

INTERVIEW WITH KIP

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Reaching into one of his back pockets, Kip Elser pulls out a folded sheet of paper and peruses it as would a fan at a baseball game to see which player was waiting on deck for his turn at bat.

Looking down the list of horses scheduled to work out that day, the owner of Camden-based Kirkwood Stables folds the paper in half as another late-morning set of horses comes by him and a guest as they watch from in front of the viewing stand at the schooling course across the street from the Springdale Race Course.

Young horse which took to the dirt track that day are listed by their sires and dams, still too young to have been given a name approved by the Jockey Club. As their riders are given instructions by Elser, he takes time out from an interview to watch the horses in order to make sure his directions are being followed. Soon thereafter, his cell phone rings. Elser's brother is on the other end of the call and the two siblings discuss the possibility of getting together over the upcoming Christmas holiday.

Welcome to a sneak peak at a few minutes in Elser's regular routine, where down time is a rumor and every day brings with it a new adventure.

Standing still is hardly the norm when it comes to dealing with the former steeplechase jockey who makes his way across Knights Hill Road -- from one of his barns to the race course -- nearly as regularly as he does hopping aboard a plane to carry him to racing locales throughout the country and the world.

As Elser has said in the past and continues to repeat, Thoroughbred racing is truly a global sport. And he is one who should know. Just last October, Elser was part of a panel invited to take in and discuss the "Ready to Run" 2-year-old sales in South Africa. It was his second trip to the continent in 10 months.

"This game, this business, whichever you call it, will take you all over the world if you let it," he said of his globetrotting business life which is based, year-round, in Camden.

"A race horse is an international currency. And horse racing is very much like soccer, tennis, golf and other sports in that racing is a global sport. Racing draws huge amounts of fans and has huge amounts of money bet on it all over the world."

That being said, there is no place like Camden for Elser and his string of young horses which he and his staff nurture, develop and prepare for waiting owners and trainers in various locales. Just two days earlier, Elser entertained more than two dozen owners of horses from his company's new client, West Point Thoroughbreds, as they came to Camden to take an early look at their horses and Elser's operation, in general.

Elser, a Pennsylvania native, first came to Camden in the 1970s to ride and school steeplechasers in races and in training, respectively. He would also gallop and school other Thoroughbreds bound for flat track courses during the winter months here. In short time, he fell in love with Camden and its myriad of equine opportunities.

He would return to Camden after he graduated from Johns Hopkins University -- with a degree in comparative literature -- to work for the late Hall of Fame conditioner Frank Whiteley Jr. Soon thereafter, Elser began training on his own, taking advantage of the policy of the late Marion DuPont Scott, who helped spur the career of many a young trainer by making sure they were provided several stalls on her Springdale Race Course property in order to give them a leg up in their chosen occupation. It was one of her many ways in which the first lady of American steeplechasing helped grow the sport and the Camden brand.

His first days as a trainer in Camden might seem a distant memory to the now-60-year-old Elser, but with the passing of years and his travels to various equine facilities throughout the globe comes more of an appreciation for what he has in his own backyard.

"I love it here. I wouldn't trade this place for anywhere that I've ever been in the world," Elser said of a town and a training center to which he has grown attached.

"Camden is a wonderful place to live and work. On the racing side of it, we are blessed by having had Mrs. Scott's foresight and this (the Springdale Race Course and training center) her gift to the community. In very much the same way, out in the hunt country, we're blessed by the foresight and generosity of Dick Lloyd and Dale and Judy Thiel. Without those major benefactors for the entire industry, it would be very different here."

Thanks to the efforts of Ernest Woodward and Harry Kirkover -- who first partnered to purchase the property when it was part golf course and part corn and cotton field -- and later, Mrs. Scott, who bought the facility from the two businessmen and sportsmen, the Springdale Race Course was up and running for the New Year's Day Races in 1929. A year later, the facility hosted the inaugural running of the Carolina Cup. And while to many a Cup-goer the site is thought to be used only twice a year -- for the Carolina Cup and the Colonial Cup races -- the property is home to Elser and several other trainers, not to mention to hundreds of Thoroughbreds each year.

"This facility was laid out when available land was not an issue. It is a facility that could not and would not be duplicated today," he said. "If it weren't for those people, we wouldn't have this beautiful place to get up and go to work every morning. It's a wonderful experience to be able to get up and come out here every day and have all this available and for you to decide what is best for your horses."

Those decisions made by Elser and his staff have proven to be solid ones as evidenced by the successful string of horses which have graduated from Kirkwood Stables.

In 1996, the Elser-consigned Sharp Cat was purchased at Barretts' Equine Limited 2-year-old in training sales for \$900,000. All the filly did would be to win 14 stakes races for her owner, The Thoroughbred Corporation.

Kirkwood has sent out a trio of Kentucky Oaks winners from Camden, including 2011 champion, Plum Pretty, which was among the 3-year-old fillies being considered for the 2011 Eclipse Award. With three wins, two seconds and a pair of thirds in nine starts last year, Plum Pretty has already earned more than \$1.3 million in 10 lifetime starts. Owned by Camden resident John Fort's Peachtree Stable and trained by Bob Baffert, Plum Pretty joined fellow Kirkwood grads Gal in a Ruckus and Keeper Hill in winning the 1995 and 1998, respectively, "Run for the Lilies" on the first Friday in May at Churchill Downs.

In the barn at the same time as Plum Pretty was another then-2-year-old filly, Winter Memories, which scored five graded stakes win over the turf in 2011 as a 3-year-old including the \$250,000 Garden City Stakes (Gr. 1) at Belmont Park. With four wins in her six starts last year, Winter Memories has already bankrolled \$417,500 for The Phillips Stables and trainer James Toner.

But no stable ever bats 1.000.

In 2004, Elser was the trainer and sales agent for the striking colt Fusaichi Samurai, the 2-year-old son of 2000 Kentucky Derby winner Fusaichi Pegasus. By the time Fusaichi Samurai was led out of the show ring at the Fasig-Tipton Calder 2-year-old in trailing sales in Florida that year, he had been purchased for a then-record \$4.5 million. He was sent to Kirkwood after having been purchased as a yearling for \$270,000 by Hall of Fame trainer Nick Zito for owner Robert LaPenta.

Fusaichi Samurai was the colt of a lifetime for Kirkwood. He never had a bobble in training and by the time he went to the sales, Elser said he knew his team had walked a special horse up the truck ramp to be shipped to South Florida. "We did not know what we would get, but we knew it would be a lot (price-wise, at the sales)," he said.

"We knew right when he started here, from the first days that we started working with him here, what we had in him," Elser said when asked if he knew Fusaichi Samurai was a special horse, which would set off a bidding war once at the sales. "Then, he just kept stepping up and stepping up. When you are in that process, you need to have an absence of mistakes or setbacks. Everything went straight through with him. When that happens, it's a marvelous thing."

Elser said there was already a buzz generated by the regally-bred colt out of Hidden Storm by Storm Cat. The purchase price was not totally unexpected. But multi-million-dollar sales are hardly the norm in what can be an unforgiving, if not humbling, business for all those who have invested their time and effort in the development of a young horse.

In the case of Fusaichi Samurai, he would break his maiden his first time out as a 2-year-old in a \$35,000 maiden special weight, 6 ½-furlong race at Hollywood Park for trainer Neil Drysdale in December of 2004. Due to an unforeseen series of injuries, the colt was never better than seventh in his other three races before being retired in 2007.

But a horse with a pedigree of a Fusaichi Samurai, which continued to develop on an upward trend, does not bring the same type of hand-wringing for Elser and company as do the, well, lesser horses. While some horses may not have the elite breeding or even the talent as others, Elser said it is his job to help find a niche for those type horses once they leave his care.

"The pressure is when you have one that is not exceptional. That's the pressure when you have to find a deal to make this one work," he said with a smile.

"Every horse has their spot, even if it's not in the big leagues. We're all aiming for the ones that are going to make it into the majors, but if you have one that's not ready, you're going to have to send them to Double A or Single A to have them compete against their own kind. That's where the judgment part comes in. They all fit somewhere."

The training and sales portion of the equine industry is one in which the highs can take one to new heights while the lows can mean a plunge to great depths. Maintaining an even keel, Elser said, is not an option as much as it is a requirement for those in the business. But without question, when a major stakes winner, such as a Plum Pretty, comes from your barn, it makes all the hard work, time and the sweat put into the animal worthwhile.

"It's what we're here for," Elser said of that scenario. "That's our whole purpose; to produce horses ready for the races for our various clients or, whether we sell them, that's our whole purpose for being here. When they do well, especially when they do as well as Plum Pretty and Winter Memories did (last) year, it picks everybody's head up.

"This crew of ours works extremely hard every day, seven days a week. They like to sit with friends of theirs in front of the TV and see something good happen with a horse which they are partially responsible for. It's a wonderful thing to have happen to you."

Officially, Kip Elser is a Thoroughbred trainer and businessman. But, unofficially, he is also an extension of the Kershaw County Chamber of Commerce and the county's economic development office.

The equine industry is one which, in some ways, is different than others in Kershaw County. In most respects, however, it is no different than a business confined by its four walls.

"We are an industry like any other in the community," Elser said. "We live here, we spend money here, we pay taxes, we pay mortgages and we employ people. It's all the same, whatever business you're in."

On the weekend that Kirkwood Stables used as a showcase for West Point Thoroughbred's group of owners, Elser was as much a tour guide as he was the overseer of the clients' investment. He pointed out some of the dining establishments in the town as well as places to stay overnight and sites to visit during their first time in Camden.

"That was 25 people who stayed here for the weekend, enjoyed themselves and who had never been to Camden before. I thought it was great," he said of the weekend. "They were very, very impressed with the facilities that we have here."

"Most all of them, will be back here to visit again. The whole thing goes together. It's not just what the horses do and what we do. Those are people who come here to visit and end up doing other things, too."

Elser has been on the other side of the business as well. He has been the guest, which was the case in his recent visits to South Africa where he saw a different part of the world and another side of the sport. South African breeders are trying to develop more and stronger business ties with North American horseman. Count Elser as being impressed with what he saw in South Africa.

"I had a wonderful time there," he said of his busman's holiday to South Africa. "They had a panel of trainers, racing commentators and agents who watched the 2-year-olds who were in training for sales. Then, we would go on their evening racing show and everybody on the panel would give their picks for the sale."

"I had a wonderful trip traveling around their country and seeing racing, training centers and farms and just having a great time. We were at a place called Summerhill, a beautiful breeding farm and training facility in the middle of the country. They are the leading breeder in South Africa and they raise a lot of good horses."

Assuring that owners enjoy themselves in Camden, just as he had in South Africa, is a responsibility Elser holds close to his heart. In a sport where new blood is as important as the bettors who make their way to the teller's windows for each race, Elser said the industry needs to keep growing.

The equine business is starting to come out of the throes of a worldwide economic crisis. While the industry is hardly back to its heyday of a decade or so ago, Elser is seeing positive things happening inside and outside the Sport of Kings.

“Our industry was not immune to the global recession that we are all just starting to climb out of,” he said when asked about the state of Thoroughbred racing. “Race horses are a luxury item and the industry, all over the world, is fueled by the gambling dollar and the money bet on them. When those numbers are down, the whole industry is going to be down.

“Just now, things are starting to climb back up as is the rest of the world’s economy. That’s not to say that there aren’t a lot of problems, but I think we’re going in the right direction.”

The aging of Thoroughbred owners and fans has been well documented. Finding a younger audience and set of investors is crucial in keeping the sport viable. But, for the most part, racing is not for those with shallow pockets. There are no guarantees in the game and like the races themselves, it is a gamble for an owner, regardless of age.

“This isn’t an ‘investment’ that you would want to use for your retirement,” Elser said without blinking an eye. “Any sort of pastime or hobby constantly needs new people to fuel it. There is going to be natural attrition and we’re always trying to shift the age of our demographic and get younger people involved in horse ownership.

“It’s a hobby, like a lot of hobbies, which tends to be driven mostly by people who have a significant amount of money and want to spend it doing something different and enjoyable.”

But for those who may not be ready to dive into the equine pool head-first, there are outfits such as West Point Thoroughbreds and Aiken-based Dogwood Stables which allow investors to join in a syndicate in joint ownership of a horse rather than taking on all the financial responsibilities of ownership themselves. Such operations have come more into vogue over the course of the past 20 or so years. They have brought younger and first-time owners into the sport.

“One of our main clients, West Point Thoroughbreds,” Elser said, “has developed this partnership idea to draw new people into the game at a lower cost. They show them what a good time they can have in this sport and take care of the management for them. That lets us bring a new group of people in as participants, not just as fans.

“We need a strong base of participants and we need a strong fan base. To do that, you need to keep younger people involved in the sport all the time, at all levels.”

In keeping with the times and the modes of communication in vogue with all generations, Elser and Kirkwood Stables have a Website and a Facebook page to keep people abreast of their horses and with how Kirkwood alumni have been performing on the track.

When you are looking to bring in young investors, it is a case of providing ready and immediate information at the click of a computer screen or an iPhone. While all that is well and good and has become the recent phenomena, Elser still relies on one-on-one, face-to-face interaction, as well.

“Any business now has to be on the Internet; it’s an instant information age,” he said. “But there is still no substitute for a personal call, a personal visit and a personal recommendation. You can do all the Facebook, e-mail and Internet that you can possibly want, but there is no substitute for looking somebody in the eye and shaking their hand and telling them that this is what we’re doing here and letting them see the place for themselves.”

In Kip Elser’s world, there really is no place like home. And for him and his business interests, there is no better place to be than Camden. Here, he and his staff have plenty of room, time and freedom to get a horse trained the right way without any undue pressure.

But to say there is no pressure whatsoever gets a laugh from Elser, who operates on a rigid time frame in order to get his horses ready for the sales ring and/or the race track.

“Anytime you’re on schedule and doing anything, there is going to be a certain amount of pressure and you have to be able to put athletes, whether they are equine or human, on a schedule if you are going to make it to the big day,” he said.

“High school football teams start in August and by September, they have to have their team in place. It’s a little different getting horses ready for a target date. There have been times when we have been wrong and there have been more times when we have been successful.

“It’s a very competitive business. We need to keep producing a good product just to stay in the game, much less pull ahead of the competition.”

Once a prospective client sees the Springdale Race Course and the outfits which train horses in Camden, Elser said, they are usually hooked. He said that when talking to owners or prospective clients, he does not disparage other training sites in other parts of the country. Camden -- and what it offers a young runner and a steeplechaser, for that matter -- sells itself.

“You can’t call somebody on the phone and describe the differences between what we can do here and the way other places are set up,” he said. “But everybody who comes here to visit seems to love it.”

Elser said much of the credit for the working conditions for his and other outfits starts with the management of Jeff Teter, the director of the Carolina Cup Racing Association, and his staff which oversees the conditions of the grounds at the facility “We have great management here,” Elser said. “Jeff Teter keeps this place up to where there are no worries when you get up in the morning. You have a lot of choices. You can decide what your horses need to do that day.

“On the other hand, there are no excuses when you train here. If your horses don’t leave here ready to do their job, they’re not going to do their job. It takes away that old trainer’s excuse that, ‘I didn’t have the right surface’ or, ‘I didn’t have the right place to work him.’”

And while a runner can be trained on other surfaces and by other methods, Elser said he is not going to pull up stakes and look for another venue to get his horses ready to run. He has all that he needs in Camden and the Springdale Race Course.

“If you have a little imagination, you can train a horse in a Wal-Mart parking lot in Alaska, but it would, by no means, be ideal,” he said with a laugh.

“I love it here. We’ve developed a certain routine with the things that we do. I wouldn’t trade this place for anywhere that I’ve been in the world. Having this facility here to be based from is one of the things that makes us stand out from other outfits and makes us unique.”