



Kyle Rothfus is someone who sees the bigger picture when he scouts OTTBs. The Midway, Ky., resident is seen here with Lady Dyanaformer, the result of him breeding his first OTTB, Lady Macjazz, to Vertiformer

## *Second Acts*

# Love *the* Horse First

OFF-TRACK THOROUGHBRED  
ENTHUSIASTS ARE AN OVERLOOKED  
POTENTIAL FAN BASE—AND MORE—  
FOR HORSE RACING

By KRISTEN KOVATCH BENTLEY



Lady Dyanaformer won on debut carrying Rothfus' racing silks at Belterra Park in June 2021. In her next start, she finished third in the Cincinnati Stakes

**W**HEN A THOROUGHBRED moves from racing to his next chapter—whether that's barrel racing, fox hunting, trail riding, ranch work, or myriad other riding sports collectively called "the equestrian industry"—he's generally said to have exited racing. He's moved on to become part of a different population of horses; he's now called an off-track Thoroughbred, or OTTB. The horse itself has not changed: he's still the same animal. He just has a different lifestyle and skill set in that next chapter.

Much as that horse is no longer considered part of the racing industry, those that transition, manage, care for, and ride those Thoroughbreds are not considered part of the racing industry either. But the line between OTTB enthusiast and horse racing fan may be more blurred than labels would have us believe—and involvement with OTTBs can even be a foot in the door for active involvement in the horse racing industry.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE FULL LIFE CYCLE**

While Kyle Rothfus of Midway, Ky., first interacted with Thoroughbreds through prepping weanlings and yearlings for a bloodstock agent in the late 1990s, his first foray back into the horse industry in 2014 after more than a decade away was to purchase a retiring Thoroughbred. "I specifically targeted getting an OTTB," he said. "I liked the breed for its sensitivity, athleticism, and the way they connect with people."

His first OTTB was Lady Macjazz, who he pointed to the 2015 Thoroughbred Makeover, the retraining competition produced by the Retired Racehorse Project. While an untimely injury prevented Rothfus and "Freja" from competing, the Facebook page he had created and maintained to chronicle their progress in life beyond racing had

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KYLE ROTHFUS

amassed a huge following, and Rothfus continued to document his OTTB ownership with his next Makeover horses.

An avid researcher of his horses' histories—Rothfus educated himself on bloodstock breeding and sales as he dove deeper into his horses' bloodlines—he was able to connect with Freja's breeder, as well as the racing owner and trainer of his 2017 Makeover horse, Quality Hey. The more he got to know the people involved in his horses' racing lives, the more he wanted to connect with the industry: "I kept seeing real people in racing: loving, caring people with their horses," he remarked. "I decided I wanted to be part of this community, and tell its story."

Rothfus bred Freja, his first OTTB, documenting his entire process from stallion selection through birth on his public Facebook platform, bringing along a large community of OTTB enthusiasts and horse lovers along for the journey. "I bred her with the idea that I was breeding for a long-term athlete," he said. "I wanted to breed a sport horse, who could hopefully also race first." He did successfully race the foal, Lady Dyanaformer, and recalls that when she broke her maiden in her first start at Belterra Park, there were about 20 people in the winner's circle with him and his husband, only three of which he actually knew—the rest were fans from his Facebook page who had turned out to see "Dyana" run.

Rothfus now has a small breeding operation in Midway under the name Horse Husband Stables; he also operates Mareworthy Charities, networking homes for and taking in at-risk Thoroughbred broodmares. "I started on the receiving end of horses exiting racing," he explained. "Now, I understand the

full life cycle of the horse, and I can make choices now as a breeder and owner for the long-term good of the animal.

"Each horse we breed is a life that we bring into the world for 20 years," Rothfus continues. "We need to start looking to the OTTB world to learn more about what their experience is like—the people who have the horse for the majority of its life should get some say."

Rothfus still maintains his Facebook



**Beguiled by horse racing, Brit Vegas took her love for OTTBs to the next level by becoming an owner of racehorses. She co-owns Prince Cosmo, a two-time winner, with the horse's trainer, Justin Jeansonne**

platform to keep educating his extensive following about how the breeding and racing industries work. "If we as a racing industry don't make the effort to connect and educate, the rest of the horse industry will speculate," he says. "You become a fan of what you understand."

#### WHOLE-CAREER APPROACH

Brit Vegas of Milford, Neb., bought her first retiring Thoroughbred for resale in 2004 when she was a freshman in college,

touring the backside at Lincoln Race Course (now Legacy Downs). "I immediately fell in love with the breed," she said. "I loved the energy of the Thoroughbred." It didn't take Vegas long to find her way on the back of a Thoroughbred racehorse. She started galloping horses and continued to do so for four years, while gaining a deeper appreciation for the power and heart of the breed, especially race fitness.

Other than a brief hiatus when she had her daughter, Vegas has maintained her Thoroughbred resale business through her Royal Fox Stables. Since that first resale horse in 2004, she has continued building a reputation for high-quality sport horse prospects as well as owning and competing her own OTTBs into the upper levels. It wasn't until 2022, however, that she first dipped a toe into racehorse ownership; she has now owned six racehorses through partnerships, all in training with Justin Jeansonne based in Louisiana, assisted by Jade Favre.

"It's rewarding in a different way," said Vegas. "As a reseller and owner, I'm in control of my own entire program myself. As a racehorse owner, I don't have control over the training—I just get to be the cheerleader. It's exciting to watch someone else make the choices; I believe in what Justin and Jade are doing as a team."

Vegas tends to buy into horses that she would want to own as an equestrian—and indeed, she takes all of the horses she's owned to transition to their retirement, other than one that was claimed. Those horses included a 2-year-old who never started. "I'm looking for conformation, temperament, and gait," she shared, crediting Favre's excellent owner communication with allowing her to make active choices rather than having a trainer buying something for her. That means she can take a whole-career approach to her ownership, enjoying not only cheering her horses home on the track but developing them beyond racing for the next stage of their lives as sport horses.



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## PROOF IN POLLING

In January, the RRP polled past competitors in its Thoroughbred Makeover, the largest and most lucrative retraining competition for recently retired racehorses and former broodmares in North America, seeking to understand how participants interacted with the racing industry. The survey went out to more than 2,600 past Makeover trainers.

About 77% of respondents indicated that the first Thoroughbred with which they ever interacted was an off-track Thoroughbred. Of that population, 64% indicated that they were interested in racing prior to working with that horse; 70% of those who first responded that they were not interested in racing prior to working with an OTTB indicated that they had an interest in the sport after working with that horse.

Poll respondents used the same tools

as the racing industry to research their Makeover mounts: a whopping 95% of respondents utilized Equibase to research their horses' racing information or find past connections. Makeover trainers regularly hunt down race replays to watch their horses' first careers; they research their pedigrees to understand more about bloodlines. More than 60% of respondents report having reached out to breeders and past owners or trainers, though a smaller fraction are successful in bridging a connection.

While in town for the Thoroughbred Makeover in October, participating trainers took advantage of the event's location in Central Kentucky during downtime in the competition. Roughly a third of poll respondents reported attending Keeneland for racing or morning works, and a third of respondents

also toured a stallion farm in the area, with many specifically seeking out farms where relatives of their Makeover horse were standing at stud.

The poll concluded with one simple question: after participating in the Thoroughbred Makeover, did respondents generally view the racing industry favorably? The response was "yes" for 88%.

The numbers don't lie: off-track Thoroughbred enthusiasts are a prime population to be nurtured as horse racing fans. There's an argument to be made that they're already there, as dedicated fans and ambassadors of the racing industry's greatest strength—that is, the Thoroughbred horse itself. What can the racing industry do to capitalize on this population of horse lovers at a time when it needs a loyal fan base more than ever? **BH**



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P.O. BOX 8368 LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY 40511-0836  
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