

RIDING THE CREST

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 comings 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 on two separate 500-acre tracts nearby one another. "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."



Mares graze over hundreds of Crestwood Farm acres; inset, Pope McLean Sr., second from right, with sons Marc, left, and Pope Jr., and daughter Grandison Offutt

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 and honest folks,” stated Bill 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 in this business and difficult to find. I’ve been in racing since 1980, and it’s not easy finding people you can trust. They are just a lovely, classy 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 Joy Stables, is thankful for having found the McLean family.

“This is a tough game, particularly if you’re new in it,” he said. “Having good, quality people around you makes it very rewarding, and they’ve been spectacular. Our families have grown very close, and it’s gone far beyond a business relationship. It’s their honesty.”

A decade ago Brent Johnson, an investment adviser based in Virginia, had a 2-year-old named Lucky Pen who was a bright prospect until being injured. Johnson sought out his dam, whose owner was boarding her at Crestwood. Johnson met



Crestwood Farm and its facilities have stood the test of time

with the McLeans, ended up buying the mare, and was impressed enough to leave her on the farm. He’s had 10 mares there over the past decade.

“What I appreciate the most is they’re very up-front, direct, and honest, and in this business, that’s important,” said Johnson, who raced the five-time grade I-winning Better Talk Now (\$4.3 million earner). “They work hard and try hard and always respond to every query. They are honest and good people.”

So there are the reviews. But no matter how respected the McLeans are, and even though Crestwood is standing promising and well-bred commercial stallions Country Day, Get Stormy, and Nobiz Like Shobiz, it is still a difficult climate for horses at that \$5,000 stud fee level. Having weathered previous downturns, however, and not being afraid to buck the prevailing wisdom, the elder McLean has positioned farm and family for success through a creative and sometimes contrarian streak that runs through his conservative nature.

That contrarian side first emerged when Pope McLean veered off the path of following his father, Dr. C.G. McLean, into a career in medicine. The younger McLean was in pre-med at the University of Kentucky when one of his father’s patients, P.A.B. Widener II, former owner of Elmendorf Farm, gave the doctor a part-interest in the broodmare Wicki Wicki. Pope McLean raised the mare’s foal, Oil Wick, at his father’s 20-acre farm on Newtown Pike, and Oil Wick would go on to win the 1959 Kentucky Jockey Club Stakes at Churchill Downs. In the aftermath, that vapor trail was McLean leaving the university for a job at Calumet Farm under another of his father’s patients, Melvin Cinnamon. Nights were spent working at his father’s farm.

Over the next decade McLean took on more mares and partners.

He co-bred Random Shot, who won the 1967 Clark Handicap for James Cowden Sr., who owned Poplar Hill Farm next to McLean’s father’s farm. McLean leased 100 acres of Poplar Hill and then, in 1970, he and his wife, Betty Ann, leased Crestwood Farm, which they would buy four years later.

“I think I was driven more by fear of failure than desire to succeed,” McLean said with a chuckle about his early years in the horse business. “I was determined, but the first years were long and hard. It took me 10 years to outgrow my parents’ 20-acre farm. I foaled mares at night and worked all day. I did have a passion and love for animals. So I thought if I could make a living doing something I love, you can’t ask for anything better.”

The McLeans sold the home they had just bought in town to move to the farm. Pope sunk whatever money he realized from that transaction into mares. And he sent those mares to stallions that he thought were on the come. 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) victress Sardula, who, racing for Jerry and Ann Moss, was pipped on the wire in the 1993 Breeders’ Cup Juvenile Fillies (gr. I) by eventual champion Phone Chatter.

Exclusive Native, Mr. Greeley, and Maria’s Mon are other sires the McLeans went to off-peak, getting successful runners and sales horses. Such decisions have led to the farm’s either breeding or raising some 230 stakes horses over four decades. Crestwood is the only farm to have raised three fillies that earned \$2 million in purses—Serena’s Song, Island Fashion, and Xtra Heat.

Said McLean with typical modesty, “If you can get lucky and catch stallions on the upward swing, you can come out pretty good.”

Crestwood began standing stallions in 1994, enjoying its biggest successes

to date with Storm Cat’s son Storm Boot, and with Petionville. Most recently, the McLeans sold Goldcents, winner of this year’s Santa Anita Derby (gr. I) and a leading Kentucky Derby Presented by Yum! Brands (gr. I) contender.

A significant addition to the farm came in 1991, when Pope McLean Jr. and Marc McLean joined their father at Crestwood. Having grown up on the farm, they became immersed in the Thoroughbred culture, and as kids were pulled out of school to help with the farm’s consignments at sales. Pope Jr., 47, is three years older than Marc, and worked a couple of years as a stockbroker after college before coming home to Crestwood, handling the business end of the operation. Marc always saw himself as a hands-on horseman and, after graduating UK, now serves as farm manager. Their sister, Grandison Offutt, puts in several days a week in the office keeping Crestwood computerized. This infusion of family—all three of the McLean men live on the farm—is undoubtedly one of the reasons Crestwood has been able to ride out tough times.

“It’s part of your life, your pride, and how you define yourself,” Pope Jr. stated of the farm. “It’s a labor of love out here that’s in our blood. All three of us kids would foal-watch from a very early age, giving a full-time person an occasional night off.”

The family patriarch is delighted to have his children scurrying about the farm, although he can still be found daily in the office planning matings with bloodstock expert Robert Keck and tracking farm graduates.

“Family brings an enthusiasm you can’t buy,” noted Pope Sr. “I can’t remember the last time we had an argument because everyone has their own niche; Pope is on the business end, which involves more than you can imagine these days; Marc has a natural instinct for being a horseman; and Grandison has the answer every time anyone needs something. I feel totally blessed to have them here.”

The younger generation, in turn, is thankful for the lessons they’ve learned by watching their father.

“He’s taught us how to conduct ourselves and develop relationships,” noted Pope Jr. “We try to conduct ourselves in the manner of your handshake being your bond. Then there is the work ethic. I’ve seen how hard he worked to build this farm from scratch, and we learned from that.”

Added Marc, “As far as the farm, he’s instilled in us that we’re not done working until everything is in place. You follow every detail through until the end. That, and loyalty to our clients.”

Crestwood will foal 100 mares this

year, some for clients exclusively interested in racing, others that they will raise and prep for weanling or yearling auctions. Those mares owned by Crestwood tend to be older, solid producers or young ones off to good starts. The farm isn’t playing in the seven-figure range. But they do board Air France for Brian Burns. She has produced Kentucky Derby Presented by Yum! Brands (gr. I) runner Smooth Air and Overdriven, a grade II winner now standing at Ocala Stud. Crestwood also boards Union Flag, a half sister to Withers Stakes (gr. III) and Louisiana Derby (gr. II) winner and current Derby contender Revolutionary who is about to have her first foal. And it owns Mischievous, a half sister to French group III winner What a Name and millionaire Diabolical.

Crestwood boasts a roster of promising young sires that all stand for \$5,000. By Albert the Great, Nobiz Like Shobiz’ first crop just turned 3, and his Let Me Entertain U is a 2013 stakes winner. Tizdejavu (Tiznow) has yearlings now; his weanlings sold well last year to a range of solid horsemen. Country Day (Speights-town) and Get Stormy (Stormy Atlantic) are covering their first mares this year.

“We’ve developed a niche in that range where the right horse can stand here and be successful where he’s probably going to get overlooked in a larger operation,” noted Pope Jr. “Get Stormy had a great race record. We love his sire, love the physical, and he’s caught on. Country Day is from a hot sire line. We got 80 mares to Tizdejavu each of his first two years and will get more than that this year.”

Added Marc, “The environment for stallions has gotten tougher, but there are still people breeding in our price range. We



Young stallion Get Stormy romps at Crestwood

have a solid group of local breeders plus people that come in from other states.”

A look at the number of Central Kentucky farms in the real estate listings these days tells you that mere survival over the past five years has not been easy. A combination of dedicated clientele, resourcefulness, and the ability to function on a lean budget have been essential for continuing operations. Crestwood has reduced staff (now at 20), grown more of its own feed, culled mares, sought out new customers, and its principals have chipped in doing extra work.

Oh, and their contrarian father has been making moves as well.

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

“It’s not a rose 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 yearlings 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-\$20,000. We’ve weathered some storms before, and hopefully things are turning around.”

The entire industry should be pleased that Crestwood will be around once the smoke clears, doing things the way it always has.

Honestly. 



Crestwood stallion Nobiz Like Shobiz