

Plum Pretty's Oaks a win for Peachtree—and the Mid-Atlantic

*Bred in Pennsylvania and raised in South Carolina,
the filly quiets all those who doubted. By Joe Clancy*

In Pennsylvania, the staff at Walnut Green called it a day and headed for the home of managing partner Mark Reid Sr. for chicken wings, beer (for the guys) and iced tea (for Reid).

In South Carolina, Kip Elser negotiated with his cable provider about how to add Versus—now!—to his television package.

And in Kentucky, on the first Friday in May, Plum Pretty got ready to come through for all of them.

The 3-year-old filly, bred in Pennsylvania by Reid's clients Silent Indy Stables LLC and DDS Stables, and prepped in South Carolina by Elser's Kirkwood Stables, won the 137th Kentucky Oaks-G1 at Churchill Downs on May 6.

On paper, the victory looked like your typical major stakes win by national players: trainer Bob Baffert, jockey Martin Garcia and sire Medaglia d'Oro. But the achievement has deep roots in the Mid-Atlantic through Reid, Elser and owner Peachtree Stable.

Longtime Pennsylvania breeder and Walnut Green client Linnie Scott started it when she sent her mare Liszy to Medaglia d'Oro (on Reid's season) in 2007. The following January, Scott chose to sell Liszy at Keeneland's Horses of All Ages Sale as part of a Walnut Green consignment. Reid was there, shopping for broodmares, and kept returning to the chestnut's stall.

"I was looking at mares all over, and every time I came by my barn, this big, pretty mare kept looking at me," he said. "I had to ask, 'Is it me, or is the one we're selling as nice as anything we're looking at?' She had some issues and never did much on the track [in two starts], but she's as pretty a mare as there is."

She also had pedigree and potential. The daughter of A.P. Indy and Grade 2 stakes winner Silent Account (by Private Account)

was a half-sister to stakes winner Gold Case, had produced a winner and was in foal to Medaglia d'Oro, whose first crop had yet to reach the race track.

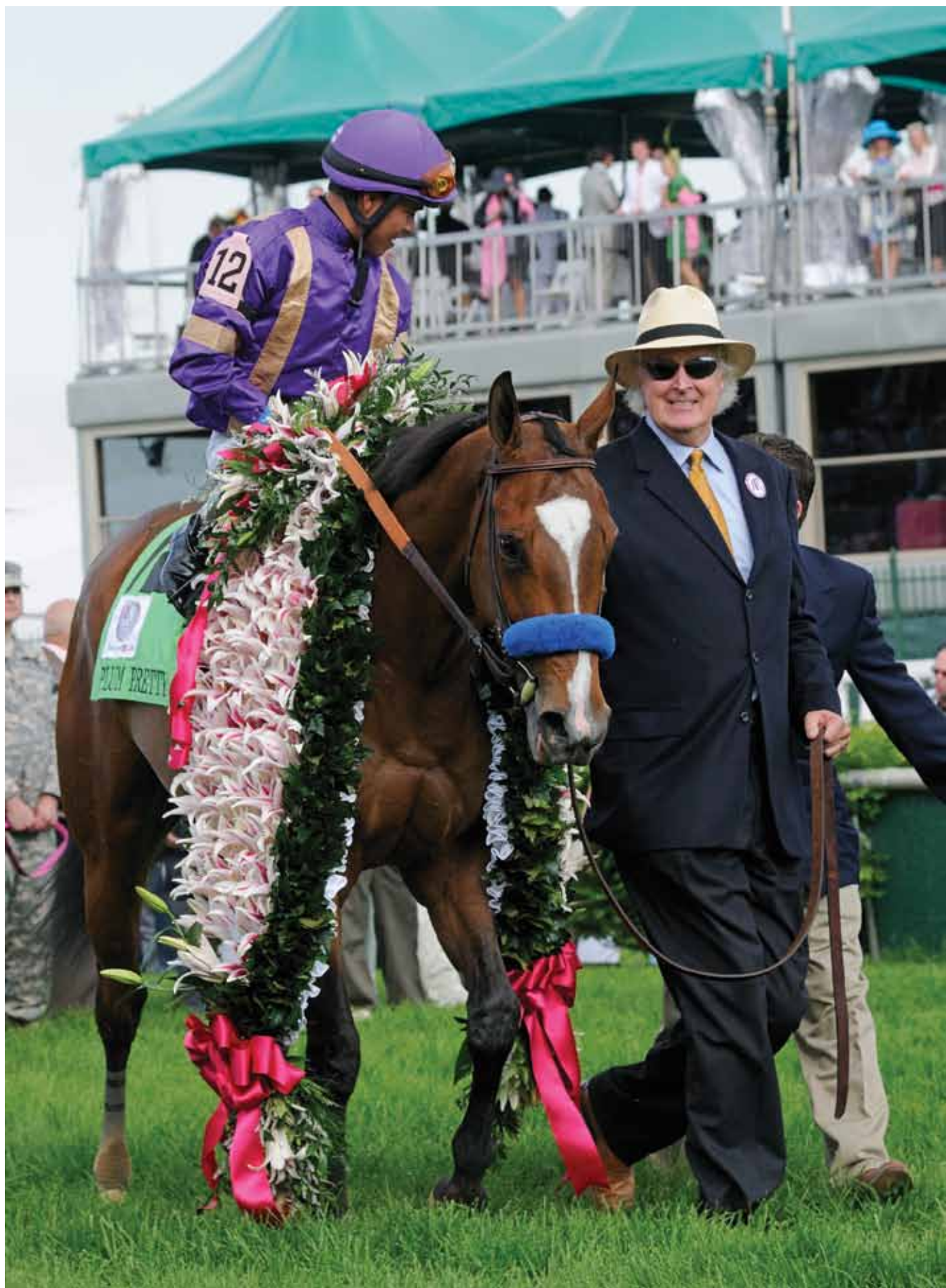
Reid called Scott to ask about bidding independently and went to \$170,000 for new Thoroughbred owners Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell Czoch, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Pulio, Mr. and Mrs. Milton (Buddy) Brown and Mr. and Mrs. John Azzeri, who make up Silent Indy Stables, and brothers Vince and Denis Curran of DDS Stables. All reside in Mid-Atlantic states—New Jersey for the Silent Indy bunch, Pennsylvania for Vince Curran, Virginia for Denis Curran.

Liszy foaled a "lovely bay filly," Reid's words, in March 2008. Medaglia d'Oro rocketed to the top of every stallion conversation with a first crop that included eventual 2009 Horse of the Year Rachel Alexandra. And Reid went to work on a return for his investors. The Medaglia d'Oro—Liszy yearling filly went to Fasig-Tipton's Saratoga Sale in 2009—and didn't sell.

"We targeted Saratoga because of everything that was going on, but they really penalized her at Saratoga," said Reid. "She was a big, gawky thing that walked horribly behind. She walked ugly. It was not a good walk."

Reid and his partners regrouped and aimed for the Fasig-Tipton Eastern Fall Yearling Sale at Timonium and again didn't sell their filly. Plan C was the 2-year-old market, so Reid called Elser. The filly joined the Kirkwood crop—which annually includes quality rookies aiming for sales or race tracks—in late October 2009 with the goal of enhanced maturity and value.

Plum Pretty grew up, learned her lessons and went to the Ocala Breeders Sale in March 2010 as part of Kirkwood's consignment.



PATRICIA MCCOY

Dressed for the occasion: Awash in lillies and ribbons, Plum Pretty accompanies owner John Fort and jockey Martin Garcia to the winner's circle.

Far more polished than as a yearling, she was nevertheless still growing into herself and didn't work the way high-priced OBS horses need to work.

"She was a little too big and immature to fire off the pole at the sale," said Elser. "Once she got rolling, she was good; she was just a little too immature yet to work the way she needed to attract real strong attention. They got an acceptable, but not exceptional, amount of money for her."

Peachtree's John Fort, who, like Elser, makes his home in Camden, S.C., bought the filly for \$130,000—based on pedigree, looks, potential.

"With that pedigree, she was an obvious one to look at," said Fort. "She had worked a little awkwardly, cross-cantering for the first 50 or 60 yards, but then she was good. Some of those things are to a buyer's advantage, and I liked the way she moved once she got going."

Reid and the breeders hoped for more money but let their filly go, knowing they owned her dam and several siblings.

Fort sent the filly to Baffert in California. She won her debut in late October at Hollywood Park, placed in two graded stakes at Santa Anita after turning 3 and dominated the Sunland Park Oaks by 25 lengths before the \$1 million Kentucky Oaks.

Fort said he has turned down several lucrative offers for the filly, whose earnings are now \$761,200, and Reid is resisting the urge to tell all the under-bidders at Saratoga, Timonium and Ocala what they missed.

"Some of these sales . . . they're looking for everything that's finished, where everything has to be perfect," Reid said. "I thought they could see all of it—Medaglia d'Oro, A.P. Indy on the dam's side, 16.2 [hands], clean x-rays, correct. It was a very disappointing sale for me, and I was trying to explain why she didn't bring as much as we thought, but the windup is, it worked out very well. We're ecstatic. It means a lot to the farm, to the partners, to the mare we own, everyone."

The Owner

John Fort came to Thoroughbred racing via sheer location. His father a math professor at the University of South Carolina, Fort gravitated toward the old Columbia Training Center, then home to a thriving winter base for some of the biggest names in racing.

He launched a Thoroughbred operation with his first horse purchase in 1976, played polo and soaked up knowledge while working with Woody Stephens, Max Hirsch, John Veitch and Calumet Farm, Horatio Luro, Scotty Schulhofer and veterinarian Robert Copelan, among others. Peachtree came to be in 1981 and turned into a racing partnership with investors beyond its founder. The stable started three horses in the Kentucky Derby-G1, finishing second with Invisible Ink, and campaigned such standouts as Red Giant, Chimichurri and homebred Mythical Power.

Fort, 68, has scaled back the partnership portion of Peachtree and owns Plum Pretty solo. He laughed at the fates that brought him his first Oaks winner.

"I don't know if she was following me or I was following her, but it happened," he said. "Kip is a great friend, but I don't go watch his horses train or anything, so I never saw her until I walked up to his consignment at OBS."

She won him over—first with the catalogue page and later with her frame, her "big hip," her potential. He thought she was undervalued.



KATHY L. CLARK

Kip Elser, a former steeplechase jockey with Pennsylvania ties, specializes in prepping horses for sales and races at Kirkwood Stables in Camden, S.C.

"Everybody asked me what was wrong with her," Fort said. "Absolutely nothing. I didn't pay but \$130,000 for her; it's not chump change, but we were at a sale where people were paying more for other horses. She didn't have the best pedigree in the sale when she was there, but she had some of the most potential to me. I was doing mental arithmetic."

Fort didn't start dreaming of the Oaks when he signed the ticket at Ocala. Like all owners, he hoped for a home run. He would have taken a single or double.

When Fort sent his new purchase to Baffert in California, the big-league trainer turned raw material into a race horse. Plum Pretty used the Sunland Park race as a confidence builder, then overcame a tangled start in the Oaks, made the lead on the far turn and outlasted St. John's River by a neck as the 6.30-1 fourth choice.

"That's something you don't figure on doing when you start out in this business," Fort said. "You're not ready to win a race like that. Ever. We were cautiously optimistic, but the euphoric feeling after something like that is hard to explain. You've done something very, very difficult."

The Oaks is not the Derby, Fort acknowledged, but the accomplishment conveys.

"We all have as many fillies as colts—you can't tell Mother Nature otherwise—so to breeders and people who do the work, it's a lot like winning the Derby," he said. "As you go along in this business, the guys you know are the breeders, the people who break horses, the people who do the work, and they know what it means."

Fort stands Invisible Ink at Pin Oak Lane Farm in Pennsylvania, so he also knows what the victory means to the Thoroughbred industry in the state.

"It's huge for the Pennsylvania program," Fort said. "People have the idea that you breed horses in Pennsylvania so you can



“So often people think, if you’re outside Kentucky, you don’t have a chance,” Mark Reid said after Plum Pretty took steps to alter that view.

take them over to [Parx Racing] and win a race, but, with the right mares and the right stallions, anything can happen. Getting people to set their sights higher can be the goal now. That will attract better mares and better stallions.”

The Preparer

Kip Elser has deep roots in Mid-Atlantic racing as a former steeplechase jockey and the son of Henry and Joan Elser, long-time Pennsylvania owners and breeders. Kirkwood Stables, established 30-odd years ago, now specializes in prepping young horses for 2-year-old sales or racing for a long list of clients.

Plum Pretty is the third Oaks winner to graduate from the operation, joining Canadian-bred Gal in a Ruckus (1995) and Kentucky-bred Keeper Hill (1998). Plenty of other stakes horses have graced Kirkwood’s stalls at Springdale Race Course in Camden, S.C. Last winter, the operation boasted Plum Pretty and Winter Memories, arguably the top 3-year-old dirt and turf fillies in the country this year.

Of his previous Oaks winners, “One was a long time ago and the next one was a moderately long time ago,” Elser said with a laugh. “It’s very gratifying to be able to show the quality and the longevity. And to look back and see that we had Plum Pretty and Winter Memories here at the same time is pretty cool.”

Elser swears by the facilities at Springdale. Legendary Thoroughbred breeder-owner Marion duPont Scott once held 1,000 acres of training facilities between the adjacent Camden Training Center and the Springdale property. Today, 600 acres at Springdale belong to the state but still operate as a training ground and home to the Carolina and Colonial Cup steeplechase meets.

The facility, founded by duPont Scott and later sold to the state of South Carolina, offers a diverse menu for horses—dirt surfaces, turf surfaces, trails, even some hills on the relatively flat terrain.

Young Thoroughbreds, whether they’re headed to the sales or to the race track, benefit.

“The amount of space you have and the room you’ve got to do things, that’s what makes it,” said Elser. “There are so many different things you can do. You can gallop in a five-eighths of a mile figure-eight, a mile figure-eight if you really want.”

Elser called Springdale an early version of Maryland’s Fair Hill Training Center, home to Kentucky Derby winner Animal Kingdom and other recent standouts. Coincidence or not, the duPont family (Fair Hill founder Willie duPont was Marion’s brother) is directly responsible for both facilities. Near bookends of the Mid-Atlantic, the training centers help define the region’s Thoroughbred industry.

“It’s a real tribute that those two places are here and part of what we do,” said Elser. “You couldn’t duplicate either property today, and they were both done to benefit the local community and the horse community. That’s as forward-thinking a process as you can imagine. They were both way ahead of their time.”

Elser’s television package was not, apparently, as he scrambled to find NBC’s partner network Versus in time for the Oaks. The voice on the other end of the phone couldn’t guarantee a quick upgrade but put it through, and Elser realized he’d produced an Oaks winner via a slight delay, the signal arriving for the race replay.

“I didn’t know what Versus was and assumed I had it,” he said. “Ten minutes to post, I was not happy when I couldn’t find it and got kind of frantic. Live or not, it was great to watch.”

The Founder

When trainer and bloodstock agent Mark Reid purchased Walnut Green bloodstock in 2005, he brought a reputation for competing at the highest end of Thoroughbred racing, given his connections to top horses Medaglia d’Oro, Saint Liam, You, Midas Eyes and others. The move to Unionville, Pa., meant less action at the race track and far more on the farm.

“My end was always the race track and buying made horses,” he said. “You never realize, sitting back here when the babies leave the farm, that the whole key is getting them in the right operations and seeing them develop. You’re not right there for it, but you really follow how they do.”

Plum Pretty took a while, but she’s doing just fine, and Reid couldn’t be happier. Her breeders are all new clients to Walnut Green and new to racing.

The Oaks winner is part of the first big crop foaled at the farm since Reid took over. Her yearling half-sister (by Dixie Union) is headed to the Saratoga sale this summer, another half-sister (by Ghostzapper) was born this year, and Liszy was just bred to two-time divisional champion Lookin At Lucky. They’re all Pennsylvania-breds, and the examples Reid uses when building his business.

“It’s exciting stuff; it means a lot,” Reid said. “So often people think, if you’re outside Kentucky, you don’t have a chance. They send castoffs here, or you hear that a horse is ‘pretty good for a regional horse.’

“We’ve got the perfect climate, hilly fields, and the Pennsylvania-bred program is as good as any. We are breeding what we think are top horses. We think we can raise as good a horse as anybody. There’s no reason we can’t. Why can’t we?”

