could be around. He’s very non-controversial, and like his jingle, he wishes we could solve all our problems in life by just coming together. He’s very upbeat, very creative... sometimes a little too creative,” she laughed. “He’s

always thinking, ‘Is there a better way to do that?’ But he’s a patient man and is easy to work for. He’s also very willing if you have an idea to follow it out to the conclusion, whether there’s something in it for him or not. He’s the type that will really work to make something that seems like a pipe dream doable, and he puts his money where his mouth is.”

While good fortune has shined upon Backer’s professional career, as well as his racing operation, he became brutally honest when relating how Virginia’s Thoroughbred industry is nothing short of bleak.

“It’s terrible; it’s at the bottom,” he admitted. “We only have one track that races 45 days (Colonial Downs). For a breeding industry to flourish, you’ve got to ideally have some racing at least if not in your own state, then around you. Right now the state of Maryland racing is in terrible shape too.”

In spite of the situation of Virginia’s industry, however, the striking beauty of the area is one of the major aspects as to why Backer has remained in the historic state

all these years.

“I think (veterinarian and breeder) Gary Lavin once said when he came to inspect yearlings that this is about a pretty stretch of county as he ever saw,” said Backer, noting that the great Secretariat had been raised in Virginia. “In a very biased way, I’ll say this area of Virginia puts Kentucky to shame. I think it raises better horses because the babies have to go up and down these rolling hills, and they develop hind ends on them. We have clay soil, which puts very good feet on the horses.”

Backer continues to have an active day-to-day role in his operation. He plans the matings for his mares, and as all of his horses are broken, as well as rehabilitated on the farm, he also makes decisions on how long individuals should be kept at Smitten and when they should be sent to the track.



Backer believes the rolling hills of Virginia help him raise better horses

Farm manager Dunham decides each day which horses she and the farm’s exercise riders will work on Smitten’s circular turf course and which ones they will take up the half-mile uphill gallop.

After the horses are properly broken at Smitten, Backer sends them to Goree Smith’s Elloree Training Center in South Carolina.

“Then I decide whether they’re going to go directly to Hamilton Smith or come home, in with Susan, and Goree, and Hamilton, and I try to make as few mistakes as possible,” said Backer.

Dunham, who formerly ran a high-risk broodmare and foal operation in Maryland, shares the same vision for breeding and raising horses with Backer. Paying attention to the details of each horse’s personality as they grow up, and pairing young horses with older, steady veterans in the fields to instill confidence in them are among the qualities that she believes sets her apart from other farm managers. “I believe that ultimately it’s about racing—no matter what happens in the sale ring or the market,” Dunham said. I believe brood-

mares are the backbone of our industry, and breeding with special attention to the female family is really a valuable tool and approach.”

Dunham is also supportive of Backer’s desire to race nearly all the horses he breeds. “That is a marvelous statement in today’s racing world,” she said. “He would rather race them in most cases than sell them...not for sentimental reasons but because he believes it’s about racing, and he loves to race. I look at our breeding book and our mares as the legacy of a man who has been doing this for the right reasons for many years.”

When asked who had been his favorite horse over the years, it didn’t take long for Backer to recall a hard-knocking bay mare named Applause, who campaigned for him in the 1980s. The daughter of Shecky Greene retired from racing after a five-

year career during which she won or placed in an amazing 31 of 35 starts.

“She was just so game and so attractive,” said Backer. “We always think of her as the queen that started the farm, because she’s the kind of horse that makes you think you know what you’re doing, which you never do,” he added of Applause, who died last year having produced two stakes winners among her 13 foals.

One of the most important aspects that makes Smitten stand out from other breeding op-

erations, Backer believes, is the fact they do most things in-house.

“By doing the whole thing ourselves—mating, breeding, foaling, breaking, and getting them semi-fit—you can keep an eye on a little foal from the beginning and be able to spot them,” he explained. “Basically, I’ve been selling the colts and keeping the fillies. In the future I may keep a couple of colts that are a little offset that may be worth more to me than a buyer.

“We get to see them, and we know what they’re fed, and the mares get to know each other and pair up together. We try and keep them together and happy. I think this operation can produce a happier horse than one of these operations that just does one thing, like breaking or breeding or selling. The linear operation, it’s probably more efficient, but you get a happier horse when it’s kept in the family from birth to when the starting gate opens.”

With his decades of experience and homebred stakes winners to prove his point, Backer is living proof that sometimes it really does make a difference to keep it all in the family. **Q**

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