



CARRA

FIELDS OF **DREAMS**

By **CHRIS MCGRATH**

Round and round they go, each with a different way of moving, unspooling their talent in daily increments around the training circuit. The furlong markers, like everything else bearing the Eddie Woods brand, are hooped in red and black. Just a throw-back to colours he wore riding one or two

better types, in the old days, back in Ireland as a steeplechase jockey. But the colours of roulette, too, of course; and each turn of the wheel brings each of these adolescent thoroughbreds—ambling and lurching in pairs or threes, in sets of two dozen—closer to the denouement of a gamble. If the



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horse lands right, a payday: whether in a matter of weeks, at a breeze-up sale; or in the longer term, on the track itself. If not: well, your chips are scooped and you start again.

“The little brown fillies,” Woods says. “They’re the ones that surprise you. Some of those big shiny colts don’t have the heart for the operation, they kind of wither under a little minor pressure. You can just see them act cheap, just not be a man about the job. But the little brown filly will get you every time. Here she comes, 15.1, weighs 900 lbs—and runs a hole in the wind. That’s the one that’s hard to peg. You

look at her, she’s nothing. And then: graded stakes horse on the grass.

“Not long after we got here, I had some horses for Mr. Nerud. This filly comes down the shedrow and she’s crooked and small and ratty-arsed. And he looks at her—not a man short of an opinion—and he said: ‘Son, do that owner a favour and get rid of that crooked little rat.’ I said ‘Yes sir.’ But an A.P. Indy filly, know what I mean, can’t do that! And she ended up earning 800 grand, and the dam of Royal Delta. She was crooked, she was small. And she moved beautifully. You can’t judge them walking down a shedrow.”

No, you can't; and that's why this whole process is played out, year after year, all round this neighbourhood: a couple of hundred here with Woods, and as many down the road with Niall Brennan. At one time, both were making their way from barns at nearby Classic Mile Park. Ciaran Dunne was there, too, and he has ridden the same wave. They're not all Irish, of course. Nick de Meric was born in England, for one thing. But the variety of American horsemen also developing young thoroughbreds in Marion County can be spanned by the diverse origins of J.J. Pletcher, veteran of

the Texas Quarter Horse circuit prepping for his record-breaking son Todd, and Jonathan Thomas at Bridlewood, raised on Paul Mellon's Rokeby Farm in Virginia.

Members of this community will, between them, often turn out to have supervised the education of maybe half the field in any given Kentucky Derby or Breeders' Cup race. Together they sow a crop that responds, no less than the citrus grove, to the benign Florida winter; teaching young horses to extend their limbs like the opening of blossom.

The concentration of so many specialist

breakers, pre-trainers and pinhookers in this neighborhood, over the past 25 years or so, has given a new dimension to Florida's postwar emergence as the meridional counterpoint to the cold winters of Kentucky and the Northeast.

The roots of the Ocala equine industry famously trace to the arrival of Carl G. Rose in 1916 to build the state's first asphalt highway. The soil proved too sandy, but this could be alleviated by abundant deposits of limestone—which Rose knew also to be valued in the raising of horses. In the late 1930s he established Rosemere Farm

as the first thoroughbred stud in Marion County, and in 1956 the nascent breeding industry here was put definitively on the map by the Kentucky Derby success of Needles, raised at Bonnie Heath Farm.

Subsequent champions bred in these parts include Affirmed and Holy Bull, emboldening those rearing other breeds to come and exploit the sunshine and water of Florida. With 29,000 residents employed with thoroughbreds alone, the economic impact of the overall equine industry in Marion County has been computed at \$2.6 billion.



Sure enough, year after year, the biography of a new champion features an early chapter somewhere round Ocala. Indeed, the jockey mannequins that greet visitors to Brennan's stables include one in the silks of the newly anointed Horse of the Year, Gun Runner—who actually got as far as breezing at OBS before a partnership was put together to take him off the market.

"He was immature when he came to us," Brennan remembers. "Very athletic, almost a feminine-bodied horse—but like a deer on the racetrack. Mentally he was still a bit flighty, just very young. Steve Asmussen and his team did an amazing job, they gave him every chance to develop. Look at him now, physically he's a beautiful horse: he was always going to be, but he needed to be a 4-year-old. So they did a wonderful

job, picking spots and developing him accordingly. Even though he's a talent, you can still make mistakes, can still go to the well too often. But they gave him every chance to be what he is."

And that same dexterity is precisely what makes this ghetto of experts so cherished—both by those breeders who turn over their young stock for a grounding, and those who spend big money at the 2-year-old sales. It's all about knowing how to avoid forcing one step forward, at the cost of two backwards.

True, the tyranny of the stopwatch at the breeze-ups has put their instincts at a new premium; to the extent that Brennan feels these auctions have lost much of their old magic, as he watches all the lemmings cluster round the "bullet" breeder.

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"We never let them go full speed here on the farm," he says. "A lot of other consignors are more into Quarter Horse training methods: they breeze half a furlong, flat out, and then pull them right up. That way, I feel, you're not training a thoroughbred to be a racehorse. So at the end of the day I've just had to make a decision—and that was to rest on my reputation, on our ability to develop racehorses. And to hope that keeps people coming back to buy from us." It can surely be no coincidence that both Brennan and Woods were raised in the old

school by fathers who trained mostly moderate animals, often steeplechasers, to be patiently primed for the day that mattered. Liam Brennan did just that for the Irish gambler Barney Curley in 1975, when a horse called Yellow Sam at a country track landed a famous betting coup. And while Paddy Woods did ride the greatest of all steeplechasers, Arkle, in the mornings—and even won a race on him once—his own yard never operated at that kind of level.

Their sons come over as very different from each other in mien and tone—Bren-





nan, dynamic and fluent, is president of the Ocala Farm Ministry; while the deep, measured tones of Woods are punctuated by chuckles and worldly wit—but both honed their instincts in a very similar forge.

“Most of us grew up around horses at home, between the pony club and the hunt, even a bit of showing,” Woods says. “And there’s maybe a little different approach to it. I don’t think we’re as hard on horses as some of the other guys. You’ve got know when you’ve done enough, can’t push the envelope. If you have them tuned too fine-

ly for your breeze show, you’ve probably done too much. You have to leave that spot, leave room for improvement. They can’t be at their finest that day—because they have to be that later on, down the road.”

“I think I learned so much without realizing at the time, just by osmosis,” Brennan reflects. “It was a different era, especially in Ireland and with steeplechase horses. It took me a while to figure out things: why did we do this today, or that today? Your brain starts ticking over. Dad was always training horses to win certain races, had to

know the form of every horse in the country. So you develop horses that way.”

On the Turf, as everyone knows, all the aptitude in the world can remain the plough with no ox if not harnessed to a little luck. Both these two retired jump jockeys more or less stumbled into their ultimate vocation. Brennan was planning to go back to Ireland, to Coolmore, after working with Paul Shanahan in Kentucky—one day he was nearly killed by Storm Bird—while Woods also meant to head home after gaining stud experience.



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But then each had their breaks.

Brennan was tempted to Florida in 1987 to prep horses for New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner. “Everybody said don’t work for him, he fires everybody!” he recalls. “But the one sport I knew nothing about was baseball. I stayed three years and am still good friends with the family, ended up selling horses for them. And then I just said we’ll stay here and fiddle around and started off with five horses. It wasn’t the plan. Funny how things work out.”

Curiously, it was another feisty proprietor of another major sports franchise who got Woods going, too: Jack Kent Cooke, of Washington Redskins fame, who had hired Bobby Spalding to run Elmendorf Farm. They were a big help and so, too, was Joe Greeley. Woods met Greeley at Keeneland one year with only the vaguest understanding that they were to scout for pinhooks.

“Well, Joe, what do you want to do?” asked Woods.

“Well, I want to buy a few nice horses for the select sales.”

“Grand. What price range you want to be in?”

“I don’t care. But let’s spend a million. And we’ll take it from there.”

Woods wasn’t arguing. And as early as the second year they spent \$130,000 on a French Deputy colt, and pinhooked him for \$600,000 to Michael Tabor at Fasig-Tipton’s February Sale at Calder. Left Bank won 14 times including three Grade 1s.

“And that put me in the spot of selling nice horses,” Woods says with a shrug. “And then when you’re selling nice horses for good money, more people want to sell with you. It’s like they say: the same few people have all the horses and everyone else has none. It’s at the track, it’s at the farms, and



it's the same for the few of us round here fortunate to be doing this."

Which begs the question: how can any of these operations absorb such numbers when each individual project is so dependent on nuance, on attention to detail? "By hiring an awful lot of good people," Woods says. "We have 72 people working here, and every barn has its own foreman. Everyone can see 'broken'—but you need people who can see things coming along. Each day, really, you're looking for nothing different. Is this horse moving the same? It's any little negative change you're looking for."

All being well, however, the system ev-

idently functions so efficiently that perhaps the most important challenge is to introduce the right raw materials in the first place. As Brennan observes, even some top-class trainers "can't buy a frog to hop" at the yearling sales. But he has been working the circuit in partnership with another celebrated judge, Mike Ryan, for over 20 years.

Brennan says he tries not to be too prescriptive, believing that good horses come in all shapes and sizes. "You probably wouldn't buy a June foal that looks like a June foal," he admits. "Because it's not going to be fair on him, to try and have him peak in March or April. Having said that, I'm



Nyquist

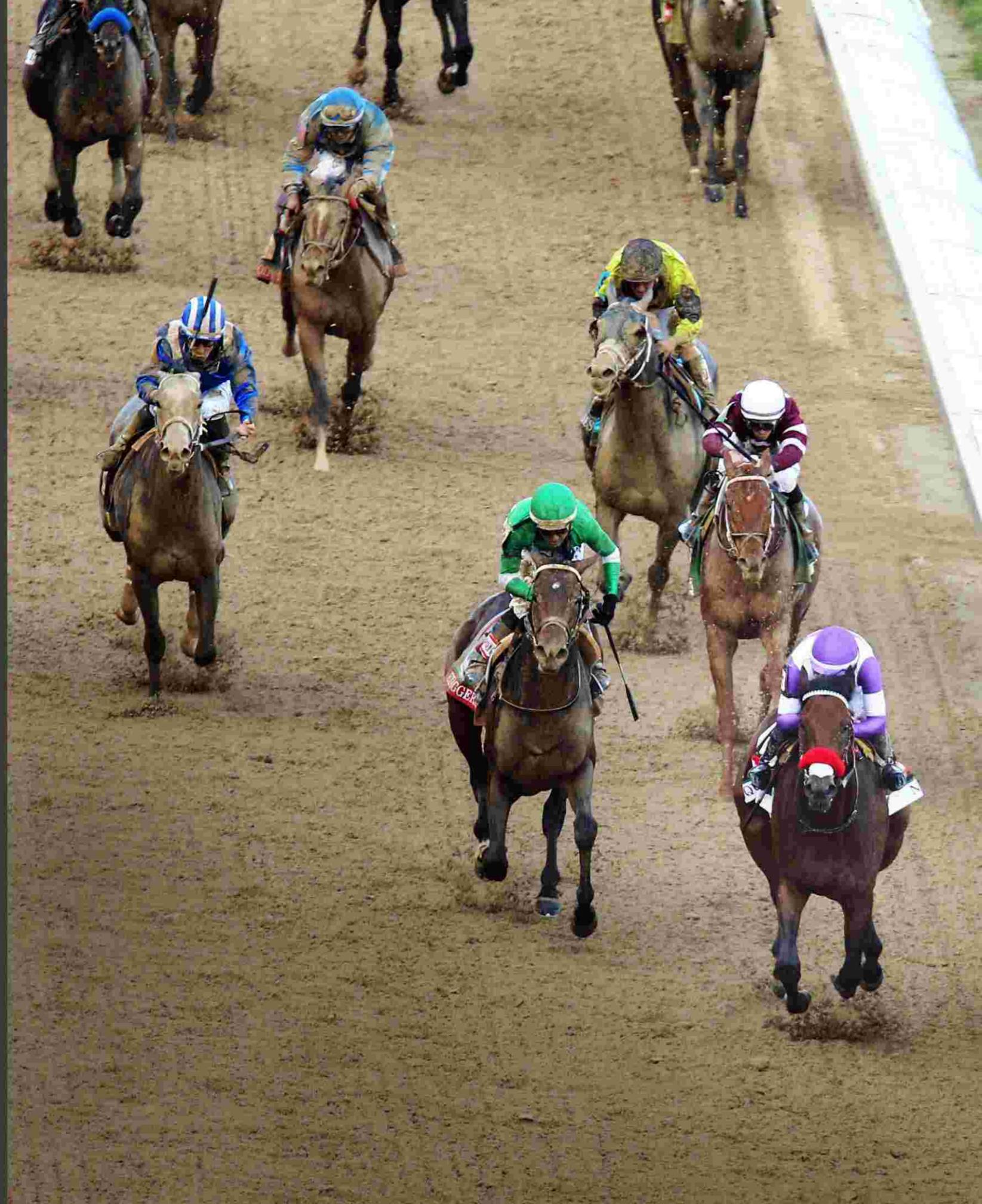
not going to buy a Quarter Horse-looking horse, that looks like he'll run five furlongs fast and stop dead. I'm not interested in that kind because I'm not going to develop a horse that way.

"We need one that's athletic, with some size and scope, some class and quality. And I love a horse that presents himself. We see a horse three or four times, never buy off one look. So I love a horse that hits me every time with a bit of presence, a nice head and eye. I don't mean a horse can't have a slightly plain head, but I want to see his eye

is honest."

But that's only ever the start. So the Uncle Mo colt they bought for \$230,000—"right on our limit"—at Keeneland in September 2014 was, through his Florida winter, just a very nice young horse.

"Did I think he was pretty special?" Brennan asks. "Yeah. Did he look like a LeBron James out there? Yeah. Did I know he was going to win the Kentucky Derby? No. He had a great presence about him, a beautiful way of going about the racetrack. But we couldn't know he was Nyquist."



A photograph of a jockey riding a brown horse on a racetrack. The jockey is wearing a white helmet with a blue star and a white jacket with blue stars and red stripes. The horse is galloping on a dirt track. In the background, there are large, multi-tiered grandstands filled with spectators. A white building with a steeple is visible behind the stands. The sky is blue with some light clouds.

Woods pinhooked the
2008 Kentucky Derby
winner Big Brown.

Nor could those who bought him the following March, for \$400,000. Brennan and Ryan had hoped for more, but the biggest paydays aren't always with the horses that ultimately make your reputation. That owes just as much to the fact that the Phipps family had entrusted the colt who became Orb to Brennan three years previously: two Kentucky Derby winners through his hands in four years.

Woods, for his part, pinhooked the 2008 winner Big Brown—picked up for just \$60,000 at Fasig-Tipton's Fall Sale and

turned round at the Keeneland breeze-ups the following April for \$190,000. Again, he has had more spectacular dividends. But as Brennan says: "When you're right in this game, and you're really right, you only have to be right so often. Because those Grade 1 winners carry you a long way."

And the home runs, anyway, are invariably recycled: into the next round of pinhook partnerships, and into the facilities. Both men have developed extraordinary sites. Over the 240-acre watermelon farm he took over in 2000, for instance, Woods



has laid out five barns, 41 paddocks, and dirt and turf circuits extending eight and seven furlongs respectively.

But despite the industrial scale of these Florida operations, both individually and collectively, the most mesmerising part of the cycle is an intimate process: the unravelling of an individual mystery, the shuffling away of the chrysalis.

"It's really like a being in a big boarding school," says Brennan. "There's all kinds of

mayhem, but every day something good is happening. Some kids are bright, will just ride to the top of the class quickly. Some will be a little slower to come around. And some are just bad asses."

"We break them in big groups and that group will all graduate at the same stage, from stall to shedrow to round pen to paddock to track," explains Woods. "The part I like the best is when you get them out in the paddock, you watch them and you say:





'That's a good-movin' sucker right there.' And then the next one you say: 'I can't believe I ever bought that piece of garbage, I must have lost my mind that day'."

He pauses, permits himself one of those deep, self-deprecating chuckles. "Because there will be great disappointments," he adds. "The gorgeous horse that's cost someone a lot of money, bought to go racing. And then something you've never heard of comes along and moves like a class act. The whole way it's the mental thing, it's how the babies handle it. And usually the writing's on the wall early. We do a lot of figure-of-eights and the ones that are chicken, that duck out and all that, most of them are no good at the end of the day."

And the surprises are perennial, for better or worse. Brennan often goes back to his old catalogue notes to remind himself of his fallibility. "We've all this stuff going on in science, with DNA tests and all, but you'll never manipulate this game—or the horse," he says with enthusiasm. "And that's what's fun about it. That's what keeps you going, looking at that next group of young ones, and trying to develop them. Because there's so much of their spirit you can't measure, with any kind of instrument."