



Leg Up

The Godolphin Flying Start program grooms young professionals for future leadership roles in Thoroughbred racing and breeding

By JARRETT VAN METER

Conrad Bendoroff was studying for his last finals as an undergrad at Sewanee, The University of the South in Tennessee, when the call came through. It was an Irish number, and although it wasn't saved in his contacts, he knew who was on the other end. He answered the call and was greeted by Clodagh Kavanagh, executive director of the Godolphin Flying Start program. Sewanee is known for having spotty cell phone reception, so Bendoroff moved to a spot where he thought he could maintain a clear signal.

"I remember her asking questions: How school was going? How were finals shaping up? All this small talk, and it was killing me because I was waiting with bated breath to find out if this was a good phone call or a bad phone call," remembered Bendoroff. "As she finally gets around to telling me — you can't make this up — the call started breaking up. I thought the call was going to get dropped. She came back in and I kind of pieced together that I had gotten in and I believe my words were, 'Oh, thank God.'"

In 2003 Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum of Dubai founded the Godolphin Flying Start program as an incubator for emerging Thoroughbred professionals with the goal of contributing to the long-term success of the racing industry. In the 18 years since, the two-year program has produced sector leaders in nearly every medium, from breeding farms (Henry Field of Newgate Farm in Australia) to sales (Dean Roethemeier and Kyle Wilson of Keeneland; Matthew Prior of Tattersalls) to media (Gary King and Kelsey Riley of Thoroughbred Daily News) to training (Francis-Henri Graffard of France and Dan Blacker and Tom Morley of the U.S.).

Flying Start typically receives 80 international applicants, interviews 30, and accepts 12 for the fully funded course; and applicants often spend years trying to accumulate enough experiences to gain admittance. Kavanagh's call to Bendoroff, now



ANNE M. EBERHARDT PHOTOS

Sheikh Mohammed Al Maktoum of Dubai founded the Flying Start program.



The program helped prepare Conrad Bendoroff for a leadership role at Denali Stud.



KEENELAND PHOTOS

Dean Roethemeier (above) and Kyle Wilson (below) are part of Keeneland's sales team.



the vice president of his family's Denali Stud, was the culmination of the program's rigorous application process that requires everything from a handwritten cover letter to a video proving basic riding proficiency, not to mention years of summer jobs and internships as close to home as Keeneland and as far away as Arrowfield Stud in Australia.

"I called my dad, and it was pretty emotional," Bandoroff said of the moments following his acceptance. "I was obviously overcome with joy and excitement. It's something that I worked toward for a long time, and getting to call him to give him that good news was a special moment for us."

A cohort of a dozen can include recent college grads and young professionals who have already been in the industry for a few years. Bandoroff's class boasted the largest contingent ever admitted from a single country with six Americans, along with enrollees from China, Spain, Ireland, and Australia. The enrollees assemble in Kildare, Ireland, at Kildangan Stud for a three-month phase that Bandoroff referred to as "boot camp" that

“THEY’VE GOT THIS RAW PIECE OF CLAY AND THEY START MOLDING...

—Conrad Bandoroff

acclimates trainees to the academic pace, hands-on approach to practical application, and Godolphin Flying Start standards they will be held to for the next two years.

"They bring you in here, you're all excited, you're starry-eyed, you're on top of the world," he remembered. "The program gets its claws into you; Clodagh gets to know what makes you tick. They've got this raw piece of clay and they start molding."

From Ireland the class moves to Newmarket, England, for the shortest phase of the program. Students attend the British Racing School to bolster their riding skills, and the phase culminates with trainees shadowing agents for the Tattersalls foal and mare sales. Next, the group moves to the United States — Lexington more specifically — for six months. From a technical teaching standpoint, Kavanagh noted, the Bluegrass region is vital to the curriculum.

"As the centre of horseracing and breeding in the USA, it's a vital cog in the international scope of the Flying Start programme," Kavanagh wrote of Lexington in an email. "The network, bloodstock, breeding, and racing that the trainees experience in Lexington have value for the rest of their lives. The Godolphin USA management team are fantastic supporters and mentors of the programme."

The USA syllabus includes a course in equine nutrition at the University of Kentucky and a two-week workshop at the Kentucky Horseshoeing School while fieldwork is focused toward the Northern Hemisphere breeding season. Trainees attend racing meets at Keeneland, Churchill Downs, and Turfway Park, and breeding stock sales in Central Kentucky.

Lexington is hardly a global metropolis, but its population and geographic size dwarf those of both Kildare and Newmarket. Kate Galvin, who serves as assistant sales manager for the Godolphin USA stallion department and was a member of Flying Start's 2004-06 class, said the relative size of the city and the six-month stay also lend to an extensive

cultural education.

"Lexington was big compared to where we were in Ireland, England, and Australia," Galvin said. "There were so many things to do outside of the course, like going to a [University of Kentucky] game. There are so many people here from all over the world compared to some of the other places we were in. You are here for six, almost seven, months, so a lot of people I feel like really put down roots here and picked up other friends. We weren't necessarily just in our little bubble of 12 as much when we were in Kentucky."

The conclusion of the U.S. phase also marks the transition to year two of the program: Participants spend six months in Australia, a month in Dubai, then return to Kildare, Ire-

land, to complete the circle around the globe.

Graduate Gerry Duffy, who is farm manager at Godolphin's Raceland and Stonerside farms near Lexington, recalls his time in Dubai where he met Sheikh Mohammed as making a big impression.

"There was so much anticipation and nervousness, but when we finally were introduced to him, he made a joke and we immediately felt at ease in his company," Duffy said. "We toured Dubai and saw many of the amazing projects that were under construction, including the Burj Khalifa and we had lunch with him and his family. His vision and passion for the game were like nothing I had ever seen or will probably ever see again."

"What was very interesting about that day

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is the same morning I sat with Alhadad, a groom from Pakistan who was working in Dubai to try and provide a better life for his family who lived in an impoverished village in Pakistan. Alhadad and I were working at Nad Al Sheba together. To me it represented very well what the Thoroughbred industry is about and how it brings people from every walk of life, background, and socio-economic profile together through their shared passion for this majestic animal.”

The program’s conclusion yields 12 seasoned and versatile Thoroughbred professionals with a web of contacts and connections, as Bendoroff put it, “the world over.”

“The access that you are given to high-level figures in our industry is unparalleled,” he noted. “It would have taken me much longer, had I not gone through the program, to establish a relationship with these people, and there are some that I never would have been able to because of our geographic location compared to theirs.”

Bendoroff’s class watched Winx win her second Cox Plate in Australia and a few months later saw Arrogate claim the 2017 Dubai World Cup. Galvin’s group was on hand to see Makybe Diva win her third straight Melbourne Cup. There are late nights and early mornings, and amid the ever-changing surroundings the group of trainees moves through, a bond is formed. Both Galvin and Bendoroff still keep in touch with the other members of their cohort.

“We had so much fun,” remembered Galvin. “You had such a



Clodagh Kavanagh
is the program’s
executive director.



Kate Galvin is assistant
manager for Godolphin
USA’s stallion division.

strict schedule, but you are young, in your 20s, and there was always fun to be had in whatever local town we were in. That's the neat thing about Flying Start; you kind of arrive at the new place and get settled in your new accommodations and then you go out and meet friends for dinner, drinks, or with the other students on the course, and you get to know a new town."

Kate Hardy, Flying Start's USA coordinator, said it is no coincidence program graduates can be found in influential posts throughout the industry, not only because of what they gain during their two years but also the support past graduates lend to the program and younger generations of Flying Starters.

"Between the leaders they meet, the network they build, and the horsemanship skills they learn from all over the world, trainees graduate with a foundation that sets them up for success," said Hardy. "It is a real credit to the program to see the number of graduates in leadership positions around the world, many of them now mentoring the next generation of Flying Start trainees."

Francis-Henri Graffard was a member of the program's first class. A native of the Charolais region of France, Graffard not only met his wife, Lisa-Jane, on the course, but he developed skills and contacts that aided him in opening of his own stable in 2011.

"I have clients from all over the world, and the international aspect of the Flying Start has been a hugely contributing factor, as well as ensuring that I came out with better English than I started," said Graffard. "The scope and ambition of Sheikh Mohammed's vision with the Godolphin Flying Start really inspired us then and continues to inspire me now."

Graffard is just one of the program's impressive roster of international alums. Henry Field is the general manager of Newgate Farm in Australia. Eden Harrington is vice president of China Horse Club, Asia's premier Thoroughbred ownership group that has campaigned the likes of Triple Crown winner Justify. Gina Bryce has established herself as one of the industry's preeminent freelance broadcasters. Like Graffard, Bryce met her future partner, bloodstock agent Alex Elliott, during her Flying Start course, and

she often finds herself interviewing other graduates for her on-camera work for Sky Sports Racing, BBC5 Live, and AtTheRaces, including trainers such as Graffard and Jerome Reynier and bloodstock agents such as Matt Coleman, Ed Sackville, and Barry Lynch.

"I did harbor a pipe dream at the time to be a horse racing broadcaster but knew I didn't have any contacts or a way into the industry," said Bryce of her decision to enroll in Flying Start. "I saw the course as a fast-track way to both improve my knowledge of the global Thoroughbred business and meet the people I would need to kick-start a career in it."

The program has not been immune to the restrictions of the global pandemic. Most in-person lectures have been moved to a virtual format, and the current first-year class just began its U.S. phase while still in Ireland, taking online courses and completing a foaling rotation on Kildangan. Erin McLaughlin is a first-year trainee originally from Pennsylvania who previously worked at Lane End's Farm's Oak Tree division. On a phone call from Kildangan, she said that despite the challenges of the pandemic, getting to learn and work with people from around the world has already broadened her understanding of the industry as a whole.

"I think everyone gains an open-mindedness because we see so many different industries and we see so many different sides that there is just this innovative, open-minded attitude toward the industry," said McLaughlin. "You see the passion that each individual has for it everywhere we go. That transfers to you as motivation. You want to be a good leader."

Kavanagh said watching this growth from a mentoring perspective is among the most fulfilling elements of her position.

"Those who work hard, listen, and remain open to learning, as well as have confidence to make mistakes and have their own opinion, are the ones who progress the most," she said. "The classes who commit to working as a team by trusting, supporting, and challenging each other have a truly exceptional two years. It is amazing to listen and watch them have professional discussions with industry leaders as they move toward the end of the two years." **KM**



Gerry Duffy manages two Kentucky farms for Godolphin USA.



Erin McLaughlin is in her first year of the program.

ANNE W. EBERHARDT

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