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The Art of Teaching Horses to Fly

By PIA CATTON

Graham Motion believes that a calm racehorse is a fast racehorse.

"Everything we do is about getting the horse to relax," said Mr. Motion, who oversees 120 horses on 350 verdant acres within Fair Hill, Md.'s natural resource preserve, near the borders of Delaware and Pennsylvania.

The set-up is highly unusual. American trainers typically keep horses stabled at racetracks for convenience and to share costs. Because most of these facilities are located in urban or neglected areas, there's rarely much green space.

The Fair Hill Training Center is shared by trainers—all of whom contribute to the upkeep in a condominium-style arrangement—but the setting is far more bucolic. "In this kind of environment, it's a lot easier to keep a horse relaxed than at the track, which is very tense and very busy," said Mr. Motion, age 47, who learned the philosophy from his mentor, the Hall of Fame trainer Jonathan Sheppard.

His success has legitimized his approach. His first Breeders' Cup win came in 2004, followed by a second in 2010, the year Mr. Motion was asked to train all the horses owned by Team Valor, one of the industry's top partnerships. Among those horses was Animal Kingdom, who in 2011 landed Mr. Motion his first Kentucky Derby win.



Here, starting as early as 5:15 a.m., the horses are turned out for about 30 minutes of freedom in a small grassy paddock. "They're cooped up in their stalls all night," said the trainer.

The horses are exercised in groups, or "sets," starting at about 6:30. Their workouts can vary from a slow walk to a jog, a gallop or a "breeze," an industry term for a run at race-like speeds. A trainer's skill comes in determining what each horse needs to stay in top shape.

"This is something I am constantly thinking about, 24-7," said Mr. Motion. "There is barely a moment in the day that I am not considering a workout or an upcoming race and how to go about it. This is not an exact science, but a lot of trial and error."



Each day, he stands at the track's edge or within its rustic, enclosed area to watch the sets. He scrutinizes everything about the horses—their gait, movement, speed—as his mind ticks through a series of decisions. Is there a race coming up? Has a race just been run? What was the last workout like? Is the athlete peppy or recalcitrant?

Information is also gathered from exercise riders and assistant trainers. When a horse comes off the track or the back acres, Mr. Motion will have a short conversation with the rider. "How'd you get on?" he asks.

After watching the horses' behavior, he decides what each one needs to stay in top shape.

The answers, a mix of jargon, mumbles and accents, contain specific information about how the horse performed. "It's very important to me that the riders come back and tell me what they think. The athletes can't talk."

As one set finishes, another begins, and Mr. Motion repeats the process of watching and talking. One aspect of the trainer's art lies in finding horses that will complement each other for fast workouts. "You try to pick horses of the same capability or horses of the same stage of fitness," he said.

Mr. Motion was born in Cambridge, England, to parents who operated a stud farm in Newmarket before moving to the U.S. in 1980. He worked under Jonathan Sheppard and later assisted Bernard Bond; when Mr. Bond died in 1993, two owners stayed on with Mr. Motion. That year, he had 21 wins.



Every day after workouts, Mr. Motion goes to his office and writes notes in a traditional management book as a backup method. His office assistant then enters information into a data-management system called TLore. Mr. Motion refers to the information on his Apple laptop, and two of his training assistants have iPads with which they can do the same. Throughout the day, his BlackBerry buzzes frequently with text messages from his stable manager, whose job is to know about every race.

Mr. Motion's detail-oriented operation has made him one of the few trainers without a medication violation. (His conservative approach stands out in an industry that struggles with public perception. Trainer Richard

Dutrow Jr. was recently given a 10-year ban by the New York State Racing and Wagering Board for repeated drug and rules violations. Mr. Dutrow is appealing.) Mr. Motion pays strict attention to the regulations in each state and knows how many days prior to a race a horse can be given a medicine without it showing up in tests.

Still, what a horse might be capable of is maddeningly unknowable. Said Mr. Motion: "So often, you don't find out until they race."

Graham Motion is not afraid to delegate. Though many trainers make their race entries themselves, he created the stable-manager job because he had too many horses and races to keep up with. "In this area, we might have half a dozen racetracks running at the same time," he said. "For the stakes races, you have to nominate the horse well in advance and that can be easily overlooked if you're not on the ball."

For the basic tools of the trade, such as binoculars and stopwatches, he favors efficiency over style or sentiment. Mr. Motion uses a digital Seiko stopwatch—"The kind they use in swimming," he said—because it can easily record the multiple times needed to judge a workout. And he doesn't invest in expensive binoculars. "I hang them up and then I lose them," he said.

When bad news has to be delivered to owners, Mr. Motion doesn't sugarcoat it. If he's training a two-year-old that isn't holding up to the regimen, he said, "I might have to call an owner and say 'This horse just isn't handling it mentally or physically. We're going to have to back off.'" This quality earned him the trust of Team Valor President Barry Irwin, who famously said, when asked why he chose Mr. Motion: "I got tired of other trainers lying to me. I wanted a guy to tell me the truth."

