

# Q&A

with

## VIRGINIA KRAFT PAYSON



ELIOT SCHECHTER PHOTOS

In the fall of 1979 Virginia Kraft Payson and her late husband, Charles, were having a somber dinner. They had been at their winter home on Jupiter Island, Fla., for only three days and were already feeling too detached from their latest adventure together—six yearling Thoroughbreds being broken and trained in Camden, S.C.

Charles then remembered one day while boating down the nearby St. Lucie canal and enjoying a cigarette on deck that he had passed by a racetrack.

“We didn’t even finish dinner and went straight

home,” recalled Virginia Payson. “I started calling the tax assessors the next day to find out where the track was. I must have made 20 calls. One call led to the other. When we found the place, it was a complete disaster.”

The 400-acre training center near Indiantown had been built in the 1950s by some of Thoroughbred racing’s elite—Michael Phipps, Bull Hancock, Townsend Martin, and Christopher T. Chenery, who envisioned running a commercial racetrack on the property one day. When Phipps died in 1973, it was purchased by a land speculator and essentially nothing was done to maintain or improve the grounds.

Although the property was overgrown and overrun with livestock, the Paysons saw its potential. Bolstering their assessment was the opinion of a preeminent boarder, Canadian Hall of Fame trainer Roger Attfield, who assured them that, despite the poor facilities, the track’s surface was among the best he’d seen. The Paysons bought and renovated the place, creating Payson Park Training Center. Scores of stakes winners and champions have gotten their schooling here over the past 33 years. But change is coming again, as Virginia Payson has listed the training center for sale with Atlantic Western. In an interview with *The Blood-Horse* editorial director Eric Mitchell, Payson talks about what owning the training center has meant to her and why she is selling it.



Payson still has the drive to see her horses work

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**The Blood-Horse: After more than 30 years Payson Park Training Center must feel like another home. Is it hard to sell the place now?**

Payson: It is heartbreaking. I've owned the park for 33 years and put a very large part of myself into it. It once was a glory place and then fell into complete disrepair. The first time we went out there, it was raining and we could only drive so far because of the mud. We met Roger Attfield, who was there with horses owned by Lt. Col. (Charles) Baker of the Ontario Jockey Club. Roger said it was a decent track, but the environment is awful. He said he didn't know how long they would stay. There was barbed wire everywhere. There were cattle and pigs coming onto the track. There was no equipment.

We then met with Col. Baker, and he said the track is so good that nothing gets done to it and it is still good. He told us not much would be required to fix it up. We made an offer in the spring of 1980...and did not close until August. We rounded up as many as 100 workers, carpenters, plumbers...all the barns needed new roofs, new plumbing. We ran one ad in the *Daily Racing Form* in September and said the old St. Lucie Training Center had been renovated and reopened. We filled every single stall that year. Until the crash in 2008, we had a waiting list every year for stalls and had as many as 100 horses on the waiting list. I have put most of my heart into the place since 1980.

**Why have you decided to sell, and is there any stipulation that the buyer must keep it as a training center?**

I have four grown children and not one has any interest in owning the place. I don't want to see it sold for 10 cents on the dollar just to get rid of it.

There is not a written stipulation. I am the stipulation. I will not sell it to anyone who does not want to continue running it as a training center. We have developed a tremendous reputation. The Breeders' Cup of 2011 had nine horses that came out of the training center, including Royal Delta and Droselmeyer. Most of Bill Mott's greatest success has been with horses that trained at Payson Park.

We have two slogans. One came from Joe Hirsch, who called it Club Med for horses. Our other saying is that "Happy horses win."

I believe if a horse is happy and not bored with his life, then he'll become a better racehorse. We built a grass track that is separate from the dirt track. The grass track is an undulating circle, not an oval. There is no concrete anywhere, and there are big grass areas to gallop and miles of hacking trails.

**How did you get your start in Thoroughbred racing?**

Though both I and my late husband had ridden from the time we were children, we had no involvement in racehorses at all. His birthday was the 16th of October, and every year we went somewhere to celebrate. One year he suggested we go to Lexington to see Secretariat. While we were out at Claiborne, we met someone who suggested we attend the Fasig-Tipton yearling sale. We went and sat in the first row, which is never where I sit now; I want to see what's going on. A horse came out into the ring by Arts and Letters out of a Tom Fool mare. I had watched the Belmont (Stakes) with my father, who was a little bit of a racing fan, and I remembered Arts and Letters and Charlie remembered Tom Fool. So he bid on him. At the time, that sale was known for pretty cheap horses that had not made it into any other auction. At one point Charlie raised his own bid and was told by the bid-spotter, "Ah, sir, that is your bid."

He got the horse. We embraced each other and congratulated each other; we now owned a racehorse. A few minutes later we got called into the office because we had not established credit. Charlie tried to give them a check from the Marine Midland bank in New York, for which he was a major figure, and they wouldn't accept the check. He said, "Well, my former brother-in-law owns a farm here, can he pay?" When they learned it was (John Hay Whitney's) Greentree, they said OK, so technically Greentree bought the horse. We went back to the hotel, ordered champagne, and stayed up until 2 a.m. celebrating. We got a call at 5 a.m. the next morning from the manager of Greentree. After quite a string of expletives, he asked why we were buying a horse for Greentree. He finally calmed down and agreed to take him. We didn't know the horses had to be off the sale grounds, and the yearling certainly wasn't going to fit in our suite.

The horse was very well bred, but he was in that sale because he was insane. He had apparently been abused as a baby and hated all people. He was vicious and would hurt you. Greentree sent him to their place in Aiken. After a couple of months the people in Aiken said, "We can't do anything with this horse; we cannot keep him here." In the interim we had met Dr. and Mrs. Holloway, and we knew their son, Blaine, was apprenticing in New York at the racetrack. Blaine Holloway jumped at the chance. He took our horse and his father gave him a filly, so he had a two-

horse stable. So that was our absolute first experience with a racehorse.

**You went on to campaign a number of prominent horses such as home-bred English champion St. Jovite and grade I winner Carr de Naskra, who was among the first crop of foals born at Payson Stud. You had the 1995 Kentucky Broodmare of the Year in Northern Sunset and were named 1997 Breeder of the Year by the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association. What does the future look like now for Payson Stud?**

I have pretty much pulled in my horns as far as breeding horses is concerned. I bred to produce the best racehorse, regardless of commercial appeal, and I used to race everything. I developed some really wonderful families.

In 1999 I decided to breed commercially. People told me, "Well, you'll never be successful selling horses because people will believe you are just culling." My breeding operation has never been very large. I averaged 12 broodmares



Payson Park was dubbed 'Club Med for horses'

over all the years, with only about eight foals a year. But in the first crop I sold Farda Amiga (2002 champion 3-year-old filly), and the next year included Vindication (2002 champion 2-year-old male). With those two great successes, that changed people's minds. I have kept only four broodmares now.

I have about 300 acres behind Payson Park. My home is there, and I have my retirement community there; I have 17 retired horses now. Carr de Naskra was there until he died three years ago. I have Salem Drive and Lac Ouimet. I don't intend to leave Payson Park. I won't inflict my theories on anyone who buys it, but I want to be close to it.

Our family of trainers loves to see how their horses thrive in this atmosphere. I think we have something very unique. It is one-of-a-kind. **BH**