

COLONIAL FARMS: THREE GENERATIONS AND COUNTING

Fieramosca family farm in Colts Neck, N.J., dates back to 1950, when a dashing young businessman unintentionally landed in Thoroughbred country.

Story by Ryan Goldberg. Photographs by Bill Denver.



The late John Fieramosca didn't envision a Thoroughbred dynasty back in 1950 when he purchased 113 acres of farmland in the New Jersey township of Colts Neck. He was simply looking for a place where he and his son, Sam, could ride their trail horses and enjoy life on a farm.

Fieramosca owned a clothing factory in Elizabeth, N.J. He had built a highly successful business, bolstered by government contracts he received during World War II. Although still a young man shy of 40, he already had plans to sell his business and retire to the quiet of the property located slightly more than a dozen miles from the Thoroughbred racing mecca known as Monmouth Park.

A year later, Sam volunteered for the Korean War. He was never deployed though, being stationed domestically.

The following year he received a letter from his father with news from home that surprised him.

"He said did you know we were in Thoroughbred country?" Sam Fieramosca, who will turn 79 in October, recalls with a hearty laugh. "He said he had just bought two broodmares. He said they were at a sale at a neighboring farm, nobody wanted them, and he bought them. They were both in foal."

John Fieramosca knew nothing about race horses. But he was intrigued, and his decision turned out to be fateful.

"One of them turned out to be of no importance," Sam Fieramosca says of the original investment, "but the other one, Midi's Mom [a foal of 1945 by Arabs Arrow], turned out to be a very, very good broodmare."

Fieramosca paid \$600 for the discarded Midi's Mom; she had been unplaced in five starts.



Sam Fieramosca and his son, John, oversee the 100-acre farm that for decades has ranked among the leading breeding facilities in New Jersey.





History surrounds John and Sam Fieramosca in the farm office, including photographs such as this one featuring homebred Accordant. Presentation shows patriarch John Fieramosca (left) accepting trophy from Ed Kilroe. At right is Fieramosca's longtime trainer Joe Kulina (father of current Monmouth Park general manager Bob Kulina).

It was the beginning of the Fieramosca family's Colonial Farms, and she its unlikely matriarch.

Father and son dove headlong into horse breeding, assembling from scratch what stands today as the oldest active commercial farm in a state that once had many such operations. Colonial Farms is the gray old lady of New Jersey breeding and racing.

FAMILY VALUES

Inside the farm's office on a July morning, as Sam Fieramosca tells the story of Midi's Mom with clarity and humor, as if it happened yesterday, his son, John, 43, enters the office.

"This is John—the second John," Sam says proudly. The third-generation Fieramosca horseman currently manages the farm. "Young" John grew up working alongside his grandfather and father, and left in his early 20s for a nearby farm. He



Barns at Colonial Farms, as viewed from the gardens, were constructed from scratch by founder John Fieramosca, who was closely involved in the day-to-day operation until a few years before his death in 1998 at 87. It was the life of a farmer that he had dreamed of as a boy in his native Sicily.

then worked as a manager at Home Depot for 11 years, but in 2001 he wanted to return to Colonial. Sam gladly made room.

"Best thing we ever did," Sam Fieramosca says.

Fieramosca and his wife, Inez, raised John and three daughters—Linda, Diana and Joanne—in a house adjacent to that of the elder John. The younger John and his wife and their two daughters still live on the farm, as does Joanne. Sam and Inez live in the stately main house where his father once lived, which, with its white columns and yellow shutters, looks like it came from the set of *Gone With the Wind*.

John Fieramosca died in 1998 at the age of 87. In the golden age of New Jersey racing and breeding, there was no one more prominent within the industry. John Fieramosca was named to receive the state's first Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Award in 1985.

He served as president of the Thoroughbred Breeders' Association of New Jersey, and was a committee member of the New Jersey Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association (NJHBPA) for 35 years. He also labored on the farm every day until a few years before he died.

Sam Fieramosca has run the farm since his father died. He was employed as the executive director of the NJHBPA (the group succeeded by the New Jersey Thoroughbred Horsemen's Association) from 1968 to 1999, all the while helping his father with the farm's operations, his second job.

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Colonial is nearing its 60th year, but the next few years may be its most critical. Uncertainty hangs over the heads of New Jersey horsemen because the purse supplement provided by an agreement from the Atlantic

City casinos, and along with it money for the state breeding program, is set to expire after next year.

In addition, an out-of-state bonus for New Jersey breeders, a program Fieramosca helped create five years ago, has not been renewed since distributing money in 2005 and 2006. With five months of racing in New Jersey, the opportunities for state-bred horses have narrowed.

"I've seen it shrivel to nothing," Sam says bluntly of the state breeding industry.

Only a few farms on the scale of Colonial remain, which itself is smaller than in its prime. Sixty-five horses are there now, of which Colonial owns 20. At one time in the 1980s there were 100. Thirty foals were born on the farm this year. Colonial has only four horses in training, and by late July, only two wins in 2009. Sam Fieramosca says the farm does not make money.

In 1999, Fieramosca sold 70 of his 170 acres to developers so that 100 acres of it could be preserved in an agreement with Colts Neck. He says it was the only way he could keep the farm. The sight of million-dollar homes on Rancho Polo, an "estate development" at the edge of his farm, breaks his heart.

Says John Forbes, the longtime conditioner who has trained for Colonial over the years, "Sam could sell the farm and live comfortably the rest of his life. But he wants to keep the legacy of Colonial alive."

The legacy is tangible inside the cluttered office where Sam and John are sitting this July morning. Nearly every inch of the wood-paneled walls is covered with photographs, articles and memorabilia. Dust covers the frames of old winner's circle pictures, lending the office the smell of an old attic.

Sam is straightforward and, perhaps as a result of vigor-



Yearlings (top) are part of Colonial Farms's stock in the future. Horses graze next to Rancho Polo, the upscale housing development constructed on land where the Fieramoscas once grew and cut and baled straw.

ous farm work, still coltish and decidedly younger looking than his age suggests. He has gray hair and a gray mustache. A prolific storyteller, he prefaces his tales with “that’s another story” and a chuckle. To jog his memory and illustrate his stories, he paces the room and points to photos. His son listens raptly to stories he has not heard before.

ROOTED IN THE PAST

John Fieramosca, the patriarch, was born in 1911 and grew up in Ragusa, Sicily. His uncle had a large horse breeding farm—its main contract was with the Italian military—and John used to spend summers there. At 14, he and his three siblings joined their father in Elizabeth. John started working in clothing factories, soon started his own in Linden, N.J.,

and then built a big factory in the center of Elizabeth in the early 1930s. When World War II arrived, his company manufactured thousands of Navy pea coats, Air Force bomber jackets and Army field jackets.

Sam was born in 1930, an only child. His parents divorced when he was 5, and he lived with his mother in Paterson, N.J., until he graduated from high school. Then he moved in with his father in Elizabeth and, after a short time in college, joined him at the factory. They started horseback riding together around this time.

“There he is,” Fieramosca says, pointing to his father in a framed photo of them side-by-side on horseback. Sam estimates he was 16 when it was taken after World War II, in the town of Kenilworth in Union County, where they boarded their horses at the time. The brown wood on the frame has chipped off in several spots.

John Fieramosca looks debonair and handsome, a man with movie star looks. (“He was a good-looking son of a bitch,” Sam says, pointing to another photo of John located under the glass top of his desk.)

Colts Neck was all open fields and farms when the Fieramoscas shifted their tack from Elizabeth. The property was an old chicken farm, and the only structure standing was an old barn. Nearby there were renowned horse farms like Greentree, Brookdale, Bernadotte and Lincroft, as John Fieramosca soon discovered.

Fieramosca’s first broodmares were part of a Lincroft dispersal. He met his longtime trainer, Joe Kulina, through a mutual friend about a year later. Kulina was then in his early 30s. Bob Kulina, Monmouth Park’s current general manager, recalls how his father told John Fieramosca that Midi’s Mom’s first foal born at Colonial, by then old enough to train, had some talent.

As Kulina remembers it, Fieramosca did not want anything to do with race horses, but he reluctantly gave the filly—Hello Mom, a 1952 foal by Helvetian—to Kulina to train. Fieramosca and Kulina remained together for two decades, their relationship sadly cut short when Kulina retired because of poor health. (He died in 1987 at age 63.)

“I think they were both lucky to stumble upon each other,” Kulina says.

Hello Mom won two races as a juvenile and two more the next year. She was a hard-knocking runner and compiled a record of 11-10-7 in 71 starts and earnings of \$43,300. She won the seven-furlong Pawtucket Handicap at Rhode Island’s Lincoln Downs on April 20, 1957. The winning purse was \$5,500. The photo hangs in Colonial’s office, a grinning John Fieramosca and Joe Kulina in the winner’s circle after their first stakes score.

Hello Pop, Hello Mom’s year-younger full brother, was similarly sturdy. Though not as fast as his sister, he earned

\$29,233 from a record of 14-10-14 in 83 starts.

But the best was yet to come. Midi’s Mom’s next foal, by Scobeyville, was Mom’s Pal, who finished second in the 1957 edition of the New Jersey Futurity.

A few years later came Decade. A fast sprinter by Decathlon, he won the Home Bred Handicap and New Jersey Breeders Stakes as a juvenile in 1961. The band leader and television host Lawrence Welk purchased Decade the following year for \$60,000—then an impressive sum.

Midi’s Mom’s foal of 1960, a chestnut son of Travers Stakes winner Ace Admiral named Accordant, turned out to be her best. Sam Fieramosca chose Ace Admiral for the mating when the stallion relocated from Kentucky to New Jersey at the tail end of his career. The Fieramoscas were in the breeding shed when Ace Admiral arrived to service their mare. As Sam recalls, six men were needed to hold him down.

“The noise that he made, that son of a bitch,” Sam says, guffawing. “I never saw a horse move like that in my life. He was blindfolded. When his back was to her, he knew she was there. He whipped around and jumped on her. . . bingo! With a roar.”

Unsuccessful in two 2-year-old starts, Accordant returned the next year and won half of his 14 starts and finished second three times. He won Monmouth’s Oceanport and Longport Handicaps (the former in 1:09½) and Aqueduct’s Fall Highweight Handicap against older horses. He finished second to Ahoy twice, and, in his final start, he missed by a half-length to 3-year-old champion Chateaugay in the one-mile Jerome Handicap.

Accordant’s brief career ended because of sore ankles, but he still stands out as one of the fastest New Jersey-bred sprinters ever.

Standing at Colonial, Accordant became one of the first big New Jersey stallions. He led a burgeoning stallion roster at Colonial that started



Colonial Farms keeps 30 broodmares, nine home-owned. Mares are bred to home stallions as well as others in New Jersey and Kentucky. At left, with her Flower Alley colt, is the farm's star broodmare, Little Ali Oop (Lost Code—Eggs Binnedict, by Naskra), a full sister to stakes winner Hash It Out and half-sister to two graded stakes horses. Tippy Toe Tessa (Swain-Ire—Dixie Sunrise, by Dixieland Band) grazes next to her colt by Private Interview.

in the latter half of the 1950s with a son of Count Fleet named Ennobled.

A FLAIR FOR THE BUSINESS

The golden triangle of New Jersey racing—Garden State, Monmouth and Atlantic City—was never healthier, and John Fieramosca became a big part of the scene. He had a thick Italian accent, was always neatly dressed in a suit and tie, and drove a white Cadillac convertible. He was close to many great horsemen and officials, and a dear friend of Sonny Werblin, then a part-owner of Monmouth and the New York Jets football team.

"John was a Damon Runyon character," says Willard Thompson, 74, a close friend and longtime trainer. "He loved to go out to dinner. He put me under the table many times; I couldn't keep up with him drinking. I would finish a dis-

tant third to him and Sonny Werblin." Sitting in his barn at Monmouth, Thompson continues, "John was a flashy guy. What the hell—he was Italian!" He laughs robustly. "You can quote me on that!"

Bob Kulina spent his youth traveling with his father and learning the game. In the winter, they stabled in Aiken, S.C., and John Fieramosca would visit his horses there. Bob and Joe Kulina greatly admired the jovial owner. Fieramosca bought the young Bob his first bicycle, and every winter he and his sister received leather coats.

Kulina says, "What I remember most about John was he was the owner every trainer today longs for. He didn't have a condition book; he didn't want a condition book. He didn't want to tell Dad where to run or what to run. 'You train my horse, you tell me when he's gonna run, I'll come and watch him run.'"

John Fieramosca built the farm from scratch—three barns (including a stallion barn), tin run-in shed, paddocks and houses. After the construction of Highway 18 seized 13 acres from the farm, he bought 70 adjacent acres. He handled the breeding and fed the horses every day. It was the life of a farmer he had dreamed of as a boy in Italy.

"I used to walk around with John when he would feed," says Thompson, whose Quiet Winter Farm is down the road from Colonial. "He was unbelievable. He knew every horse. He'd adjust the feed accordingly. . . I've seen him out putting up new fencing, digging out post holes. He was an incredible person. He was a pleasure to know and a pleasure to be friends with."

Even though Sam Fieramosca left the daily labor of the farm for the NJHBPA in 1968, he had discovered a knack for the pedigree side of the opera-

tion. His goal was to breed horses who could compete in open races.

In 1970, he put together a syndicate to buy the stayer Chomption, the 1968 Travers Stakes winner who had placed in a long list of great handicaps on both surfaces. At the end of his 5-year-old season, Chomption was being sold as a stallion prospect in a Belmont Park auction. Fieramosca approached his trainer, Ivor Balding, with an offer of \$125,000. Balding declined, saying he could not reach the owner, C.V. Whitney. Fieramosca paid \$104,000 at the sale.

Joe Kulina received the horse and pronounced him sound and fit, and urged the Fieramoscas to keep him in training for Aqueduct's final two distance races of 1970. He finished second twice. Sam Fieramosca intended to retire him then, but Kulina begged him not to. His stallion career could wait another year.



Sam and Inez Fieramosca have been married for 56 years. The couple raised four children at Colonial Farms while Sam Fieramosca also served as the longtime executive director of the New Jersey horsemen's group.

Chompion started 1971 with yet another runner-up finish, and then won the Quaker Handicap at Liberty Bell Park in February. Switched back to turf, he won Gulfstream's Pan American Handicap, setting a course record. He then gained a victory in Pimlico's Dixie Handicap upon the disqualification of Fort Marcy. He won the Massachusetts Handicap six weeks later—another course record and his final victory. But he was facing the best horses in training, and other standout performances included placings in the Washington, D.C., International, United Nations and Manhattan Handicaps. In all, the son of Tompion out of the *Mahmoud mare Mahratta earned \$300,349 for the Fieramoscas.

"They all thought you were a genius," John Fieramosca says to his father. Sam Fieramosca laughs, saying, "Yeah, on the basis of that we ended up buy-

ing another stallion, or another race horse—*Slady Castle."

In March 1972, Sam Fieramosca met a representative of the British Bloodstock Agency at an HBPA convention in London. The man called Fieramosca afterward and said he had two 3-year-olds for sale. One was *Slady Castle, a son of *Tudor Melody who had been one of the leading 2-year-olds in Ireland the previous year. A full brother to 1966 English 2000 Guineas winner Kashmir II, *Slady Castle was a pure speed horse, and thus Fieramosca believed he would fit in well in America.

Fieramosca flew to Ireland to see him. *Slady Castle's trainer, the legendary Irish conditioner Vincent O'Brien, picked up Fieramosca and drove him to the gallops. There, O'Brien told him, "You don't even need to get out of the car, he'll be coming by in a moment," as Sam remembers. "So we're

sitting there and all of a sudden—shoo!—this horse comes flying by. He said, 'That's *Slady Castle.' Oh!"

Fieramosca got out of the car and the agent explained why he asked him to see *Slady Castle in the flesh. He was small—"barely 15.1, maybe 15.2 hands"—but Fieramosca was undeterred. He bought *Slady Castle for \$125,000. "I just loved him," he says. "He was so gorgeous, kind of refined, but a beautiful horse.

"Mr. O'Brien said to me, 'Young man, I have only one suggestion for you. I know the way you train in the States. Tell your trainer to throw away his stopwatch. This horse does not need a lot of work.'"

In other words, *Slady Castle was supposedly ready to run. But when he arrived at Garden State, everyone involved was shocked. Recalls Fieramosca, "When he got off the van, he had an old blanket on him; he was very thin, he did not even look like the same horse. Joe Kulina said to me, 'Oh boy.' He said, 'This isn't the way he looked over there?' I said, 'No, Joe, he was gorgeous.' I was embarrassed."

Bob Kulina remembers *Slady Castle looked like a pony. Joe Kulina told the Fieramoscas he would need three months to work with the colt. As promised, the second week of July he entered him in a one-mile second-level allowance on the Monmouth grass. With Paul Kallai aboard, *Slady Castle spurted to the lead and led comfortably throughout, winning by three lengths.

The rest of his career was rocked by injuries. He won once more in 11 starts. As a stallion, however, his influence was unprecedented in New Jersey.

"He really made this farm," Sam says. *Slady Castle was New Jersey's stallion of the year for 11 consecutive seasons. His first runner, Castle Bell, won the 1976 New Jersey Breeders Stakes in her debut. He went on to sire a career total of 17 stakes winners, including Grade 1-placed Castle Royale.

In part, *Slady Castle filled the role set aside for Chompion, who collapsed and died in the breeding shed in 1977. One of his first offspring was the winning filly Chompelle, a foal of 1973 out of the Vertex mare Forbidden Lass. Chompelle retired following a short career, and, mated with *Slady Castle, produced the good Colonial Farms homebred Castle Guard.

Castle Guard won two stakes, including the New Jersey Futurity, in his juvenile campaign in 1981. The chestnut colt was a stakes winner the next three seasons, winning 14 of his 56 starts, placing in 23 others, and earning \$398,754 before retiring in 1985. He finished second in the Salvator Mile Handicap-G3 and third in the Longfellow-G2, Lamplighter-G3 and Oceanport-G3 Handicaps. He was named New Jersey-bred Horse of the Year in 1984.

Castle Guard stood at Colonial for 17 seasons, the majority of them alongside *Slady Castle. In 1993, Castle Guard was New Jersey's leading sire. *Slady Castle died in 2001 and Castle Guard in 2004.

The 1970s and 1980s were high times for Colonial, but none of its horses was as popular as Dan Horn. A gelded son of Accordant out of the Prince John mare Rosy Moon born in 1972, he did not find his best stride until 5, when he moved to the turf. Harry Wells trained Dan Horn, who had bowed a tendon as a young horse, but he and the Fieramoscas were patient.

In 1977, Dan Horn won the Cliff Hanger, Lincroft and Linwood Handicaps, and placed in two graded races. The next year was his best, as he won the Donald P. Ross-G2, Longfellow-G3 and Lincroft Handicaps and finished third in three added-money races, including the Grade 1 United Nations Handicap. He won the Grade 3 Longfellow again in 1979, as well as the Grade 3 Kelly Olympic, and took the Lincroft for a third time in 1980. At the age of 10, he retired with earnings of \$390,411.



Dan Horn was known as the Forego of New Jersey-breds, and John Fieramosca considers him the horse who drew him into his father and grandfather's sport.

NOT FINISHED YET

The last two decades have been quieter years on the race track, but Colonial is still known for breeding good horses and, as old-timers like to say, doing things the right way.

"I think it's a great honor to Sam to keep it going," says Bob Kulina. "It's so hard today, you know, to have a working man's farm. . . I think that's an honor to be called that, because it's hard work running a farm."

As farm manager, John Fieramosca handles his grandfather's old responsibilities. He cuts the lawn, repairs fences and barns, oversees a small staff, feeds the horses. As morning turned into afternoon on this July day, he and his father lingered near the aged main barn. Sam pointed to the

Rancho Polo homes on their old ground and recalled how they once grew straw there, cut it and baled it.

"John used to do it with his grandfather," Sam said.

"Five thousand bales a year," John said, proudly and simply.

"The fields look good, John."

"The fertilizer seems to be working."

Sam turned and admitted, with a measure of sadness, "There aren't too many farms left."

Near the road, their two stallions—Private Interview and Park Avenue Ball—relaxed in their paddocks.

Private Interview, a graded-placed son of Nureyev and half-brother to Kentucky stallion Doneraile Court, has been a leading New Jersey stallion since 1997.

Park Avenue Ball (by Citidancer), a New Jersey-bred millionaire who won graded races over three consecutive seasons for his owner/breeders Charles



Colonial Farms stands two stallions: Private Interview (at top, with Sam Fieramosca), a graded-placed son of Nureyev who currently ranks as second-leading sire in New Jersey, and Park Avenue Ball (by Citidancer), whose first foals arrived this season.

and Marianne Hesse and trainer Jimmy Ryerson, stood his second season in 2009. Optimistic about Park Avenue Ball's chances, Sam Fieramosca supported him with four of the farm's own mares.

Beyond those paddocks, Sam Fieramosca strolled along

a path to the office. John trailed behind, looking out over the grounds. Sam Fieramosca stopped and thought aloud.

"I don't know where the hell it all went," he said. "From 1952 on it has been all racing and breeding. And it's been wonderful." ✱