

VonLepel Says Goodbye



Middleburg Life/Janet Hitchen

Dr. Jens von Lepel and Untouched Talent the dam of Boedmeister, winner of the 2012 Arkansas Stakes and second in the Kentucky Derby and Preakness.

By Leonard Shapiro
For Middleburg Life

It was a family decision that pushed Dr. Jens von Lepel to move from Germany to become the general manager of the storied Audley Farm in Berryville 16 years ago. Another family decision will now pull him back to his native land at the end of this year.

At age 75, he says, it's time to spend more time with his adult children and his four grandchildren. Still, he also will admit that he surely will keep his well-trained horseman's eye on Audley from a distance, and occasionally up close and personal with trips back and forth to Keeneland and Saratoga.

That's where most of Audley's world class thoroughbreds have been bought or sold at auction, some for eye-popping prices, under von Lepel's masterful watch. That would include Bodemeister, the pre-race favorite in the 2012 Kentucky Derby. Named for the son of the horse's trainer, Bob Baffert, Bodemeister finished second in the Derby and Preakness and won the Arkansas Derby.

"This has not been a job," von Lepel, a veterinarian by training, said in a recent interview at the historic 2,500-acre farm. "It's been a combination of hobby and profession. It's always been a joy."

Over the last quarter century, Audley has remained one of the nation's foremost breeding operations, a status first achieved when Sir Barton, winner of America's first Triple Crown in 1919, stood at stud there in the 1920s.

Once owned by Eleanore Custis Lewis, the adopted daughter of George Washington, Audley was purchased in 1921 by Monfort and B.B. Jones, two brothers who made their fortune in the Oklahoma oil business. In 1955, they sold the farm to James F. Edwards, a manufacturer and racetrack owner. In 1964, the farm made history when its horses won

eight races at six different tracks.

In 1978, Hubertus Liebrecht, a passionate horseman whose family owned a major German pharmaceutical company, was visiting the U.S. in search of broodmares for his own thoroughbred stable. He was so impressed with Audley, he convinced Edwards to sell him the farm. Liebrecht wanted to exchange top German bloodlines with sound and speedy American pedigrees.

Liebrecht and von Lepel had often crossed paths back in Germany and in 1986 von Lepel was hired to manage his horse operation there. The two became great friends and "we had a wonderful time together," von Lepel recalled.

"One night, there was a big fire on the [German] farm. It was January, it was snowing. I got a call at 3 a.m. that the barn was burning. We lost 11 pregnant mares. I was sick for two weeks afterward. The next morning I called him, and he was there in 90 minutes. I thought that was it, he would not go on after losing his best mares.

"But after he arrived, he tapped me on the shoulder and said 'we will go on. We will take up another challenge.' It's something I will never forget. That's the kind of person he was."

Sadly, Liebrecht died in 1991 at the age of 60. He had no children, and members of his extended family took over the farms, eventually selling the German operation but holding on to Audley and installing von Lepel as general manager in 1997.

"I had come here at least twice a year," von Lepel said. "If you have someone in Germany with a beautiful property in Virginia, you needed someone you knew and could trust. I would never have come here without the backing of that family. It was not an easy decision, but in the end it was a great decision... We built a wonderful team here, a nice Audley family, and we've had great success.

He also made many friends locally



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Courtesy Image

At top, Untouched Talent was sold at auction for \$5 million. Middle, Audley Farm has won the Virginia Breeder of the Year award five times. At bottom, Sir Barton was first winner of the Triple Crown in 1919. He stood at stud at Audley from 1922 to 1933. The statue pictured here, crafted by American sculptor Jan Woods, was a December 2008 gift from Erich von Baumbach, Jr., whose family has had a 30 year association with the farm in Berryville.

and nationally. Von Lepel served as a board member of the Virginia Thoroughbred Association (VTA) and also was an international representative for the German Owners and Breeders Association.

“Even though Audley had been a successful operation, the family rightly thought they needed to reach out to someone who could share their vision and someone who could represent the farm at the highest level,” said Patrick

Lawley-Wakelin, a Berryville-based bloodstock agent and racing manager and former VTA board member.

“That person is Jens von Lepel. He not only dedicated himself to doing just that, but also shared his knowledge and wisdom with so many others. He is a gentleman of the first order and Virginia will sadly miss him, as will I.”