

# Ever HOPEFUL



Rick Trontz, with his wife Liz, has transformed a former cattle farm into a Thoroughbred showplace.



Anne M. Eberhardt photos

## Farm Owner's Optimistic Vision



## By Lenny Shulman

**K**entucky hardboots — the grizzled farmers who raise horses in the Bluegrass — aren't supposed to spend their childhood in surf-friendly San Diego. Their moms aren't supposed to be health-food nuts, especially in an era when nobody knew what health food was. They usually don't study business and economics at college.

Meet Rick Trontz, the new wave of hardboot. What he lacks

in Kentucky roots, Trontz, owner of Hopewell Farm, makes up for in unbridled energy. A bear of a man who moves like a jackrabbit, Trontz sits in front of his office desk rather than behind it, knowing he doesn't stay put very long. It has taken him only six years to turn Hopewell from a cattle and tobacco farm into a showplace Thoroughbred facility.

Hopewell's 585 acres lie majestically in the heart of Woodford County, inside the corner of Old Frankfort and Pisgah pikes. As Trontz traverses the spread, his pride is obvious in his

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rapid-fire delivery. Here are the lilac bushes and oak trees planted by the dozens; there is the aerated and fountained pond stocked with all manner of fish; here is where beautiful Elkhorn Creek cuts through the property; there are the stallions he hopes to turn into huge successes; here are the Indian burial grounds that lend character to the land. The cell phone interrupts every two minutes with callers asking about horses Trontz is selling at the Keeneland September yearling sale, but after each interruption Trontz seamlessly picks up where he left off. Here are the rebuilt, modern barns; there is an outdoor area under lights that helps bring mares into season.

“He has unlimited energy, and yet he doesn’t come across like everything is a fire alarm,” said Patchen Wilkes Farm owner



Warren Rosenthal, who owns the stallion Skip Away in partnership with Trontz. “He’s very good at what he does, and at the

same time comes off as the most relaxed character who is fun to be around.”

Reversing the path of his mentor and long-time friend, owner/breeder John Mabee, the late owner of Golden Eagle Farm who dominated California breeding for many years, Trontz, 49, spent his early years in San Diego and migrated to the Midwest. As a child, he came to the Bluegrass to visit his uncle, Art Baumohl, who for 18 years had a racing show on WLAP radio. Trontz’ aunt came from a farm family in Morganfield, in western Kentucky, that grew “the best tomatoes and corn I ever put in my mouth. That’s how I got into liking farms,” said Trontz.

Impressed with his uncle’s love of horses, Trontz took a job at Liberty Bell Racetrack in Philadelphia as a groom for trainer Glen Hild, a friend of Baumohl’s. “Although it

Trontz has modernized Hopewell, rebuilding barns and planting dozens of new trees.



was the bottom of the barrel of racing, I learned how to respect a horse, its physical presence, and how intelligent they are," said Trontz. "It was there I learned the horse game is like life — you can't beat life and you can't beat the horse game. You can only hope to do well at times." Hence, the name of his farm.

After gaining an undergraduate degree from the University of California San Diego, Trontz re-

turned to Kentucky to do graduate work in business/economics at the University of Kentucky. He landed a job with IBM and then entered the horse industry, working for Fasig-Tipton Livestock Underwriters. True to form, Trontz soon moved on, starting his own bloodstock and insurance concern, Bluegrass Bloodstock. Profits were



**Trontz made a splash in the stallion side of the business when he and partner Warren Rosenthal purchased Horse of the Year Skip Away.**

plowed back into the game, as he began claiming fillies off the track, buying mares, and selling the foals they produced. Trontz also bought stallion shares and sold seasons for income, building up shares in better stallions. He bought part of Margaux Farm in Woodford County and then purchased his own operation. "I wanted to go

to give up some pedigree, but that's what I can afford. If you've got all of the above plus pedigree, the cost is astronomical, and it's difficult to compete at that level.

"Skip Away has a lot of potential, and he's done well so far. His first crop are 3-year-olds now, and he's had 16 stakes horses and five stakes winners, but not the big

faster than my partners," Trontz said.

While the ink was drying on the Hopewell purchase, Trontz made a sizable splash in the stallion business, purchasing, with Rosenthal, the breeding rights of the great racehorse Skip Away, a three-time champion and 1998 Horse of the Year. Skip Away earned better than \$9.6 million on the racetrack, second only to Cigar, and won 10 grade I stakes.

"He is what I like — a sound horse, a good physical horse, and a racehorse," Trontz said. "I had

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one yet. We have the supporting cast; now we're looking for the star. We're off-Broadway, but we're close to hitting the Great White Way."

In addition to Skip Away, Trontz' stallion roster includes Souvenir Copy, a three-time stakes-winning son of Mr. Prospector; Crafty Friend, who won five stakes and earned nearly \$1 million; Royal Anthem, a winner of nearly \$2 million by the brilliant turf sire Theatrical; graded stakes winner K.O. Punch; and the new arrival, David Copperfield, a multiple graded-stakes-winning son of Halo. It is a small but impressive cast.

"I like the stallion side of the business," Trontz said. "I know the odds are against you, but I believe the ones we have can

make it. It will teach you patience and humility. People expect every horse to win early as 2-year-olds, but these horses are more suited to getting later-developing



end of the year, although those type's of horses tend to sell better at sales because they're pretty. Stallions like Cozzene and Broad Brush and Relaunch, it took awhile

before their horses sold well. I believe there's a lot of value in the marketplace; you just have to look and find it."

Value is essential in racing today, when syndication deals for top stallions routinely spiral into the tens of millions of dollars and just a handful of breeding establishments can put them together. Expensive does not necessarily equate to successful, however. A stallion needs to produce a couple of impressive winners

of major races to make a big splash in the business. "I try not to look at it like I'm competing against the bigger operations, even

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**Hopewell's interesting features include a burial ground and an historic home (below), which is now the farm office. Some 150 horses, half of which are boarders, reside at the farm.**





Trontz and "Skippy."

though I am to a certain extent," Trontz said. "But you have to carve out your niche. I like to establish long-term relationships with clients and focus on that. The harder you work, the better your luck gets, and the more business you can do."

Trontz keeps approximately 150 horses on the farm, half of which are boarders. He owns all or part of some 50 mares and employs a workforce of 40. Trontz admits that his wife, Liz, and their two children are not as horse-crazy as he is. Currently the family lives off the farm in Midway, but he and Liz have selected a site for a home on Hopewell with sweeping views of green paddocks. The farm's two-story, columned office was once the main residence and served as home to former Kentucky Gov. Louie Nunn.

Although he has lost clients and friends Prince Ahmed Salman and John Mabee in the past couple of years, Trontz remains optimistic about succeeding in the industry. He feels it is of paramount importance to give something back. He has done work with the Gluck Equine Research Center at UK and is proud of offering English classes on the farm to Latino workers, as well as Spanish classes for Americans. Trontz is also a guiding force behind the Old Friends organization that is seeking to bring notable stallions back to Kentucky from overseas so that fans have the opportunity to visit with and enjoy them. This movement has taken on greater import since the news

this past summer of Kentucky Derby winner Ferdinand's demise in a Japanese slaughterhouse. Although it was erroneously reported that the stallions would be housed at Hopewell, Trontz said the group is close to a deal on a parcel of land outside Midway.

"I think Old Friends is a terrific idea," he said, "and we are trying to set it up so that we are accountable for where every dollar goes. I came up with the idea with Midway resident and former Boston journalist Michael Blowen at a dinner party; we've had a fund-raising party here, and it's getting more exciting. I'm involved in every aspect of it."

To anyone who witnesses the man's energy as he juggles several tasks, it is clear he is deeply involved in whatever he undertakes. That is why, even though he retains his bloodstock agency, Trontz just wasn't satisfied with simply advising. He needed to play, too. "It's easy to advise people," Trontz maintained, "but it's different when you put up your own money. My definition of a consultant is a guy who knows how to make love 100 different ways but never had a girlfriend. You have to know what it's like, and I think it's easier to advise people if you've owned a farm, owned horses, and gone through every aspect of the business — the trials and tribulations and highs and lows."

He admits initially to questioning his decision to purchase the farm. But some time

after naming it, Trontz received confirmation from a doctoral student who came to the farm to analyze the Indian burial grounds for his thesis. After studying the area, the student told Trontz the tribe that had come through the area was called the Hopewell.

Seems like it was meant to be. 🐾