

Springing forward

Keeneland features new race, upgraded stakes

By Amy Owens

Question: What is the longest stakes race that will be run at Keeneland during the spring meeting?
Answer: The Fort Harrod Stakes at 1 5/8 miles.

On April 19, Keeneland will debut the \$100,000-added Fort Harrod for four-year-olds and older horses. The track created the Fort Harrod as part of a nationwide series of distance races leading up to the new \$500,000 Breeders' Cup



Dirt Marathon, a 1 1/2-mile race for three-year-olds and older horses that will be run during the 25th Breeders' Cup World Championships on October 24-25 at Santa Anita Park in Southern California.

The new series of races is designed to reward horses who relish racing long distances on dirt or synthetic surfaces such as Keeneland's Polytrack.

"Here's a whole division that we've gotten away from," said Rogers Beasley, Keeneland's director of racing. "The division needs some opportunities, so this is a step."

The Fort Harrod will begin in the chute on the Versailles Road side of the track that is an extension off the main track and joins the far turn. This chute is called the Headley Course, named for one of the track's founders, Hal Price Headley, and is best known as the start for 4 1/2-furlong races for two-year-olds racing during the spring meetings. Keeneland has run 1 5/8-mile races occasionally over the years, and the distance made its Polytrack debut during the 2007 fall meeting.

The Fort Harrod is one of three stakes to be run at Keeneland on April 19, joining the \$100,000-added Giant's Causeway and the \$325,000 Coolmore Lexington (G2). The latter traditionally is a prep race for the Kentucky Derby (G1).

The Breeders' Cup Dirt Marathon is one of three new stakes to be contested during this year's Breeders' Cup, joining the \$1 million Breeders' Cup Turf Sprint and the \$1 million Breeders' Cup Juvenile Fillies. The races will raise total purses for the event to \$25.5 million.

Keeneland will simulcast the Breeders' Cup, which falls on the final two days of its fall meeting that begins on October 3.

Making the grade

You remember what grades meant in school. In Thoroughbred racing, grades equate to the importance of stakes races. Higher grades mean higher purses and higher quality horses. Translation: better racing.

During its spring meeting that concludes April 25, Keeneland will feature 18 stakes races. (The 19th stakes of the meeting is the Royal Chase for the Sport of Kings,

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Director of Racing Rogers Beasley

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The gray Kip Deville won last year's Maker's Mark Mile and went on to capture the Grade 1, \$2.4 million NetJets Breeders' Cup Mile.

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a Grade 1 event for steeplechasers.) All but three of those races are graded.

Who assigned the grades for the 18 stakes? The American Graded Stakes Committee of the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association (TOBA).

The purpose of the grades is to give people who own

and breed Thoroughbreds a reliable guide to the relative quality of horses by identifying the races in the United States whose recent runnings have consistently attracted the highest quality competition. Horses that win graded races are considered to be superior.

The committee meets annually to evaluate and affirm the relative quality of these races, and issues its collective opinion in the form of ranked grades: Grade 1, Grade 2 and Grade 3, with Grade 1 being the highest. The committee may upgrade a stakes that is exceeding its standards, and may downgrade a stakes if the reverse is true. (A stakes generally has to have been run at least three consecutive years to be eligible for grading.)

This year, a total of 481 graded races will be run across the U.S. Of those, 110 races are Grade 1 events.

For Keeneland's spring meeting, five stakes were upgraded. The \$300,000 Maker's Mark Mile was elevated to Grade 1 status, joining the Ashland Stakes and the Toyota Blue Grass Stakes. Additionally, the Fifth Third Elkhorn Stakes was moved up to Grade 2, while the Woodford Reserve Bourbon, Bryan Station and Appalachian Stakes all were elevated to Grade 3.

What does all this graded business mean for Keeneland?

"It's a great credit to our horsemen who have supported our program," said Beasley.

The grading of races began as a TOBA project in 1973, primarily at the request of European authorities who were anxious that North America have a method similar to their Pattern race system, which was begun the previous year to identify Europe's highest-quality races. Since 1976, Keeneland has included the information in its sale catalogs, giving buyers and consignors another tool to evaluate a horse's talent and quality. 🐾

Amy Owens is a freelance writer and editor based in Lexington.

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