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Breeder extraordinaire Alan Leavitt continues to reshape racing

It would be easy to run through the accomplishments of Alan Leavitt, and consider it a clear picture of his career. A graduate of Andover and Harvard, he has been in the business for almost 50 years, developing the great Lana Lobell Farm and currently serving as president and general manager of Walnut Hall Ltd. in Lexington, Ky., which is owned by his wife, Meg Jewett Leavitt. He is a director of the USTA, Hambletonian Society and the Racing Medication and Testing Consortium. He is president of the Kentucky Standardbred Breeders Association, and a member of the Kentucky Equine Drug Council. He has been associated with more great horses than most have ever dreamed, including Speedy Somolli, No Nukes and the immortal Speedy Crown. He brought Cambest to the Bluegrass and watched as the son of Cam Fella dominated pacing. And his most recent acquisition, Deweycheatumhowe, is poised to take on the best of the sophomore class in 2008. All those facts are true of Alan Leavitt, but his influence in racing is so much greater and can be felt so much deeper than words express. From stallion syndications and management, to identifying breeding potential and developing quality bloodlines, few have done or know more than Leavitt. He and Jewett Leavitt recently sat down for a talk with Hoof Beats executive editor Nicole Kraft.
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HB: What’s going on with Walnut Hall Ltd.? In 2005 you had a major dispersal. What’s the status here now?

Leavitt: We have 65 broodmares, and we’re training 10 fillies who will be broodmares when they’re finished racing, and we have another 10 yearling fillies we’ll train and then breed. I think that in a couple of years we’ll be back up to 100 mares, and that’s where we’ll stay. We’re involved with seven stallions that we manage, and we’ll stand Dewey when he’s finished racing.

HB: What was the goal of the dispersal at the time that it took place? I think people were afraid you guys were getting out of the business.

Leavitt: That was because mainly I wanted to get out from under the pressure of living or dying according to what happened in three hours or less when we sold our yearlings. We had a big broodmare band, which meant that we used up most of the bookings that we own in the stallions we stood, so there wasn’t any real stud fee income. We don’t board horses, so there was none of that. There was just too much pressure.

I’ve been doing this for a long time, and I finally got to the point where I decided I just didn’t want to go through the pressure or stress—or whatever you want to call it—of selling a large consignment of yearlings.

At least 97 percent of the people that came out here to look at our horses were great, and I enjoyed seeing them—most of them I’d known for a long time—but there was a very, very small percentage who were unpleasant. We had a Garland Lobell filly out of Canne Angus several years ago, and she was beautiful, and she had a wonderful pedigree, but she was also touchy. Whenever we showed her to people, I’d go through this litany that “When she’s out here, please don’t touch her. If you want to run your hands over her legs, if you want to touch her in any way, you want to wait until we bring her back into the stall.”

Inevitably, that would be a challenge to certain people, and so they put their hand on her. They would get maybe as far as her knee, and then she would strike at them. There were a couple of people that came here to look at her, and they didn’t like being told that for their own good that they shouldn’t try to put their hand on her when she was outside.

I also had my own thoughts about how you should present a horse when anybody comes to look at him, and some of the help, you couldn’t even be sure if they had ever worked with horses. I seemed to be spending half my days telling them to get a stiff brush and put water on their manes, and to be sure and put the hoof dressing on their feet, and put the foretops down under the brow bands.

HB: What has changed now?

Leavitt: We don’t sell [in Lexington] anymore; we sell at Harrisburg. If you’re selling at Harrisburg, you get virtually no traffic [at the farm], because when people are in town for the Grand Circuit here, they’ve got other fish to fry, and they’re not going to spend time looking at yearlings that aren’t going to sell for five or six weeks. So I spare myself that hassle.

For the last two years, we got the yearlings ready and sent them to Terry and Bobbi Morley [from Westwind Farm]. That’s where we stand Striking Sahbra. We’ve got a great relationship. They sell our yearlings for us. We don’t have to worry about bringing grooms up there, finding places for them to stay, getting them back and forth from wherever they stay to the farm show building.

I’ve always felt that Harrisburg was a better place to sell horses than Lexington—if for no other reason than the fact that it’s the last sale. People come to Kentucky knowing there are 950 yearlings waiting six weeks down the road for them at Harrisburg. When they get there, that’s the end of the line; if they don’t buy the horses they need there, they’re not going to get them.

HB: How does someone from Harvard and Andover get into this business?

Leavitt: My parents had Saddle Horses—3- and 5-gaited horses. Starting when I was 6 years old, riding a Shetland pony in the horse shows, I showed horses until I got out of college. It was something I loved, but it was not any kind of vocation.

By day I was sort of press-ganged into my father’s mail-order business, but I also took advantage of the friendly relationship I had developed with Lawrence Sheppard of Hanover Shoe Farms. I bought a broodmare here and a broodmare there, and after four or five years of
that, something happened in my personal life that made me reassess things. I decided I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life buying bras and girdles and then writing the copy for them for a mail-order catalog, or selling Venus flytrap plants.

HB: I have to ask how the Venus flytraps fit in with the bras and girdles.

Leavitt: My father had two mail-order catalogs; one was women’s clothing, Lana Lobell Fashion Catalog. The first 30 years of my life I thought the most expensive dress in the world was $19.98. He segued into a gift catalog called Hanover House, and the artwork for the Venus flytrap plant looked like the mouths of several snapping turtles in the air, taking care of any bug that was unlucky enough to get close to them.

Before I left the world of bras and girdles forever, Jim Harrison was managing Hanover Shoe Farms. He was assistant to the president, and I got to be somewhat friendly with him. He called me one day and said, “Shep wants to see you.” So over I came, and Mr. Sheppard said, “You need a stallion if you’re going to be in this business. I’ll sell you Solicitor for $25,000—$5,000 a year, no interest.”

Solicitor had been bought the same afternoon as a 3-year-old as Tar Heel, when the W.N. Reynolds horses were dispersed, and they gave $125,000 for Solicitor, which was a world’s record price at an auction. A half an hour later they gave $130,000 for Tar Heel.

By the time of this conversation with
Mr. Sheppard, Tar Heel was right behind Adios as the greatest pacing sire in the world; they really didn’t have that much faith in Solicitor from the beginning. They’d shipped him out to Ohio to a place called Bonnie Brae Farm, and he had stood there for $300, which wasn’t quite as low as it sounds now. When I made the deal this day in Mr. Sheppard’s office, Jim Harrison said, “There’s one intangible that goes with this horse. We brought him back from Ohio last year, and he did stand the last breeding season at Hanover Shoe Farms. We won’t stand a $300 horse, so we stood him at $500. We did breed some of our mares to him, so he’s had one season of exposure to a higher quality of broodmares.”

What none of us knew was that one of the mares bred to him was Overbid, and the foal she had conceived was Overtrick. Three years later Solicitor, who was by then pretty well written off, suddenly had the best pacer in the land. Overtrick was the best 2-year-old; he was the best 3-year-old. Suddenly we had a live horse, and that’s what got me going.

HB: But you seem to be quite the anomaly—a Harvard man who shows horses, who decides to get your hands dirty with buying stallions. Who are you?

Leavitt: I don’t know. I do subscribe to the quote by the great black pitcher Satchel Paige, who said, “Never look back, they might be gaining on you.” I don’t think self-definitions are worth very much anyhow. So that’s a non-answer to your question, but it’s the best I can do.

HB: I went back through our files and I read some stories from the 1970s, and they described you as “fiery.” You are a man who invites strong opinions. What does that mean to you? How do you respond to that?

Leavitt: Well, this is maybe a defensive cop-out, but I think part of being younger is being brasher. And you maybe haven’t learned yet that you’re not going to be able to change the world by yourself. I think that what has shaped my attitude toward life in general—to a large extent—is a very keen awareness of anti-Semitism.

In Hanover, Pa., where I grew up and lived until I went away to school in the eighth grade, most of the population was under the impression that the word “Jew” was a verb. Then I spent three years at McDonough Military Academy, which was not exactly a bastion of liberal thought. There was one other Jewish kid in my class.

And don’t forget that it was still close enough to the end of the Second World War that I was exposed to relatives and family friends who managed to get out of
Europe before the Second World War. One or two had survived in the camps. It seemed like everybody of their generation had been touched directly by the Holocaust, and in those days, when I got into harness racing, anti-Semitism was still very evident. You didn’t have to look for it; it came and found you if you were a Jew.

HB: How do you think being Jewish has shaped who you are?
Leavitt: When you’re part of an oppressed minority—which is probably overstating it a little today—instead of offering reasonableness to somebody that I perceive as ready to do me wrong or having done me wrong, I’m ready to strike out. By the same token, I learned early on that if I didn’t stand up for myself, if I didn’t defend myself, if I didn’t take a strong stand, I’d be walked over.

I know that there are times when it causes me to overreact.

HB: Does Meg temper you?
Leavitt: Of course she does. Meg has been the major influence of my life ever since we got together, and I just wish I’d listened to her even more than I have. But I’ve learned. Now I always discuss things with her before I jump into something, and sometimes she tells me not to jump, and I don’t.

HB: How’d you and Meg meet?
Leavitt: In 1968 I brought a consignment of yearlings, such as they were, to sell at Tattersalls, for reasons that are unclear to me at this point, I shipped them down here about 10 days before the sale, and for nine of those 10 days there was absolutely nobody around except Joe O’Brien. He got tired of looking at my crummy horses, and we went to every meal together. I used to go train with him in the morning.

The sale started on Monday, and Sunday morning there was a breakfast at Walnut Hall Farm. So I went to it, and that’s when I started chasing Meg. It took quite a few years before I caught up with her.

HB: You went through lives apart—different marriages and such. What brought you back together?
Leavitt: It happened within that [time] Lana Lobell Farms was over. It was Aug. 6 or 7 of 1989, the final yearling sale, and I knew this was the last sale that we were going to have. Meg and her sisters were in East Hampton, and it happened that Meg’s sister and brother-in-law, Jim and Kitty Sautter, had leased a mare to Lana Lobell Farms on a foal share. Jim and Kitty decided they’d drive down to see how the yearling would sell, and Meg just rode down with them.

If I hadn’t bumped into Kitty halfway through the sale, I would not have known that Meg was there.

We sort of stayed in touch, and eventually in the famous phrase of Sammy Davis Jr., we got around to some heavy housekeeping. We got married Dec. 18, 1994.

HB: Tell me about Lana Lobell.
Leavitt: That’s water well under the bridge, over the dam, on the beach—wherever you want the water to be.

HB: How did you first get started with the syndications?
Leavitt: Helen Buck owned Overtrick. In those days, if you were Hanover Shoe Farms, people would lease the horse to you—they’d give you half the horse. You didn’t have to pay anything for it. Mr. Sheppard was under the very clear impression that Overtrick was going to go to the Hanover Shoe Farms. Well, Mrs. Buck was not big on the kind of deals where she didn’t get any money, so she sent a telegram to 10 people offering them the opportunity to buy the horse for $400,000.

Mr. Sheppard’s name was at the top. He saw this telegram, and I imagine he didn’t need a shredding machine to turn it into small bits. Mrs. Buck wanted to sell it to 10 people; there were only nine she could think of, so finally someone suggested me to make 10 people.

I got this telegram, and so did Norman Woolworth. I was fairly friendly with the man; we had stood Muncy Hanover until he died. Norman called me and said, “Alan, you should get the horse.”

I said, “What are you talking about?
He’s $400,000,” and he said, “Syndicate him.”

“I don’t know anything about syndicating.”

He said, “Look, Toni [Woolworth’s wife] and I are going to Rigoletto tonight at the Metropolitan Opera. Meet me in the lobby of the Metropolitan Opera House at 7:30, and I’ll give you copies of the syndicate agreements for Kimberly Kid and Trader Horn.”

I got them, and I cobbled together a syndication plan for Overtrick. Although ultimately he wasn’t a successful sire—the only thing he did that lasted for any length of time was to sire the dam of No Nukes—I was able to put the thing together.

In those days, things were so different,

Particularly in the horse business, you have to be lucky. Napoleon would never promote an officer to the rank of general until he asked his officers, “Is he lucky?” He understood how that worked.

because the tax brackets went much higher, and the government was much kinder when it came to taking depreciation on the horses. There was a thing called “accelerated depreciation,” and the shares were payable over four or five years. If you were making a lot of money, you could offset your losses, including the depreciation on horses, and that could offset income from other major sources.

I fell into what was a very good deal for people. Then I syndicated Airliner, and then I syndicated Noble Victory. He was the first horse to bring $1 million. By then I had roughed out a syndication outline that you could apply, and I used it here, and I used it there.

Then Lou Guida came along, and he did something that became very popular with everybody but me. His deals had a bonus provision. You were buying the horse for X dollars, but he was still going to race the rest of the year. If he won certain races, the price went up. The price never went down.

It seemed to me that in the horse business, you buy them as they are. For a while I had trouble syndicating horses, because the sellers would rather do business with someone who was going to offer this incentive. But eventually that passed.

It still is somewhat the fashion for a share to represent the right to breed three mares but have two free live foals. That also didn’t seem to me like the horse business; you bought a share, it was one breeding or two breedings or five breedings—whatever it was—but none of this nonsense about you could breed an extra mare. To me it devalued the shares. You’d never in a million years see any Thoroughbreds sold like that. It made each individual breeding right diluted in its value.

I was absolutely sure that I was out of the horse business forever until Meg decided we’d give it a try here, and she was the only person in the Western world—and probably the Eastern world, too, if there’s such a thing—that had any confidence in me, but things worked out.

THE A LIST: Alan Leavitt has stood as stallions such champions as, from left, Garland Lobell, Noble Victory, Speedy Crown and Cambest.
literally the clothes on his back and not a word of English. But from the time he started to have a little material success, he kept a horse to ride, and he loved horses. And he was a good rider, too.

HB: What was your vision at the point that you began Walnut Hall Ltd.—what did you see?

Leavitt: When Meg’s parents died, she had inherited property, and Kitty had, too. Meg went into partnership with Kitty, and Meg contributed her property, and whatever horses she had, but she was a passive partner.

Jewett Leavitt: I was living in Las Vegas. It was a transitional period for me. My son was going off to college. I would go back and forth while he was in college. Then he totally went off and I was in an “empty nest” situation, so I came back [to Kentucky]. I went out and started my store [L.V. Harkness].

HB: Who picked “Hall”? We certainly have the Hanover influence and there was Armbro and Lobell—now Hall. There are some people who feel that’s important, some people who don’t. Why is a farm name so important?

Leavitt: Anybody who’s got two brain cells realizes it’s the best form of free advertising you can have. It’s not even a subject of debate. Unfortunately they’ve gone by the boards, but the Armstrongs were smart enough to do it, and Charlie Keller did it at Yankeeland.

HB: The Thoroughbreds don’t name their horses at all before they sell.

Leavitt: They’re not allowed to use a commercial name—probably because it would take a minimal expenditure of mental effort.

HB: Which way do you like better?

Leavitt: The Thoroughbred people are so strange about things. You go to a sale at Keeneland; they can’t even tell what color their horses are. They have them registered as “dark bay or brown.” [They] can’t tell the difference between a bay horse and a brown horse—and then they can’t tell the difference between a roan and a grey.

What makes even less sense—in the Thoroughbred business, the breeder of record is the person who owns the mare at the time she foals. Well, the word “breed” implies hanky-panky. The guy who’s responsible for the hanky-panky, he’s the breeder—any way you look at it.

We say that the horse is bred where the guy who is responsible for the hanky-panky lives. That’s only something called logic. But they come up with this non-
One thing that everybody is slowly finding out is that the slots are not going to be a big help to a breeder.
night when we first got started with Myron Bell and Ronnie Gurfein. Out of nowhere, they start talking about how Hanover’s not going to take Cambest.

I said, “What do you mean, they’re not going to take Cambest?”

“Well, they’re on this law-and-order kick, there’s some talk that the horse might’ve been milkshaked, and people are making jokes about it,” Myron said, “They’re not going to take the horse.”

So I went home, and I woke Geoff Stein [of Preferred Equine Marketing] up at 10 at night, and said, “What’s Danny Kramer’s phone number?” And he said, “Can’t this wait till tomorrow?” I said, “No, I’ve got to know right now.”

I was on the phone first thing in the morning to Kramer, and I said, “We’d love to stand that horse.”

It worked out that we got him, and I heard that Paul Spears said, “We didn’t take that horse, because everybody said that that wasn’t the way to promote integrity in the business, to stand a horse like that, and then the horse went to Lexington and all those people that had told us that we shouldn’t take him, they all bred to him.”

HB: Were you worried about it at all? There are still people who question his 1:46.1 time trial.

Leavitt: The last time I looked, nobody else went that fast. “Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds”—Ralph Waldo Emerson.

That horse and Danny, his owner, have both paid a very high price for the horse standing in Kentucky. I don’t think it’s open for debate about what kind of sire he’s been. He’s been one of the great sires. But if he had stood in a state with a good sire stakes program, there’s just no telling what he would have done.

The problem he had to overcome was we started him at a very moderate stud fee, and what I found out was you wind up producing a bunch of horses, most of whom are not getting staked. If he’d have been standing in Ontario or New York, or even New Jersey, or Pennsylvania—but he had to fight so hard for the exposure that he got.

The problem he had to overcome was we started him at a very moderate stud fee, and what I found out was you wind up producing a bunch of horses, most of whom are not getting staked. If he’d have been standing in Ontario or New York, or even New Jersey, or Pennsylvania—but he had to fight so hard for the exposure that he got.

HB: How do you happen upon these stallions—does it just happen to you? Is it luck?

Leavitt: Particularly in the horse business, you have to be lucky. Napoleon would never promote an officer to the rank of general until he asked his officers, “Is he lucky?” He understood how that worked.

Let’s look at a horse like Garland Lobell. He had been the leading percentage sire from the first crop of 2-year-olds that he had. You didn’t have to be a genius to like him. When I went after him, Emilie Cas El had just become the second 2-year-old filly—the first being Armbrwo Flight—to be the Canadian Horse of the Year. He had another 3-year-old colt that had won both weeks at Lexington, and went up to Chicago and won the big stake up there.

Jewett Leavitt: Anybody could see the potential in Garland Lobell. Anybody could have been at that table with Ron Gurfein and Myron Bell and heard that

You’ve got to have access to a successful stallion of your own for the number of broodmares that you’ve got, and if the day comes that you don’t, you have to get rid of the mares.
got—that I cannot fathom.

HB: When The Meadowlands is cutting days of racing for not having enough horses—they can’t all be getting in at Yonkers.

Leavitt: No, there just aren’t enough of them. Any operating racetrack requires something like 1,200 horses. One thing that everybody is slowly finding out is that the slots are not going to be a big help to a breeder. They’re going to help a stallion owner, because people will chase the stallions that are standing in the good slot states, but as far as the yearlings are concerned, you’re deluding yourself if you think it’s going to make any huge difference.

The reality is that the same people are buying yearlings that were buying them last year, and five years ago, and 10 years ago—with a certain amount of attrition. You’re not creating new yearling buyers. It doesn’t matter how high the purses go. They found that out in Ontario.

One night, when the first slots money really was hitting up there, we were waiting for a horse of ours to race at Woodbine. The race before ours was a claiming race for pacers, and the smallest number of claims on any horse in that race was two. One horse had six claims, and one horse had eight. That’s what the slots do. People want horses that are ready to go next week.

HB: What’s the situation here in Kentucky?

Leavitt: More promising than it has ever been before. Our new governor, Steve Beshear, is totally committed to expanded gambling.

There are still some hurdles—namely the upper house of the Legislature, which is controlled by the Republicans. The Speaker of the House, a man named David Williams, told me right to my face that as long as he was in elected office, he would fight expanded gambling in any form. And he’s a very powerful man. But, the governor has the most power, and he wants slots.

HB: What are the prospects for more stallions coming to Walnut Hall at this point?

Leavitt: Because of the big boost to our sire stakes with the $300,000 finals, we were lucky enough to get Fox Valley Barzgar to stand here starting in ’08. Yes, we could add another stallion, but let’s see how the slots play out. If we get them, we could stand Dewey here in Kentucky.

HB: The industry stands a lot of horses. Do you think that we are selective enough about stallions? Are there a lot of stallions that maybe should not stand?

Leavitt: It’s a free market. You can do anything you want. The reality is that a very, very small percentage of horses that go in to stud are successful. The market adjusts itself. If somebody’s standing a horse that isn’t any good, his owner will get no mares.

In our position, we can’t afford an unpopular stallion. We don’t breed much to anybody else’s trotting stallions. You’ve got to have access to a successful stallion of your own for the number of broodmares that you’ve got, and if the day comes that you don’t, you have to get rid of the mares. We’ve been lucky with our stallions, and we’ve got two irons in the fire now in Tom Ridge and Cash Hall, plus Dewey when he’s finished racing.

HB: It’s 50 years from now and none of us are here; what do you think harness racing history says about you?

Leavitt: In our business, the only people whose names last for any length of time are the drivers. My name won’t be attached to it in any way, but I think that people will still remember Speedy Crown and what he did, and maybe Speedy Somolli. I don’t know. I’ll let you know in 50 years when I’m a ghost, and I walk around and see if I hear people talking about me.

HB: If you were looking back, what’s the thing that you’re the proudest of? What’s the thing that brings you the most pride?

Leavitt: I don’t have any answers for you. It is wrong, is a waste of time to think in those terms. Self regard has no virtue whatever. To think about yourself, to talk about yourself, to recount what you regard as accomplishments—those are things that one should not do.

Of the seven deadly sins, the worst is pride.

HB: Do you look forward only?

Leavitt: Sideways, occasionally.

HB: Thanks so much for your time.

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