

PAY THE LADY

By Rena Baer
Photos by Anne M. Eberhardt

Catherine Parke's first venture into the breeding and consigning business was driving a horse van in the early 1970s, a time when she wasn't even allowed into the breeding shed. After unloading her charges, Parke would have to hand the mares over to a man.

"I got the job only because I could drive a horse van," she said.

Today she breeds and consigns clients' horses from her own farm, Valkyre Stud, near Georgetown, Ky., which she was able to purchase in 1978 after selling her first weanling at a Keeneland sale for \$32,000. At the time, she was one of very few women to sell horses at auction. Today she is one of many women in the Bluegrass who have found their niche in consigning, or in breeding and consigning.

Geoffrey Russell, sales director at Keeneland, said he was surprised when he counted 30 women consignors in one of the recent sales as compared to five or six a couple of decades ago.

"The glass ceiling has been diminished or broken," he said. "There's an emphasis now on talent and professionalism.

"These consignors have worked up through the ranks. They are professional people who have gone to college, gained work experience, and gone out on their own."

When women first got into consigning horses to the sales, most of them had grown up in families that owned and bred horses, making the career choice seem most natural to them and those in the horse business.

Catherine Parke (left) hand walks a yearling in preparation for a sale.



Kitty Taylor



Catherine Parke

WOMEN CONSIGNORS NOW A FORCE IN THE SALES ARENA



Alice Chandler



Suzi Shoemaker



Jackie Ramos

WOMEN

Alice Chandler of Mill Ridge Farm just outside Lexington, who has been in the business 45 years and inherited the family farm when her father, Hal Price Headley, died, said consigning is drawing in more people in general, not just women. "It's a money thing. It's a more dependable living. A well-bred horse with a clean vet check offers the chance to make money. It's lower risk than training a horse for the races. If you have to make money in the business, it's the logical way to do it."

For Jackie Ramos of Ashleigh Stud near Paris, Ky., consigning was her lone option in the racing business in the late 1950s. "It was the only thing in England that a woman could do in racing. We couldn't train, ride, or hold a license of any kind," she said.

Ramos went to the races every day and began building a client base. She ended up in Ireland, consigning for the late Robert Sangster

Alice Chandler (right) says consigning horses to auction is a more dependable way to make a living than other facets of the business. For Jackie Ramos (below), consigning was her only option initially.



and Charles St. George. In 1980 she moved to Paris, Ky., where she breeds and still consigns horses, including some of the offspring of Eclipse Award-winning turf mare Possibly Perfect, who was foaled and raised at Ashleigh Stud.

"Women do a good job as consignors," she said. "There's no

doubt they have a good rapport with horses. Go to any Pony Club and it's almost all girls."

In the past couple of decades, women consignors have taken a different route to the sales ring. Many started with a childhood passion for horses that never abated and instead led them to pursue an equine-related degree and a job in the industry. They came to Lexington from other places because they knew the Bluegrass was the epicenter of the horse world.

Consignor Suzi Shoemaker moved to Lexington in 1978 after she graduated from Cornell University in New York. She said she became transfixed with the area after vacationing here while growing up.

"Horses are so central to this area, and that's the way I felt about horses in my life," said Shoemaker, who now owns Lantern Hill Farm near Midway, Ky., and consigns mares and foals.

Shoemaker is one of several women who have found a niche in consigning after realizing with their own riding backgrounds, their college educations, and their experience in the horse business that they could head out on their own. Some of these women strictly consign, and others have bought farms and combined consigning with breeding.

They don't own the largest farms or have the largest staffs, but what each woman does show is commitment to her job and her clients, working long hours or traveling far to make sure clients and their horses are prepared for sales. Consignors focus on getting the top dollar for their charges by placing them in the proper sales in the proper spot, offering owners an impartial eye and suggestions in the months leading up to the sales. They oversee the horses' preparation for the sales or do it

themselves, making sure the horse is professionally presented at the sales. A lot of their living depends on building trust with their clients and the buyers.

"Owners want the most money they can get for their horses, but if we sell a horse that isn't what we say it is, we've probably lost a



Suzi Shoemaker, on her pony, Spike, jogs a yearling to ready it for sale. Owner of Lantern Hill Farm near Midway, Shoemaker says it is important to know each horse.

buyer for life," said Shoemaker.

Valkyre Stud owner Parke has found success by keeping her farm small, by Kentucky standards, and keeping her hands on her clients' horses.

"My niche has been high quality in a more personal way," she said. "The people I work for don't want a corporate structure. They want to talk to the person who sees their horse every day. My clients are very involved with their horses and are very interested in their care. When they call me on my cell phone, I might be leading one of their horses. I am hardly ever in the office."

Parke, who showed horses growing up, moved from Ohio to Kentucky to attend the University of Kentucky and study animal science. She galloped horses on the side at Keeneland during college. She went to work for a large farm before striking out on her own by leasing a farm. She gradually built up her business as customers increased their broodmare bands and word of mouth circulated. After she founded Valkyre Stud, Parke reinvested the profits from consigning horses into building barns and putting up fencing.

"I started with one barn and kept adding," Parke said. "One of the

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biggest steps was getting my office out of the house. I was able to build a separate office after we sold a \$1-million Cozzene filly in 2000."

Parke also credits raising grade I stakes winners Milwaukee Brew and Riskaverse with giving Valkyre Stud a higher profile.

"That really helped us," she said.

Parke said she has seen more women consignors, but she attributes the larger number to the general shift in women having greater options. In addition to seeing the growth in women consignors, she said she has seen more women trainers and jockeys.

"I even know some women blacksmiths," she said.

And as far as being a woman in the business, Parke said she has never felt a bias.

"Initially all of my clients were men and most of them still are," she said. "I definitely don't have a farm full of women owners.

"I've never had anything negative happen, but I've also never had a woman call and offer help though plenty of men have offered help. There's not enough networking of women trying to help women."

Consignor Kitty Taylor of Warrendale Sales in Lexington said

gender hasn't been an issue. "The playing field is level," she said. But, she added, other women from other professions have referred clients to her and it was a woman banker who believed in her enough to provide the wherewithal for her to get started. She said she sees some networking among women in the business. "Good business is good relationships," she said.

Taylor grew up riding and showing horses. She got a degree in equestrian science from William Woods College and spent the next seven years galloping and breaking yearlings in the winter. During the summers she worked yearling sales in Kentucky. For four summers she worked the sales for bloodstock agent Lee Eaton, getting plenty of hands-on experience. She honed her knowledge of sales, strengthened her organizational skills, and learned more about client relations. In 1992, with a young family to think about, she went to work for Ben Walden at Vinery, running the sales division for eight years. It was her first "office job."

"I love horses, but you reach a point when there is no future in riding," she said.

At Vinery, she grew more comfortable dealing with clients, and in 2000 she became the co-owner of Bluewater Sales with Meg Levy. In 2002 she decided to launch Warrendale Sales on her own.

"I had been doing it so long that I knew everyone in the business and realized they didn't have some magic key that I didn't have," Taylor said. "I took the step out on my own and haven't looked back. The normal course of things — if you stay in the business — is that you want to take it to the next level."

Taylor said her business — consigning weanlings, yearlings, and breeding stock — depends on a lot of loyal, long-term clients. She does not have a farm and spends a lot of time traveling to New York, Virginia, California, Florida, and Louisiana, as well as throughout Kentucky, to see her clients and their horses.

"I go to the farms on a regular basis, looking at the horses with a fresh eye every few weeks, and make suggestions," she said. "The more money they make, the more I make — we're always trying to improve the product. I'm always working to-

ward the next sale."

She said she especially enjoys the Keeneland sales because they draw the deepest group of buyers. "The buyers are also diligent; it's a very work-oriented sale."

Shoemaker, of Lantern Hill, said she buys and sells primarily at Keeneland.

"When I'm selling, I find that the buyer base at Keeneland is so large and diverse that if one type of buyer doesn't care for a certain animal, there are others who may need something just like what I've got," she said.

The first mare she ever bought came from Keeneland many years ago.

When Shoemaker moved to Lexington in 1978, women were just beginning to be able to work on breeding farms, and there were very few women in the industry at any level. She got a job at a farm with both American Saddlebreds and Thoroughbreds.

"I got to do a lot of things," said Shoemaker.

"I learned about what was important and what I could use from my past experience with horses and from college. It's like I started my career at a young age — putting myself in training but not doing it consciously.

"I came here with no idea about the Thoroughbred industry, and it quickly became clear if I wanted to work in the horse industry, it would have to be with Thoroughbreds."

Shoemaker decided to take a chance and buy her own

broodmare, convincing a Nicholasville banker to loan her \$20,000 after several other banks had turned her down.

It turned out to be the beginning of an amazing success story. When she bought the 16-year-old broodmare, the horse had produced several winners at the track but none of them stakes winners. Within 11 months of purchasing the broodmare, one of those offspring placed in a stakes race. Realizing the broodmare had increased in value and wanting to pay off her loan, she decided to sell her back in foal.

As she prepared the broodmare the day before the sale, someone came up and said "Congratulations." Shoemaker thought maybe

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Catherine Parke (top) provides hands-on service at her Valkyre Stud. Kitty Taylor (above, pink shirt) looks over a yearling with owner Sandra Sexton at Oak Crest Farm near Versailles, Ky. Taylor often visits her clients to assess and monitor the yearlings she will consign for the sales.

the kind words were due to the stakes-placed offspring, but as it turned out, another offspring, a 50-1 longshot, had just won a stakes race at Hawthorne. The broodmare ended up bringing \$45,000 at the sale.

"From the beginning I had very good luck," she said. "I thought it would run out."

After she sold the broodmare, Shoemaker bought a house downtown rather than re-invest in horses because she said she did not know where she was going with it. She got into consigning after she eventually bought some property in the 1980s as the market went south and people began selling their horse farms or pieces of them. Shoemaker had a horse that needed company and put an ad in the newspaper. It read: "Desperately seeking a yearling Thoroughbred colt as a companion ..." A man called and told her he didn't want to sell her his colts but he was looking for a new place to board them. He

ended up letting her sell some of his yearlings at auction.

In 1995 she bought the 144-acre Parrish Wood Farm and renamed it Lantern Hill. One-third of the horses she sells are her own or in partnership, and the rest she sells for other people. Most of these horses she keeps on her farm and gets to know them personally.

"It is important to me to let people know I know the horse and if they have a question I can answer it," she said.

This has become even more important

with the advent of the bloodstock agency concept where all the animals are shown in a consistent, professional manner, she said. "As that trend progresses, it is more important for me to have that relationship with the horse and the client. People need to know I'm there for the long run — and that the horse is what I say he is."

Shoemaker said that though good luck has been an almost constant companion, she wishes other women had encouraged her along the way. "If one other woman is encouraged by hearing my story and knowing that you can be successful, it's well worth it to me," she said. 🐾