



“When you contemplate set-ups, you want to know what’s it been like there in the past, what’s it like in the present and how will it be in the future. You don’t have to go too far in the history books to understand the significance of Aiken...”



Darley’s Winning Plan “The Missing Piece of the Puzzle”

By PAM GLEASON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARY KNOLL

Tim Jones oversees Darley horses at work at the Aiken Training Track.



On December 30, 2009, Darley Stable, a gigantic global racehorse operation, purchased 352 acres of land in Montmorenci, just east of Aiken, to create a training facility for young horses. Darley is owned by Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, the leader of Dubai and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates. This purchase ended a period of local anxiety about the future of Darley’s enterprise in the Aiken area. It started a new period of speculation about what the increased presence of such an immense international organization might mean for Aiken’s horse community.

Darley’s relationship with the Aiken area is about 15 months old. In September 2008, Darley purchased Stonerside Stable from Robert and Janice McNair. This purchase included a 2,000-acre breeding farm in Kentucky, about 250 horses, and Stonerside’s Aiken facilities, a complex of barns on Audubon Road that adjoins the historic Aiken Training Track. After that purchase, there was considerable uncertainty in Aiken about what the future would hold for the Stonerside organization, which was one of main stables that used the training track. For a time, Darley was in negotiations to buy the track from the trust that owns it. Although Darley did make an offer to do this, that offer was rejected, reportedly because it would have eventually closed the track to all outside horses, fundamentally altering the character of the historic horse district. After that rejection, Darley began looking for somewhere to create its own training facility. There was no guarantee that that place would be in Aiken.

“We looked at other locations in other states as well,” says Jimmy Bell, who is the president of Darley America. According to Bell, the decision to stay in

Aiken was made for several reasons.

“When you contemplate set-ups, you want to know what’s it been like there in the past, what’s it like in the present and how will it be in the future. You don’t have to go too far in the history books to understand the significance of Aiken with regards to the winter training of horses and the development of young horses. There has been phenomenal success in Aiken, particularly when you consider that that success has come from a relatively small number of horses. Aiken has a great history.”

Another factor in choosing Aiken was that the infrastructure was already in place, with a well-established horse training team operating under Tim Jones, the head trainer for Stonerside and now for Darley in Aiken. Finally, the location worked well logistically for Darley, which is headquartered at Jonabell Farm in Lexington, Ky., where there is a large breeding operation. Darley also owns the former Stonerside Stable in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., where the horses go to race each summer. “It’s not a long drive from Kentucky to Aiken, or from Aiken to Saratoga,” says Bell. “The whole network works very well together.”

Another major factor in the decision to stay in Aiken was finding the right piece of property. Darley had a number of requirements, and it was not easy to locate a parcel that could satisfy all of them. Suzy Haslup, who is a racehorse trainer in addition to being a realtor at Meybohm and an accredited land consultant, spent a considerable amount of time conducting research. The land in Montmorenci that she found for Darley was ideal. It has large flat areas on which to build a training track, rolling areas with huge old growth trees and pastureland that has been in grass since before the Civil

War. The only trouble was that the land wasn’t exactly for sale. It had been in one family for generations, and, although members of that family were no longer farmers themselves, they did not want to see the property developed. With the assurance that the land would stay agricultural, however, they were convinced to make the deal.

Shortly after the purchase was finalized, a Kentucky-based company called Dennis Fencing, which has worked for Darley Stable for over 30 years, arrived to erect a perimeter fence around the property. Future plans call for a one-mile dirt training track and the construction of four 30- to 32-stall barns and two houses. The majority of the wooded areas will remain intact, although there are plans to cut trails and set up other places to ride through the countryside.

“We were fortunate in this piece of ground to find not only an area that will be well suited for a track, but also pastures, and other abilities to give the horses time outside their stalls,” says Bell. “Our hope is to use these facilities to develop our horses not only physically but also mentally. We feel like we will give ourselves many different opportunities and alternatives to do that on this land, to develop sound horses both mentally and physically before they move to our facility in Saratoga.”

According to Jimmy Bell, there is currently no timeline for when the new facility will be constructed, nor are there any concrete plans for the future of the Stonerside complex downtown. (“We have the privilege of time,” he says.) For now, Tim Jones will continue to train at the Aiken Training Track,

where he currently has 64 horses in work. Once the new facility is up and running, Darley plans to bring in an additional trainer, Danny Moncada who is now training horses for Darley in Florida, and to raise the number of horses in the training program to about 130.

“I think it will be a good thing for Aiken,” says Tim Jones, who notes that he has twice as many horses in training this year as last, and that if there are twice as many more in the future, this can only benefit the local vendors and others who supply the operation. “It will also be a good thing for us. I think the horses are going to love it, because the plan is to be able to keep them outside most of the time, so that they can be more like horses.”

“This is the last piece of the puzzle,” says Jimmy Bell. “Having this facility completes what Darley is about in terms of the breeding, raising and racing of horses. Everything is in place now. We’re excited about the prospect, and hope to continue the tradition of what has made the Aiken area such a great horse haven.”

As far as Aiken goes, the Darley acquisition will certainly help remind the horse racing world at large that Aiken is a superb area for developing racehorses. The new facility is unlikely to alter the city substantially, however, and it may never even get a visit from its owner, Sheik Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, who generally comes to America for the horse sales and some races, but has little free time. The sheik also has racehorse farms and facilities in England, Ireland, France, Australia and Japan. 🐾