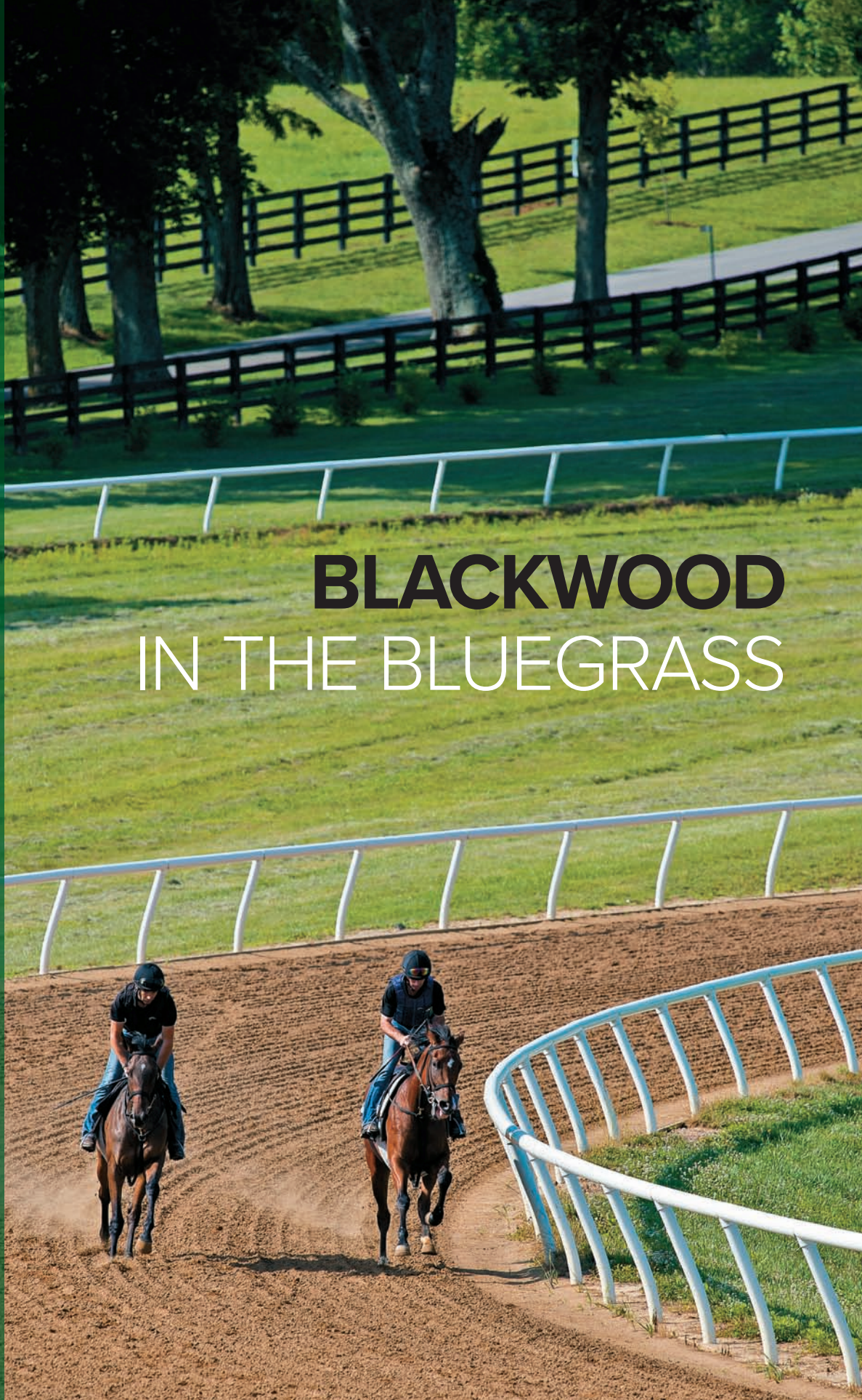


## BLACKWOOD IN BRIEF

- ▶ Accredited training center
- ▶ 350 acres in heart of Bluegrass region
- ▶ Six-furlong dirt track
- ▶ Turf course
- ▶ All-weather uphill gallop
- ▶ Professional starting gate crew once a week
- ▶ Workouts published via Equibase and *Daily Racing Form*
- ▶ 40 one-acre turnout paddocks
- ▶ 15 10-acre turnout paddocks

Horses on the six-furlong dirt track at Blackwood Stables

# BLACKWOOD IN THE BLUEGRASS







From left, Guinness McFadden and Matt Hogan

## Training facility is Kentucky's answer to Fair Hill

BY LIANE CROSSLEY | PHOTOS BY ANNE M. EBERHARDT

**IN THE POSH BOONDOCKS OF** Woodford County on a connector road with a blink-and-you-miss-it sign that leads to Lexington, Versailles, or Midway, the silence is overwhelming. While waiting for Blackwood Stables' electronic front gate to open, one might hear a random bird chirping, but the absence of noise is tangible. Even the horses and riders on the track seem to be choreographed with the volume turned off.

The 350-acre facility in the heart of the Kentucky Bluegrass region is something of a downsized version of Maryland's massive Fair Hill Training Center, where horses meander on tree-lined trails toward the track. The property also is reminiscent of another Maryland mainstay—the legendary Sagamore Farm, where one can feel the ghosts of champions past amid the serenity.

But there are no ghosts at Blackwood, an operation so new that finishing touches are still underway in some areas. Despite its youth Blackwood has a long list of star graduates from its pre-training program.



Blackwood is a 350-acre facility

The outfit also has options for getting horses back to the races after some time off.

Blackwood was founded by Matt Hogan and Guinness McFadden in 2012 on a former division of Three Chimneys Farm known as Tracewood. The new name is a nod to the former facility and the business partners' preference for black vehicles. Neighbors include Lane's End, WinStar Farm, Three Chimneys Farm, and the yearling portion of Airdrie Stud.

Hogan and McFadden lived parallel yet opposite lives in different states before meeting each other in Kentucky.

"We had crossed paths in the industry, but it was my wife, Jessica, who formally introduced us when she and Guinness worked together at Three Chimneys," Hogan said.

Hogan grew up on his family's Central Kentucky Thoroughbred farm and never felt the desire to leave the business. During his youth his chores included foaling, grooming, and all-around horse care. He honed his horsemanship during high school and college by working at Hagyard Equine Medical Institute in Lexington. After attending the University of Kentucky, Hogan furthered his education in various other Thoroughbred-related jobs. His resume includes graduating from the Irish National Stud program.

McFadden was raised on a different kind of farm with no first-hand knowledge of Thoroughbreds. His early years were spent in Northern California where his family raised grapes, herbs, and cattle. His specialty of driving and servicing the farm's tractors led to outside employment in landscaping and operating heavy machinery. An avid sports fan, McFadden attended the races for the first time in 1996 at Belmont Park. The outing, with an aunt and uncle, was a turning point.

"I realized early on that I was not going to be the general manager of the San Francisco Giants (Major League Baseball franchise)," McFadden said. "I loved the fact that (with Thoroughbreds) I could get close to these equine athletes. I could really be a part of the process."

After attending the University of Nevada at Reno, McFadden obtained a job through a family friend at Three Chimneys and relocated to Central Kentucky in 2004. He started in the broodmare division before joining the yearling prepping crew. When extra administrative help was needed, McFadden's computer skills landed him an office position.

"That worked out great," he said. "Turns out I liked that part of the business and eventually moved to sales full-time."

His duties included showing prospective clients around the property, an experience that served as inspiration to host Blackwood tours via the Horse Country Tours booking outlet.

In 2011 Hogan and McFadden hatched the idea to build a state-of-the-art training facility in the heart of the Bluegrass.

"I saw a huge demand to break horses in Kentucky," noted Hogan.

Added McFadden, "I had always sent



Trainer Ian Wilkes, left, with Hogan and McFadden



Horses have plenty of room on the turf course

my clients' horses to Florida but thought that somebody should provide those services here. There are plenty of horses, and there is no reason we can't do it just as well as they do it farther south.

"It was location, location, location. This property was available, and it was right where we wanted to be. We took a leap of faith at the beginning because it did not have a racetrack, but we were able to use the track at a neighboring farm for two years while we built our own."

Unlike facilities that lease stalls to multiple outfits, Blackwood dictates all training, which allows for creativity and an unhurried pace. McFadden refers to "wrong-way Mondays" when horses can gallop clockwise. Blackwood has its own time frame, so there is no need to rush horses back and forth during training hours.

"We can train as long as we want," McFadden said. "If we feel like taking a horse for a hack in a field, we can do that. Instead of tack walking in the shed row, we can go for a training ride across the farm. We can pretty much do exactly what we want or need to do."

Amid the tranquility in the park-like setting, Blackwood is a hub of activity during training hours that begin at 8 a.m. About 100 Thoroughbreds will be exercised in the next two hours by riders clad

## HONOR ROLL

Graduates of Blackwood Stables pre-training program include:

Name	Notable achievements
Paradise Woods	Won 2017 Santa Anita Oaks (G1)
Salty	Won 2017 Gulfstream Park Oaks (G2)
Midnight Storm	Won 2016 Shoemaker Mile (G1T); 3rd 2016 BC Mile (G1T)
S'maverlous	Won 2016 New Orleans Handicap (G2)
Dreamologist	Won 2016 Las Cienegas Stakes (G3)
Golden Valentine (Fr)	Won 2016 Prix Minerve (G3)
Super Majesty	Won 2015 Dogwood Stakes (G3)
House Rules	Won 2015 Top Flight Handicap (G3), Rampart Stakes (G3)
Madam Cactus	Won 2013 Lexus Raven Run Stakes (G2)

in dark attire with the Blackwood Stable logo. Impeccably mannered dogs mingle so seamlessly that they appear almost to be part of the staff.

The rhythm is racetrack-style with a toned-down tempo. Riders are legged up and take a few turns around the barn before joining together as a set with Hogan going along on a stable pony. His mounts include Beer Man, a one-time winner who seems to thrive in his semi-retirement at age 8. Some horses might go to the elevated grass gallop while others take to the six-furlong dirt surface, installed by a team specializing in racetracks.

When their exercise concludes, horses return to the barn for a customary bath and walking session to cool down. Riders bring their tack to subsequent mounts, and the routine begins again.

Blackwood personnel have the freedom to plan exercise based on both particular horses and on others in the group. On a recent spring morning, advanced horses and newbies left the barn together and then went separate ways. The seasoned horses advanced to the dirt for timed workouts while others had a leisurely canter on the turf unaware of the pounding hooves that might cause a spook.

With as many as a dozen Thoroughbreds on the track

at one time, young horses learn valuable lessons that serve them well when they relocate to a busier environment. They see horses coming toward them, get accustomed to passing, and relax while standing with their peers before and after exercise.

Horses have the option of visiting the starting gate where Keeneland starter Robert "Spec" Alexander and his team oversee schooling once a week.

"Spec is the best there is," Hogan said. "He and his guys have seen everything, and they are very patient and give young horses confidence with something that can be a little scary."

Blackwood is accredited by the Kentucky Racing Commission, so timed workouts are "official" and published via Equibase and *Daily Racing Form*.

Although training is orchestrated by





Bloodstock agent Steve Shahinian



Gate work at Blackwood

the in-house team, Hogan and McFadden welcome independent veterinarians, farriers, and other specialists to serve clients' horses.

"Clients and horses usually come with prior relationships that we need to respect," McFadden said.

Besides the bucolic surroundings, Blackwood offers clients another big benefit—the opportunity to keep close tabs on their horses.

"We actually underestimated people's desire to watch their horses in person," noted McFadden.

Added Hogan, "We are extremely accessible to so many people—people who want to come and see their horses or clients' horses. We had an 'If you build it, they will come' mentality. At first clients sent one horse. As we proved ourselves, they sent more, and it has built from there because we promote confident, independent, sound horses."

Equine residents are a mix of young prospects and older runners preparing for a return to the track. Blackwood also handles rehabilitation that includes various physical therapies and time in small paddocks.

The pre-training program began in 2012 and has since produced a bevy of stakes winners including Longines Kentucky Oaks (G1) starters Salty and Paradise Woods. The season starts in late summer with horses receiving their initial lessons with Hogan line driving them in a round pen.

"The horse has a better mouth without the confusion of having a rider up," he said. "They gain confidence from not being led as well."

They soon progress to being ridden in the pen and then a small paddock.

When youngsters master being ridden by themselves, they are allowed to go with other horses. They eventually progress

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***When you go there,  
the horses are happy, and  
that is what I want to see.”***

— IAN WILKES

to the grass gallop and then to the Blackwood dirt track.

The four-legged students head in many directions to various leading trainers that include Ian Wilkes, one of Blackwood's original customers.

"When the horses arrive at my barn, they are well broken and ready to go forward," Wilkes said. "I like the set-up. When you go there, the horses are happy, and that is what I want to see. That is important."

Wilkes' fittest Blackwood graduates head straight to his Churchill Downs barn while others go to his Skylight Training Center division in Goshen, Kentucky.

Bloodstock and racing adviser Steve Shahinian has been sending client hors-

es to Blackwood since 2013. Blackwood remains open for training all winter, but most Shahinian-connected youngsters head to Ocala, Fla., after receiving their initial education. They return in spring for tune-ups before being dispatched to racing stables.

Shahinian is at Blackwood about four days a week to evaluate the horses' progress. He appreciates the various training options and has high praise for the adept staff that is so cohesive they barely need to speak to one another.

"The team is focused on doing the job well," he said. "Everyone is pulling in the same direction. My goal is to give every horse his best chance to find his spot in the game. Everything they do at Blackwood gives the horse the best chance to get where they are going. They are hungry to get it right."

McFadden and Hogan are quick to praise the people of Blackwood at every opportunity.

"The team we have assembled is a joy to work with," Hogan said. "We have a family feel, and we have great clients."

"Having two graduates in the (Longines Kentucky) Oaks this year was very rewarding for the whole team, a defining moment. The quality of the horses here is getting better, and it is fantastic to see them go back to the races and win at any level." **BH**

*Liane Crossley is a freelance writer based in Lexington.*