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Sadler's Joy winning at the Pan American with Julien Leparoux in the irons.

Coglianese Photo

The Virginia Equine Alliance

Shaping the Future of Horse Racing and Breeding in Virginia

By Jane Fogleman
Photos courtesy of VEA

There is nothing more picturesque than driving on a bucolic country road in Virginia, seeing horses grazing or galloping in a lush, green field. As the birthplace of the legendary racehorse Secretariat, the Commonwealth has traditionally had a strong equine industry. According to a 2011 study prepared by the University of Virginia Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service and funded by the Virginia Horse Industry Board, the industry had an annual economic impact of \$1.2 billion in Virginia. Thoroughbred breeding and racing has been an integral component,

especially once pari-mutuel betting began in 1988; yet the equine industry has suffered significant setbacks in recent years. Most notably, the 2014 closing of the Colonial Downs racetrack in New Kent County has contributed to a decline in the Virginia Thoroughbred industry, as owners must ship their horses to other states to compete in races. As a result, activities at Virginia horse farms have slowed down, and the need for equine industry services has declined.

While facing many challenges, Virginia's horse-racing, breeding and pari-

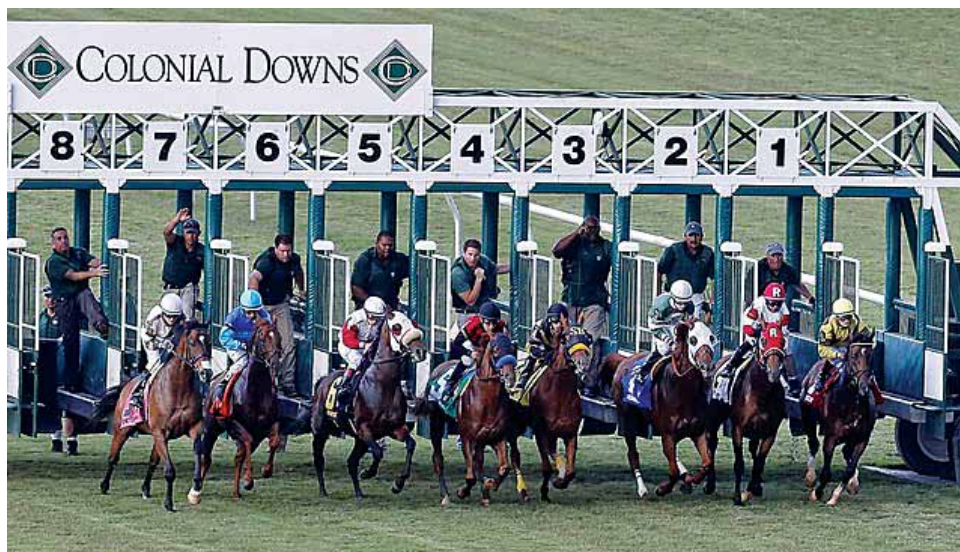
mutual industries have managed to survive. At the forefront of preservation efforts is the Virginia Equine Alliance (VEA), a non-profit, 501(c)(6) organization. It is comprised of four statewide horse-interest groups: the Virginia Harness Horse Association; the Virginia Horsemen's Benevolent & Protective Association (VHBPA); the Virginia Gold Cup Association; and the Virginia Thoroughbred Association (VTA). The VEA mission focuses on sustaining, promoting and expanding the horse-breeding and horse-racing industries throughout the Commonwealth.

The VEA formed shortly after the owner of Colonial Downs surrendered his racing license, thereby closing the track in October 2014. This move sent shock waves through the industry in Virginia. In addition to reducing the need for equine services, it led to the shuttering of off-track betting (OTB) centers and eliminated a substantial portion of the horsemen's pari-mutuel revenue. At its peak, Colonial Downs had produced wagering income as high as \$160 million annually; but the OTBs were critical to keeping horse racing in Virginia, as revenue from racing alone could not cover the monetary needs of racing facilities, purses and riders.

Without the presence of Colonial Downs, the VEA has had to help rebuild the much of the state's racing industry. Since its inception, the organization has opened four OTB centers in the Richmond, Chesapeake and Martinsville that offer dining, bar facilities and daily simulcast wagering from up to 20 horse tracks around the country. Additionally, the VEA has maintained working relationships with four online wagering partner companies, and a percentage of each wager is returned to the VEA in support of its mission. Combined, these revenue centers generated more than \$100 million in total wagering in 2017.

Because of the VEA's efforts, Virginia-bred horses have had racing opportunities in the Mid-Atlantic region. Last year 30 Virginia races were carded in Maryland and West Virginia. The Commonwealth's last remaining graded stakes, the Commonwealth Derby and Commonwealth Oaks, were also run in Maryland. Should Colonial Downs reopen, these races would return to the Commonwealth, serving as a source of quality racing and a special point of pride.

VEA initiatives also include programs that incentivize Thoroughbred owners to purchase Virginia-bred horses and raise them in the state. The inaugural program, the Virginia-Bred or Sired Owners Bonus, began in 2016 and has



The Starting Gate, the Secretariat turf course and the finish line at Colonial Downs could see action again soon once Revolutionary Racing finalizes the sale of the New Kent track.





Harness racing at Shenandoah Downs





Virginia-bred champ Stellar Wind at the November 2017 sale at Keeneland

Woodberry Payne and Olga Payne discuss the morning workout at their Ingleside Training Center at Montpelier.



increased the market value of Virginia-breds significantly. As part of the incentive, owners of Virginia-bred or sired horses that win races at pari-mutuel tracks in the Mid-Atlantic region are eligible for a 25 percent bonus on top of the winner's purse. In July 2017, the VEA created another incentive program: the Virginia-Certified Residency Program, which seeks to draw out-of-state Thoroughbred business to the Commonwealth. This creative initiative allows Thoroughbred owners to send their non-Virginia-bred horses to reside in Virginia for a minimum of six consecutive

months. After a verification process, owners of these horses are also eligible for the 25 percent bonus on wins at tracks throughout the Mid-Atlantic. Since the program's inception, more than 500 horses have been registered, filling farms throughout Virginia.

Woodberry Payne, owner of Ingleside Training Center in Orange, speaks enthusiastically about the Residency Program. As more horses come into Virginia, demand for equine services has increased. Already, he has had to turn away 30 horses, referring them to other operations across the Commonwealth for training and

boarding. Payne notes the growth at his center, saying, "The Certified program has literally put farms back in the business both in training and boarding of weanlings and yearlings. I have hired seven new employees, increased wages and am actively seeking more help." Other farms across the state have also experienced growth. This income bolsters local economies and benefits businesses and individuals alike. Payne adds, "Did you know a dollar spent in the economy usually is turned over four times, but in the horse industry that same dollar is turned over seven times? That just shows the horse industry has a magnified economic impact on the Commonwealth."

Even after Colonial Downs' closing, Virginia farms have continued to produce a number of equine stars who continue to gain national prominence. Eclipse Award winner Stellar Wind, bred in Virginia by Keswick Stables & Stonestreet Thoroughbred Holdings, ended her extraordinary racing career earlier this year. The six-year-old Curlin mare won \$2.9 million in only 17 starts. Further, a pair of standouts raised at Woodslane Farm in The Plains have amassed purse winnings in the seven-digit range. Tonalist, the 2014 Belmont Stakes winner, finished his career with \$3.6 million in earnings and Sadler's Joy, who has bankrolled \$1.3 million, is still going strong in 2018. Virginia's newest star, three-year-old Greyvitos, is returning from an injury, just in time for this year's Triple Crown trail. Bred by Audley Farm Equine, Greyvitos has earned more than \$300,000 in only four starts. The VEA's programs help Virginia breeders to continue breeding quality horses capable of competing globally.

The VEA's efforts further extend to ensuring that other forms of racing have a place within the Commonwealth. The alliance has spent more than \$1 million to renovate and upgrade an existing racetrack at Shenandoah Downs in Woodstock, Virginia, for harness racing trotters and pacers. Pari-mutuel racing runs for five



Horses at Stephanie Nixon's Horseshoe Hill Farm in Ashland



Horses train at the Eagle Point Farm in Ashland, where incentive programs to breed and raise horses in the Commonwealth have helped business.

straight weekends at Shenandoah Downs in the fall and includes a different festival atmosphere each weekend. This autumn, the action kicks off Sept. 15 and runs through Oct. 14. The VEA also supports steeplechase racing and pari-mutuel wagering at the Virginia and International Gold Cups. A new \$25,000 maiden race series to all the Virginia Steeplechase meets in 2018 will lead to additional out-of-state horses competing in the Commonwealth.

Most recently, the VEA has been working cohesively with Revolutionary Racing – the potential new owners of Colonial Downs – to lobby for the legalization of historic horse racing (HHR) in Virginia. Revenue created by HHR will allow Revolutionary Racing to purchase Colonial Downs and return racing to New Kent. An additional \$8 million to \$10 million in revenue is also projected for Virginia's horse industry. The legislation (HB 1609) aimed at reopening Colonia Downs race-track was signed by Gov. Ralph Northam on April 11, 2018. The VEA will continue to strive to strengthen and improve the equine industry for all breeders, owners and horse enthusiasts throughout Virginia.

To stay current on news pertaining to Virginia Thoroughbreds, please visit the following websites:

www.virginiahorseracing.com
www.vabred.org
www.shenandoahdowns.com

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