

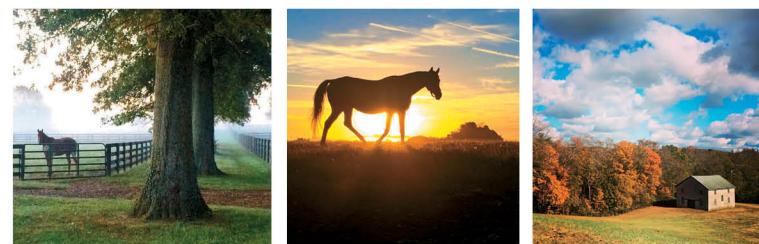


# RUNNING ON

Clay family's Runnymede Farm  
going strong at 150

BY AMANDA DUCKWORTH

**AMONG MANY OTHER THINGS, BRUTUS J. CLAY III** is a runner, and he likes to watch dawn break as he cruises through his family's farm. Along the way he will stop to document a beautiful sunrise or a quizzical horse watching his efforts. He posts the best photos onto the farm's Instagram account, which is a sentence his predecessors legitimately couldn't even begin to understand. The constant tug between new and old is what keeps his family's Runnymede Farm going strong as it prepares to celebrate its 150th anniversary.



ANNE M. EBERHARDT: INSTAGRAM PHOTOS COURTESY BRUTUS J. CLAY III



At Runnymede Farm, from left, farm manager Romain Malhouitre, Catesby Clay, and Brutus Clay; at left, some of Brutus Clay's Instagram postings



Runnymede was founded in 1867, giving it the distinction of being the oldest continuously run Thoroughbred breeding operation in Kentucky. Clay is the fourth generation of his family to run the farm, which today covers about 365 acres of rolling hills in Bourbon County east of Lexington.

Colonel Ezekiel Clay founded Runnymede after being inspired by his father, Brutus J. Clay, who was a member of the United States Congress but also bred both Thoroughbreds and champion cattle. In 1896, Ben Brush became the first of three Kentucky Derby winners to come off the land, and these days multiple grade 1 winner Lady Eli continues to show the strength of the Runnymede breeding program.

"It hasn't been smooth sailing throughout the 150 years," said Clay. "Each generation went through things. There were ups and downs for everyone, but somehow or another, the family always had the resolve and the resources to make it through. We are blessed to still be here, and we hope that we can continue on."

With such a rich history behind him, it is natural to assume Clay was born to run a Thoroughbred farm, but he is from a large family, and taking control of the farm was not something he saw himself doing until recently. Prior to his return to the farm he held a number of jobs outside of racing, including being the lead partner responsible for the development of Texas Roadhouse restaurants.

It wasn't until a day at the races that he truly understood what his father, Catesby W. Clay, had spent decades working toward.

"Honestly, I didn't really understand horse racing," said Clay. "For every dollar you spend, you win 30 cents. I thought, 'Why would I want to do that? That's not too smart.' That changed with Meribel, whom we co-bred. She was running in the Valley View Stakes (G3) at Keeneland in October 2006,

and the whole family was there.

"She was dead last, but then she went wide, and I remember watching her starting to make her run. We were all screaming, 'Go Meribel, go!' The whole family was losing it, and she was slowly grinding away. We didn't know



Catesby Clay, 93, and his son, Brutus



Catesby Clay with longtime farm manager Martin O'Dowd in 1992

if she was going to get there."

Meribel did, in fact, get there. Officially she won the Valley View by a half-length over Precious Kitten, but really, her victory went even deeper for Clay, who soon would come home to take care of the family farm.

"My dad turns to me with a look of disbelief and says, 'We won?' He had tears coming down his cheeks," said Clay. "In that moment I realized the value of a racehorse. It's not the prize money, and it's not the residual value. It's the value of the experience. That is what differentiates us from other forms of gambling: the horse and how they inspire us."

#### POWERFUL FROM THE START

The fact Runnymede, which is named after the site where the Magna Carta was signed, exists at all is a tale unto itself, involving the Civil War, a prodigal son, and the help of Abraham Lincoln. According to family lore, over dinner one night, Ezekiel Clay—a nephew of abolitionist Cassius Clay and a cousin to Henry Clay—was forbidden by his father to join the Confederacy, but then left in the middle of the night to do exactly that.

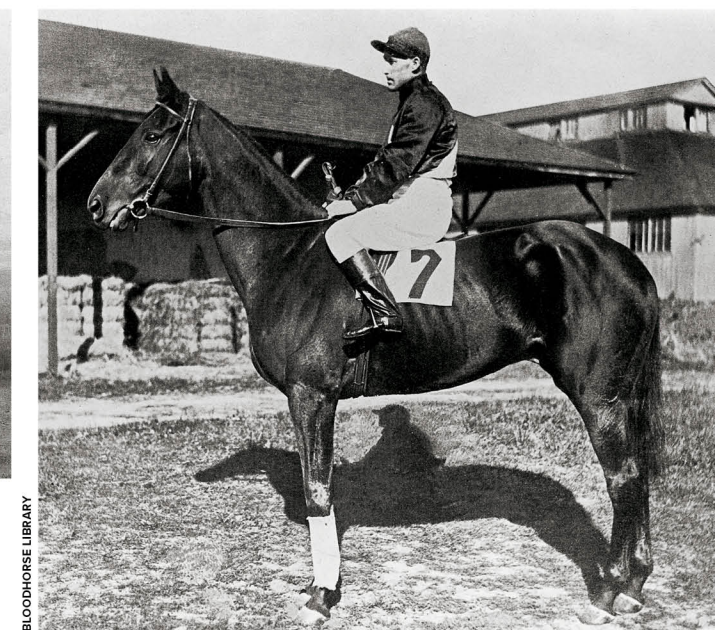
"Brutus told him if he did, he would disown him, but Zeke did it anyway," said Clay. "He rose to the level of colonel, but he ended up having his horse shot out from under him and losing an eye and being captured. Zeke was sent off to Johnson's Island up on Lake Erie. It was a really difficult place. His father went to Abraham Lincoln and asked for his son to be released. Zeke was released several months later, and after all that, what does his father do? He loans him money to buy Runnymede."

Ezekiel Clay would go on to become a preeminent horse breeder. Among others, he and his partner Catesby Woodford bred Miss Woodford, one of the top fillies of all time. A member of the Hall of Fame, Miss Woodford became the first horse in America to ever reach \$100,000 in earnings.

The horse who would surpass Miss Woodford's earnings record, Hanover, was also a Runnymede-bred. Hanover won the Belmont Stakes, became a leading sire, and is also in the Hall of



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A sampling of sale catalogs featuring Runnymede horses; Hall of Fame members Miss Woodford, Roamer, and Hanover



Fame. Ben Brush, too, was inducted into the Hall of Fame, and Clay bred another Derby winner in Agile, who won in 1905.

Clay's sons kept up the tradition of breeding Hall of Fame runners, albeit accidentally. Roamer was foaled in 1911, but he was never meant to exist. His sire was the farm's teaser, appropriately enough named Knight Errant, and his dam was Rose Tree II, a blind mare.

"In 1912 Zeke sold all of his stock, but his sons kept some of theirs, and they had bred Roamer," said Brutus Clay III. "It's not entirely clear who

jumped the fence, so that's why they named the horse Roamer. He ran in 98 races and hit the board in 74 of them, winning 39 times, and became the first horse to run a mile in under 1:35."

Roamer's story ended in just as unique a fashion as it began. On New Year's Eve in 1919, his owner, Andrew Miller, died of a heart attack, and a few hours later, on New Year's Day, Roamer slipped on some ice and had to be euthanized.

Upon Ezekiel Clay's death in 1920, his son Brutus J. Clay, who was a lawyer in Atlanta, returned to run

the family farm, but did not rule over it very long before dying six years later. His widow, Agnes, remarried U.S. Sen. Johnson N. Camden, who headed the Kentucky River Coal Corporation, which exists today as Kentucky River Properties. Camden also owned Spring Hill Farm near Versailles.

When Camden died in 1942, Agnes' oldest son, also named Brutus, began boarding horses at Runnymede and rebuilt it into a thriving operation before leaving to enter the Jesuit order. Following that decision, the property was leased to Dr. Frank



Porter Miller, who bred Count Turf, the third Kentucky Derby winner to be raised on the land.

Agnes' younger son, Catesby, had gotten involved with the coal company, but the combination of a love of horses and his brother's exit to a higher calling meant he would eventually return to command the family farm for decades.

## REBUILDING THE BRAND

Catesby W. Clay, now 93, remained at the helm of Runnymede until handing over control to his son Brutus in 2009.

"The time gallops by," said the elder Clay. "I think breeding horses energizes you. Waiting for the next big one. Watching them develop. I grew up with horses, and it just continued on. It's certainly a very intriguing business.

"Breeding a horse that really runs is the object, and Runnymede has had some success. The limestone water and running up and down these steep hills empowers them. Brutus is carrying on the business very well."

During his time as the head of the farm, Catesby Clay entered into some key partnerships that would help shape the success of the operation. In the 1970s he partnered with Howard B. Noonan, and that partnership produced Angle Light, who won the 1973 Wood Memorial Stakes at the expense of both Secretariat and Sham.

The next decade witnessed another significant partner, who also became a lifelong friend. Together, Catesby Clay and Peter Callahan

bred a number of graded stakes winners including Japanese champion Agnes Digital, who won more than \$8 million during his career.

Another key member of the team was Martin O'Dowd, who served as farm manager for almost three decades. It was O'Dowd who helped plan the mating that resulted in Lady Eli, and it was he who brought her into the world and raised her.

"Catesby and I were an unlikely pair, but we worked well together as a team," said O'Dowd. "We worked

Marylebone, Palace Episode, and Undrafted.

In addition to being by one of Runnymede's grade 1 winners, Lady Eli hails from the family of the farm's foundation mare, Kazadancoa.

"Since we also bred Divine Park, I used to say Lady Eli couldn't be any more Runnymede than she is, until someone said, 'Yeah, well, you could still own her,'" said Brutus Clay. "I started laughing and thought it was a good point."

Although pensioned in 2000,

Kazadancoa lived 11 more years before dying at the age of 33. Lady Eli is out of her final foal, Sacre Coeur. Meanwhile, Palace Episode, Kazadancoa's great-grandson, won England's Racing Post Trophy (G1) in 2005; her granddaughter Regina Maria produced a \$1.9 million Galileo yearling; and another grandson, Tejano Run, finished second in the 1995 Kentucky Derby (G1) as well as third in the 1994 Breeders' Cup Juvenile (G1).

"Lady Eli was always special to me," said O'Dowd. "She was like all the good ones: she stood out, she was a real independent lady, and you didn't mess with her. She had this air about her that was unbelievable.

"Beyond the grade 1 winners I was associated with while at Runnymede, there

were also several really nice grade 2 and grade 3 winners, such as Bizzy Caroline, Laughing Lashes, Archbishop, and Collected, among others," said O'Dowd. "It just means you weren't working for nothing. The one thing I always wanted to do, and I didn't quite get it done, was to breed a winner of the Kentucky Derby, mainly for Mr. Clay's sake. However,



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Runnymede-bred Lady Eli, top, and Palace Episode

very, very hard on our matings. We both loved doing it. At one point in time we had mares in Ireland, England, France, and Japan, and those forays abroad were successful."

In addition to Agnes Digital and Lady Eli, other grade 1 winners to come off Runnymede while O'Dowd oversaw the farm included Awesome Gem, Divine Park, Jaycito,





***“Runnymede is much bigger than an individual. It’s my father, my siblings, my family, our ancestors. We are each one chapter in the book.”***

— BRUTUS CLAY



Brutus and Catesby Clay with Medaglia d'Oro—Bizzy Caroline filly

when I left there was a wealth of really nice, young fillies and mares. I think Runnymede has a good future.”

#### EYE TOWARD THE FUTURE

“One of the great pleasures and privileges is to do this with my father,” said Brutus Clay. “I learned so much from him and from Martin, who was here for 27 years. They had a great deal of success. Runnymede’s success during that time is certainly linked to Martin’s contributions.”

At last count, among the generations, there are 30 Clays, and Brutus and his wife, Sarah, are confident two of their three children have an interest in the family legacy. Perhaps, though, an outsider’s perspective is even more telling.

After Clay took over from his father, the changing of the guard continued in late 2013 when Romain Malhouitre came on as the new farm manager.

“There is a very big respect in the

business for this farm, this land, these barns, and these horses,” said Malhouitre. “When they called me, there was no way I would say ‘no’ to the job, although I didn’t tell them that. But Runnymede has an impact on everybody. I think the only line Brutus and I needed to have was, ‘OK, let’s give it to the next generation.’ That was two days after we met, and that will continue to be the mission.”

Clay and Malhouitre are looking to build upon what Runnymede has achieved through the generations, but with an eye toward making it more commercially viable than it has been in the past.

“Breeding good racehorses and making it sustainable is our top priority,” said Clay. “In the past it was just to breed good racehorses and any potential profits would be good.”

One of the notable things about many of Runnymede’s most successful racehorses is that they were not especially commercially bred. Now, Clay has an eye on commercial vi-

ability. A clear example of that is one field of young fillies whose sires read like a Who’s Who of desirables: Tapit, Medaglia d’Oro, Scat Daddy, Empire Maker.

“Before the Great Recession we were up to 40 mares, and now we are down to about 20,” he explained. “We want to be in the 20-25 range, and we are taking on some clients. We still like Europe, and we’ve had a connection there for a long time. I suppose the tweak is that now our base of operations is more in France.

“Runnymede is much bigger than an individual. It’s my father, my siblings, my family, our ancestors. We are all each one chapter in the book, and I just hope I am not a short chapter. You feel very much like you are steward of this legacy. You want to make the most of it, and you want to leave it in better shape than when you received it.” **BH**

*Amanda Duckworth is a freelance writer based in Lexington.*