

TDN Q&A

Come this Thursday, Nov. 20, Jim Williams will officially head into well-deserved retirement exactly 28 years and 19 days after first starting as Keeneland's director of communications. Yesterday, the *TDN* sat down with Williams in his corner office and talked about some of his favorite memories at Keeneland, the origins of the term RNA, and what he and Lynn, his wife of 36 years, have planned for the future.

When did you first come to Keeneland?

I came to work Nov. 1, 1971. I remember writing a recap for the entire year of 1971, and vaguely remember that the gross sales total--for the entire year--was \$30 million. There were four sales then--the January, July, September and November sales. At that time, there was no April sale. We sold two days in July, four or five days in September, four or five days in November and usually two days in January.



Jim Williams

What do you remember from those early days?

It's interesting, my predecessor was J.B. Faulkner, who was also the sales announcer. He was the one and *only* sales announcer. I wasn't able to announce--it just wasn't my forte. So we had to look for an announcer. We first used Chic Anderson, who was the guy who called Secretariat's phenomenal win in the Belmont. That didn't work real well--Chic was announcing at Churchill at the time--and so ultimately we found Tom Hammond. I'd known Tom and suggested he had the presence of an announcer, because he did local sports. And he knew the game very well--Tom grew up in the game and even worked on the backstretch of Saratoga. So we put him up in the sales box with George Swinebroad, who was the auctioneer. George was a very dominant figure--a bigger-than-life figure--but he and Tom hit it off.

What do you remember about Swinebroad?

He had this booming voice, and a booming presence, and he always bragged, he'd say, "I've hired and fired and kicked in the behind" --but he wouldn't say behind--"to the point where I have the best auctioneering crew in North America--including the bidspotters." George claimed he was responsible for the use of bidspotters. I don't know if history would bear that out, but it's certainly possible and it's a good story.

I got along with George. He was an intimidating figure, but was really a nice man. He was very much a part of the Keeneland team.

Some of our readers might be interested to learn that you helped coin the phrase RNA--or reserve not attained. Before that, each horse was listed as sold, whether it was bought back or not.

At one time, the sales office provided names whenever there was a "charge back," when a horse didn't meet its reserve. And there wasn't a lot of comfort with that, and we discussed it a number of times through the years of just how to refer to them. Do you call them charge backs? That's what we called them internally. Do you call them not solds? Some people were uncomfortable with that, because it sounded negative. We talked about it--I think it was Ted Basset and me and maybe some others--and we came up with the term 'reserve not attained,' and thus the RNA. This was probably the late 1970s.

Why wasn't that the standard practice previously?

There was a stigma attached to a horse not selling, and people didn't want to list them as not sold. But the right thing to do was to put on the sales sheets that the horse was not sold.

What are some of the big changes in your tenure here?

When I came around, the July sale was the centerpiece of the whole year. We would sell in the afternoons and then again in the evening. The auctioneers and bidspotting crew all wore tuxedos. The sales pavilion was overflowing with people; the townspeople would crowd into the corridors. In fact, on several occasions we considered the idea of using tickets, to limit access into the pavilion to people involved in the sales.

Nobody wanted to sell at the September sale--nobody wanted to be relegated to September. I actually give (Keeneland Director of Racing) Rogers Beasley a lot of credit. He redesigned the September sale and put an emphasis on quality at the beginning of the sale. Before that, we sold by consignor seniority. This was around the mid-'80s, I guess.

Another big change has been who's buying the horses, particularly on the American side. In the early times I was here, most of the purchases were made by trainers or principals, and now you have more and more influence by bloodstock agents. There was also a very distinct line between commercial and non-commercial breeders. Again, there was a stigma attached to horses being sold by non-commercial breeders--why aren't they racing them? As horses began bringing more and more money, more and more people became sellers.

Q&A cont.



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What do you recall about some of Keeneland's important milestones?

I was here--as a teenager, I suppose--watching through the window at the old sales pavilion, when Keeneland sold its first horse for over \$100,000. In the '60s, that was a lot for a horse. Then I remember the first million-dollar horse that was sold here (Canadian Bound, by Secretariat--Charming Alibi, who sold for \$1.5 million at the July sale in 1976).

It was interesting, because George Swinebroad died in 1975--he was having heart surgery and died in surgery. So, (auctioneer) Tom Caldwell sold the following year, and when we reached that milestone of a million, I remember Tom saying from the auction stand, "How we doin,' George?" George would have been very pleased with that.

Any other sale moments stick out?

One particular sale that I remember was Wajima (By Bold Ruler, who sold as a July yearling in 1973), and the fact that it was done in two bids. Someone opened up at \$500,000, and the winning bid was \$600,000. That was a lot of money for a horse back then. I can't remember who made the opening bid, but it might have been Tom Cooper. *(Editor's note: Wajima was the highest-priced yearling ever to sell at public auction at the time. Consigned by his breeder, Claiborne Farm, Wajima was purchased by James Scully on behalf of Japanese breeder Zenya Yoshida. He would go on to win four Grade I's, including the GI Travers S. and GI Marlboro Cup H., and was named champion three-year-old male in 1975. He was later syndicated for a record \$7.2 million)*

How'd you first get into racing?

My family moved here from Northwest Pennsylvania in 1958. My father had a business relationship with W.T. Young Storage. When we got to Lexington, Mr. Young--who would become so prominent in racing but wasn't involved at that point--asked his father, Willis Young, to show us around Lexington. Willis had a woman that worked for him, and she brought us to Keeneland. That's how I got into it. Eventually, I began working for the papers. I covered the Derby when I was 18 years old for the Lexington *Herald-Leader*. It was the year Lucky Debonair won (1965).

So what now?

Well, our falls are totally occupied here, by the September sale, then the October race meet, then the November sale. So we're here, literally, six or seven days a week from Labor Day to Thanksgiving. So I'm looking forward to having some flexibility with my time. I'm a great fan of racing and hope to spend a lot of afternoons here at Keeneland and come back to see friends at the sales. I'll play a little golf, and travel a little more than we have in the past. We'll probably seek out some warmer locales in late fall and early spring, but we plan to stay here in Lexington.