McLean family’s reputation allows Crestwood Farm to survive tough times

BY LENNY SHULMAN
PHOTOS BY ANNE M. EBERHARDT

Just outside Lexington, where the roads become two-lane affairs and the industrial parks give way to rolling hills of bluegrass fenced in by wood panel fencing to corral horses, tiny Spurr Road shoots off at a right angle from another country lane, bisecting a couple of mega horse farms. To the south is Hill ‘n’ Dale Farms, a thriving enterprise maintained by Canadian expatriate John Sikura. To the north, a forlorn real estate sign is affixed to the horse fencing, inside of which one is hard pressed to find any horses.

The property was most recently Vinery, an operation well on its way out of business, its stallions shipped off to WinStar Farm to stand the 2013 season. Before being bought by Dr. Tom Simon, the land belonged to investor Ken Jones for about a decade. Prior to Jones, the farm was developed by Franklin Groves into North View Farm, a leading breeding operation. Groves bought the place from Ann Trimble, who bred The Bart, the runner famously nosed out by John Henry in the inaugural Arlington Million. Before Trimble, a fellow named Tom Piatt and his family owned hundreds of acres on and around the site.

Through all those comeings and goings, and remaining to this day, is Pope McLean Sr. and his family’s Crestwood Farm, which sits just east of the former Vinery. McLean bought his farm from the Piatt family some 40 years ago, and while bulldozers have carved out fancy facilities on the neighboring land as owners have come and gone, Crestwood stands tall as a symbol of stability and continuity, immune to the big eyes and grand plans that have burned brightly and flamed out around it.

Surviving in the middle-market that has taken a giant hit over the past five years of recession and tightening credit, Crestwood still breathes because service and honesty never go out of style. Because when you treat people the right way, they will stay loyal through good times and bad. Because reputation, thankfully, still matters.

“You are either honest or you’re not,” stated Pope McLean Sr., the 75-year-old silver-haired patriarch who today happily works alongside sons Marc and Pope Jr. and daughter Grandison Offutt. “Over the years people have come to realize that we are looking out for their best interest and not trying to take advantage of them. We’d rather be helpful and establish long-term relationships than look for the quick buck. Some folks don’t have that tendency to look toward tomorrow.”
The word “honest” comes up time and again, not just from the McLean clan but, more importantly, from the farm’s long-time clients.

“They are the nicest, most honest people in a business that sometimes doesn’t have nice, honest folks,” stated Jill Schiffman, a certified public accountant and investment adviser in Columbus, Ohio, who has been doing business at Crestwood for more than a decade. “It’s their horsemanship, integrity, and people skills. Integrity is an enormously important thing for this business and a difficult find. I’ve been in racing since 1980, and it’s not easy finding people you can trust. They are like a family.”

Brian D. Burns has done business with Crestwood since he retired his first runner, multiple graded stakes winner The Name’s Jimmy, to Crestwood in 1995. He has had as many as 47 broodmares on the farm, a number reduced to 12 after the financial crisis. But Burns, an insurance executive who races in the name of Mount Name’s Jimmy, to Crestwood in 1995. He
dominate this business, that’s important,” said Brian D. Burns who has done business with McLean.

“Family brings an enthusiasm you can’t be able to go for that. The McLeans have their own feed, culled mares, sought out a lot of these mares to stallions that he thought were on the one. One of those was Storm Cat, to whom McLean bred eight mares in the sire’s first two years at stud. Four of those matings produced stakes winners, including Kentucky Oaks (gr. I) victor Saraband, the only one foaled for Jerry and Ann Moss, and was mopped on the wire in the 1993 Breeders’ Cup Juvenile. Her half sister to French group wins. Pope, Sr. ‘I can’t remember the last time we had an argument because every- one has their own niche; Pope is on the farm, he’s a business owner of his own, and Grandison has the answer every time anyone needs something. I feel totally blessed by all of my family.’

he younger generation, in turn, is thankful for the lessons they’ve learned by watching their father. ‘He taught us how to conduct our- selves and always treat other people with respect, said Pope Jr. ‘We try to conduct ourselves in the manner of your handshakes being your body language, being on the phone well, and Grandison has done it. I’ve seen how hard he worked to build this farm from scratch, and we learned from that.’

Added Marc, ‘The environment for stallion and broodmare breeding over the past five years has not been easy. A look at the number of Central Ken-

tucky farms in the real estate listings these days tells you that more survival is easier said than done. A combination of dedicated clients, re-

struction and loyalty to our clients. Crestwood has been making moves as well.

In addition to culling some mares, I went out in 2009, and bought some about one-fifth what they could have been worth,” said Pope Sr. ‘People were looking for bargains, there were some nice bargains to be had that may pay off for us in the long run. Of course, my sons were kind of wondering what the heck I was up to.”

That’s not a rare garden out there. There are a lot fewer yearlings in the sales than before. However, it looks like things are turning around. People are coming back in off the sidelines. We’ve had some year-
gains in the last days of the September sale that might not have gotten a bid two or three years ago, but last year they sold for $5,000-$25,000. We’ve weathered some storms before, and hopefully things are turning around.

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