

FROM



EVERY

ANGIE

Dell Hancock
serves the
Thoroughbred
industry
she loves

By **LENNY
SHULMAN**

Photos by
MARK MAHAN



WITHIN THE BROAD confines of the Thoroughbred industry are those who seek the excitement of owning a winning horse; those who attempt to make a living by breeding, raising, or selling potential runners; and those whose sheer joy comes from watching the majestic Thoroughbred perform.

Dell Hancock embraces all of the above along with an equally lofty goal—to be of service to the horse, her family, and the industry that embraces all of the above.

Born the youngest of four siblings to Waddell and Arthur B. (“Bull”) Hancock Jr., Dell grew up on her family’s historic Claiborne Farm, now standing for more than a century as a cor-

nerstone of Kentucky’s Thoroughbred industry. Her father was famous not only for his expertise in acquiring, breeding, and raising champions, but for his willingness to lend a hand to both the giants of American wealth and power and to the struggling horsemen needing to breed and sell a yearling so they could hold on to the dream of making a living with horses.

“Bull always saw to it that I had something to breed to that was good and that I could afford,” Dr. Smiser West once said of his beginnings in the business. Hancock’s kindness set West on his way to a 50-year career as a celebrated breeder. Dozens of other horsemen tell similar stories.

Her father’s generosity was visited upon Dell, who has embraced and made her own the words of Luke 12:48: “For



everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required.” With a true love for the horse always at her core, she has devoted herself to the health and well-being of the breed, most noticeably today as the longtime chairman of the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation, which funds worldwide research to develop cures for equine maladies.

“I hate raising money,” she stated recently, adding with a force that swatted away any irony, “But when it’s for something you really believe in, something that 100% helps horses...I don’t understand how anybody doesn’t contribute. These are your horses, and the research could save one of them.”

Hancock loves the idyllic setting of Claiborne Farm, which sprawls over thousands of Bourbon County acres ribboned

by creeks and dotted by gentle hills, populated by the finest stock her ancestors bred and acquired from around the world. Older brothers Arthur and Seth, both destined to preside over top-shelf equine nurseries in the manner of their father and grandfather; and older sister Clay, were off attending to activities, so Dell spent much of her childhood at the barns. She developed an early affinity for horses and dogs (the current generation of a longstanding family of Labradors accompanies her around nearly everywhere), and swam with friends on the local swimming team in the summers.

Fifty years ago Seth took over running Claiborne after the sudden death of their father, and Dell assumed a supporting role. Asked whether in these modern times of increasing equality she would have enjoyed tackling the task of heading such an operation, she doesn’t hesitate or bother to second-guess.

“Seth did a wonderful job heading it up,” she said. “How lucky could I get? I got the pleasure of being around the horses, without the worries. I’m glad we’ve reached the point today where capable people can do the job regardless of their sex. A lot has changed. But in truth, I never would have wanted to sit in that chair.”

Content to ride horses over the farm’s iconic acres, Dell began thinking of what her niche could be at Claiborne. She wound up combining her love of horses and photography, and began taking shots of famous residents there such as Chris Evert and Six Crowns. Mary Jane Gallagher, who did Claiborne’s advertising, suggested Dell talk to Ed Bowen, who was then editing *BloodHorse*. That turned into a 12-year series of assignments shooting big race days, and a lifelong friendship with Bowen that continued through their joint association at the Grayson Foundation.

“What has been so impressive, going back to when she was helping at the *BloodHorse* and when she was my boss at Grayson, is that Dell has always remained the same person. I have so much respect for that steadiness, in addition to her pleasant way of going,” Bowen said. “She has a real appreciation for the people who have helped along the way. She was devoted to (trainer) Woody Stephens and Dr. Gary Lavin.

“We recently published a book on Claiborne Farm, and it was Dell’s idea to have Edmond Boyle write an essay for it. He had grown up on Claiborne and worked on the farm crew his whole life. She was grateful for his dedication to Claiborne.”

Dell’s friendship with Bowen survived one of the first photo assignments he gave her: shooting the Preakness Stakes (G1) from the rooftop of Pimlico.

“I didn’t have the guts to tell Ed that I’m terrified of heights, and there was no ledge or railing up there. I got it done without falling,” Hancock said, “but I told him I could never do that again.

“That was a great time because Forego and all these wonderful horses were coming off the farm, and it was the glory days of Belmont Park. Seth was kind enough to include me in a partnership of horses, one of whom was Swale. I figured I



Friends Ramona Bass (above) and Ed Bowen (top, left in photo) and nephew Walker Hancock (top, middle) appreciate the consistent commitment Dell Hancock has provided for Claiborne Farm and the industry overall



could do all of it. But Swale was running in stakes up there, and I got so excited that one day I forgot to put film in the camera, and I told Ed he probably shouldn't count on me anymore. But I loved every second of it, and Ed and I have worked together on and off ever since."

Hancock continues to enjoy photography at Claiborne. Her desktop calendars featuring seasonal scenes of horses and landscapes around the farm are anxiously awaited each year by those fortunate enough to receive them. She also has proved to be a valuable resource for the farm, which is now run by Seth's son Walker.

Most of her duties are accomplished behind the scenes. She has taken a lead role in entertaining clients as an ambassador

for the farm. She was involved in the Claiborne yearling consignments for years. And she is a trusted adviser.

"It's hard for a person to run a farm with other people chirping in," she allowed. "I think Seth has valued my opinion more over time. I'll talk with Walker if I feel strongly about something because sometimes you can see things when you're not in the trenches."

Said Walker Hancock, "Claiborne Farm is Dell's baby. She grew up here and loves this place more than anything. It means the world to her, and she would do anything for it. I value her insight and input, and I'm lucky to be able to call her my aunt."

Said Ramona Bass, a longtime horsewoman who has known Dell since they were teens, "Dell's love for Claiborne

TOP LEFT: SKIP DICKSTEIN; BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY OF BASS STABLES

Farm and her tireless work for it and the family is something to be celebrated. She is the glue that holds the social part of the farm together. Going to dinner with people, making friends all over the world. And it's genuine, her interest in people and her support and excitement for friends and clients when any of us do well."

With her friends Adele Dilschneider and Bass, both long-time Claiborne clients, Hancock has gotten into the ownership trenches. The three women, along with Ramona's son Perry, formed Raydelz Stable a dozen years ago and have enjoyed not only good times and camaraderie, but fast horses as well, particularly daughters of Distorted Humor. Witty won the 2009 Railbird Stakes (G3) while Soothsay, a homebred, took the 2021 Santa Anita Oaks (G2) and Indiana Oaks (G3).

Bombard, by Claiborne's War Front and out of Witty, took the 2021 Daytona Stakes (G3T), 2019 Wickerr Stakes, and 2018 Siren Lure Stakes, and competed in the Breeders' Cup World Championships.

"We have the most wonderful time with our partnership," said Bass, whose father (Arthur Seeligson) stood Avatar at Claiborne. "We all get along so well. At the sales, if one of us does not love a horse, we won't bid on it. All three of us have to love—not *like*—love the horse. That makes it easy because, at the end, you're down to two or three horses."

Added Dilschneider, who has campaigned such stalwarts as Elate (two-time grade 1 winner of more than \$2.6 million) and Arch (grade 1 winner and influential sire) in partnership with Claiborne, "The Raydelz are a laugh a minute. We have the best time, and it doesn't take much to get us rocking and rolling."

Hancock has never taken for granted the joy and the life that horses have afforded her and her family through the generations. Her actions prove it. She has served on the Breeders' Cup board, the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association board, as president of the Kentucky Thoroughbred Association, founder of the Thoroughbred Incentive Program (horses going on to second careers), steward of The Jockey Club, and chairman of the board of the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation. She continues to devote a large chunk of her time to Grayson.

"My family is indebted to the horse," she stated. "Mr. (Charles) Nuckols said that if you take care of the land, the land will take care of you. And that's the way I feel about horses, too. I've had the opportunity to give back. When Swale died so suddenly (of an apparent heart attack), I wanted to contribute to research to prevent that from happening to others. I landed on the Grayson Foundation because I felt that money is spent in the best possible way, and in a variety of places.

"So I gave them some money out of the insurance money I got when Swale died, and I went to talk to Lou Dougherty, who was running it. He saw how interested I was and asked me to head it."

That was in the early 1980s, and Hancock has been in and out of Grayson's leadership ever since, most recently serving



At the farm with 2010 Broodmare of the Year Liable, dam of 2010 champion older horse and current Claiborne sire Blame



Half of Raydelz Stable: Hancock and Adele Dilschneider



Dell Hancock, seen here with Walker, believes her family is indebted to the horse

CENTER: ANNE M. EBERHARDT; BOTTOM: KEENELAND PHOTO



While Hancock ‘hates raising money’ her efforts have helped the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation to award a million dollars a year for the past six years; Raydelz Stable saw homebred Soothsay (middle) deliver a win in last year’s grade 2 Santa Anita Oaks

as chairman since 2005. Grayson funds research to battle and prevent virtually every malady that can beset a horse.

“I’m really proud that we’ve been able to give out a million dollars every year for the last six years,” Hancock said. “We have protocols in place now for various problems because of Grayson research grants. We’re able to be more proactive and less reactive.

“If we don’t have healthy horses, we don’t have a sport.”

Said Bowen, who has served as president of the Grayson board, “Dell has been exemplary. She is a hands-on chairman who has worked hard to understand very technical material. She would go to every research advisory committee meeting where you have 32 scientists talking about their work. Even if you understood everything they were saying, it’s tough sledding. It was never tedious to her. She always learned from them, and that has helped her make judgments through the years.”

Added Dilschneider, “I don’t know anybody else who has done more in service to the industry. You could put in an overflowing basket her roles as a horsewoman, friend, and partner. She’s a wonderful friend to everybody.”

Hancock looks ahead with cautious optimism, recognizing that racing still hasn’t cured its problems with drugs. She decries the slow pace of justice while realizing that’s a problem that goes much further than just the horse world. But she brightens when considering the young generation that is coming into its own in the industry.

“I think we have great kids to carry us forward, and hats off to their parents for raising them. The Lyster boys, Riley

Mott, Reeve McGaughey, Conrad Bandoroff, Bret Jones, Gatewood Bell, Walker, Arthur’s daughters Alex and Lynn,” Hancock said. “I just hope our generation is handing them something sustainable.”

Asked about the characters she has enjoyed along the way, Hancock selects from a long list.

“Mr. Nuckols was a character and a sportsman, and his word was his bond. Warner Jones was a character and a good friend of Dad’s,” Hancock said. “Woody Stephens was another character and a great guy who was a mentor to Seth. Mac Miller was one of my favorites; a lovely guy. Mr. William Haggin Perry was so good to me. Dick Mandella. Christophe Clement makes me laugh spewing that French that you can’t understand. Shug is all of that. People who care about their horses.”

Inevitably, the talk turns back to the joys of horses and of Claiborne.

“I love going to the races when we have a good one to run, and I love watching them train,” she said. “Being around people like Dick Mandella and Bill Mott and Shug. Quality people. But the older I get, the more I like being right here. If somebody said, ‘This is your last day on earth, what do you want to do?’ I would walk around these acres.

“I thank my dad every day for the grounding he gave all of us. He’d say, ‘Manners are the cheapest thing in the world, and they’ll get you further than anything.’ You don’t forget those things. He loved his farm and adored the horses and cared about his clients, and I hope that’s something we’ve carried on through the generations.” **BH**

TOP CENTER: © BENOIT PHOTO; TOP RIGHT: KEENELAND/COADY PHOTOGRAPHY



Raydelz Stable homebred Bombard won last year's grade 3 Daytona Stakes



Hancock is thankful that her father passed along his values to her and hopes they carry forward for generations