

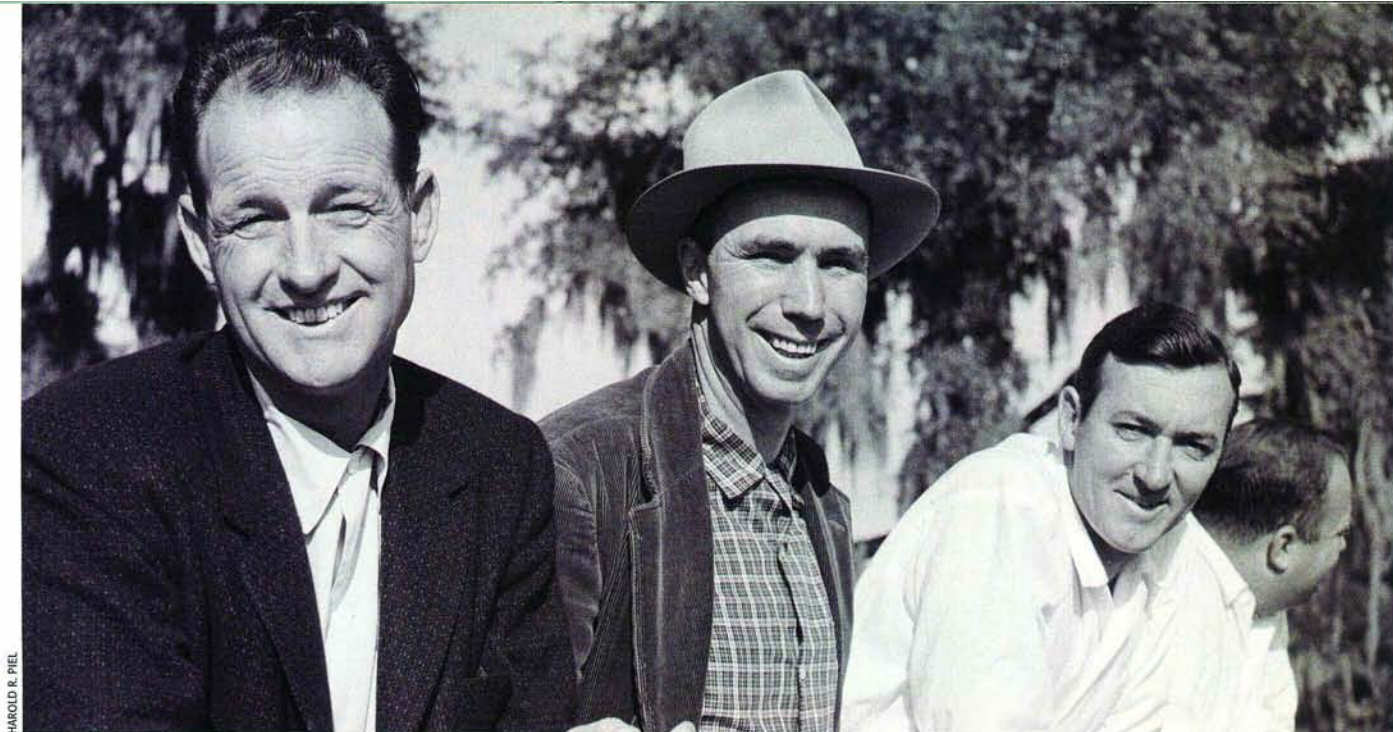
STAR OF THE
**SUNSHINE
STATE**

Needles Put Florida on the Racing and Breeding Map



Needles (outside) catches Fabius in the final strides to win the 1956 Kentucky Derby

COURTESY JOURNAL & LOUISVILLE TIMES



HAROLD R. PIEL

Needles' owners, J.C. Dudley (left) and Bonnie M. Heath (right), with Joseph O'Farrell (center), another leader of the Florida Thoroughbred industry

BY MIKE KANE

Before Florida became known for producing such Kentucky Derby winners as Carry Back, Foolish Pleasure, Affirmed, Unbridled, and Silver Charm, there was Needles, the trailblazing colt with the distinctive name and the quirky disposition. With his victory in the 1956 Kentucky Derby, the first triumph by a Florida-bred in America's most celebrated horse race, Needles became the hero of the state's fledgling breeding business around Ocala in Marion County. He was full of firsts: the first Florida-bred to be a national champion, the first state-bred to start in the Derby, and the first horse of his stature to stand at stud in the state.

Fifty years have passed since Needles turned in his breakthrough performance for the D & H Stable of Jack Dudley and Bonnie Heath, but he remains an icon with Florida's breeders. Gone, but certainly not forgotten.

"Needles' impact down here was huge," said Heath's son, Bonnie Heath III, himself a longtime breeder. "I don't know how you could measure it. There was nothing here. There was Dudley's and Dad's farm, and I was always told they were the fourth and fifth Thoroughbred farms in Ocala and Marion County."

At that time the Florida foal crop was tiny, and there were few quality mares to breed to the Derby winner.

"He kind of had to do it on his own," Heath said.

Florida's Thoroughbred industry has grown dramatically since then and is a solid second to Kentucky. The state has 600 farms and training centers and approximately 250 stallions in place for the 2006 breeding season. According to The Jockey Club, the Florida foal crop in 2004, the most recent year figures are available, numbered 4,343.

Since Needles became the state's first champion — co-champion two-year-old male in 1955 and champion three-year-old male in 1956 — Florida has produced 41 other horses that finished at the

What Needles started, Carry Back and four other Florida-breds continued at Churchill Downs on the first Saturday of May.

Five years after Needles' triumph, Carry Back became Florida's second Derby starter and its second winner. He scored his victory in the 1961 Kentucky Derby over Fred Hooper's Crozier. Like Needles, the brown colt was a closer. He was 11th at the first three calls of the Derby and was 13 lengths off the pace after a mile but came on in the stretch to edge Crozier by three-quarters of a length.

Known as "the People's Choice," Carry Back had a rags-to-riches story. His dam, Joppy, became the possession of breeders Jack and Katherine Price for a total of \$300: \$150 to settle a boarding bill and another \$150 in cash. His sire was



Silver Charm (right) defeated Captain Bodgit in 1997

the Maryland stallion Saggy, a sprinter who was the only horse to beat Citation as a three-year-old. Carry Back, foaled at Ocala Stud Farm, raced in Katherine Price's colors, and was trained by Jack Price. He ran 21 times as a two-year-old, 62 times in his career, and earned \$1,241,165. The first Florida-bred millionaire was elected to the National Museum of Racing's Hall of Fame in 1975.

Fourteen years later Foolish Pleasure became Florida's third Derby winner. The son of What a Pleasure was bred by Waldemar Farms and owned by John L. Greer. Foolish Pleasure was unbeaten in seven starts as a two-year-old for trainer LeRoy Jolley. The colt prepped for

his Derby victory with wins in the Flamingo and the Wood Memorial.

Foolish Pleasure compiled a 16-4-3 record in 26 starts and earned \$1,216,705. He was inducted into the Racing Hall of Fame in 1995.

A Florida-bred returned to the Derby winner's circle on May 6, 1978, when Affirmed, bred and owned by Harbor View Farm, held off rival and narrow betting favorite Alydar by 1½ lengths. Trained by Laz Barrera, Affirmed went on to sweep the Triple Crown, the last horse to capture racing's elusive prize. He won 22 of 29 starts and earned \$2,393,818. He also was champion of his division at two, three, and four, and earned Horse of the Year honors at three and four, a resume that carried him to the Hall of Fame in 1980.

Unbridled's victory in the 1990 Kentucky Derby produced an enduring video highlight: trainer Carl Nafzger describing the race to 92-year-old owner Mrs. Frances Genter. As the son of Fappiano bred by Tartan Farms approached the wire, Nafzger shouted, "Mrs. Genter, you've won the Kentucky Derby!"

Later that year at Belmont Park, Unbridled won the Breeders' Cup Classic. He was retired after his four-year-old season with a career record of 8-6-6 from 24 starts and earnings of \$4,489,475.

On May 3, 1997, Silver Charm registered a breathtaking victory, beating Captain Bodgit by a head under jockey Gary Stevens. A son of Silver Buck bred by Mary L. Wootton, Silver Charm was purchased as a two-year-old for \$85,000 by Bob and Beverly Lewis and became their first Derby winner. Bob Baffert trained the gray colt for the Lewises. Silver Charm won the Preakness and was second in the Belmont Stakes, narrowly missing the Triple Crown. He was retired after the 1999 season with a record of 12-7-2 from 24 starts and earnings \$6,944,369.

When Bob Lewis died on Feb. 17, 2006, at the age of 81, Steve Haskin, *The Blood-Horse's* senior correspondent, recalled one of Lewis' comments after Silver Charm's victory:

"It was at a press conference following the '97 Kentucky Derby that Bob wrote his own epitaph: 'I've asked Beverly, when you plant me six feet under, I want on that tombstone: 'Loving Husband, Adoring Father, and Winner of the 123rd Kentucky Derby.'"

By Mike Kane

top of their division or were named Horse of the Year. The two newest champs came in 2005: the three-year-old male Afleet Alex and the sprinter Lost in the Fog. One of the most prominent of those champions, 1994 Horse of the Year Holy Bull, was foaled at Bonnie Heath Farm. And Silver Charm, the Derby winner and the three-year-old champion of 1997, was foaled at Dudley Farm.

"What happened here quite well would have happened anyway," Heath III said. "But I think what happened here was accelerated

"NEEDLES' IMPACT
DOWN HERE WAS HUGE."
— BONNIE HEATH III

tremendously by what Needles did. People saw that you could raise a good horse here. It's without a doubt the best place in the world to raise a horse, as far as I'm concerned, to this day.

"It's the climate. It's the soil. It's the water. It's all those things that combine to make it a great place. His coming here (to stand at stud) was definitely the thing that did it. It's always been said down here that Needles sold more real estate than any real estate agent around."

That's a line that has stood the test of time in Marion County, which bills itself as the "Horse Capital of the World."

Only the most optimistic horse farmer could have believed that title was possible in 1953 when Needles was one of 79 registered Florida-bred foals. By the time he was pensioned from stallion duty in 1977, the foal crop was 2,220. It had nearly doubled again by 1984 when Needles died at Bonnie Heath Farm at age 31.

Dudley and Heath witnessed the explosion of the racing business into a major economic force in Florida. Dudley died in 1998, while Heath passed away at the age of 85 in 2001, a little more than a year after Needles was inducted into the Hall of Fame at the National Museum of Racing in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

Indeed, much has changed in the Florida

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horse business since Needles' dam, Noodle Soup, arrived from Kentucky in the summer of 1952, carrying the future Derby winner in utero. Less than four years later, her foal returned to the Bluegrass State, where his historic victory pushed the Florida breeding business out of its infancy.

THE PONDER COLT

Noodle Soup, a daughter of Jack High and the winner of just one race with career earnings of \$1,975, had raced in the colors of

Samuel Feinberg, a furniture store owner in Wilmington, Del. Feinberg closed his racing stable in 1949 because his eyesight was failing and entered a breeding arrangement with W. Rhodes Estill. Noodle Soup and two other broodmare prospects, Carol Lee and Sis Brier, were sent to Estill's farm in Lexington, Ky. By the spring of 1952, however, Estill had decided he wanted to end his arrangement with Feinberg to board the mares.

When Bill Leach, the operator of Dickey Stables in Ocala, learned that the broodmares were for sale, he called a friend in Kentucky, Paul Little, who evaluated the broodmares and relocated them to Palmeadow Farms, which he operated with his brother, Kellar.

According to the book *Florida Thoroughbred* by Charlene R. Johnson, the deal that emerged made Little and Leach co-owners of the mares.

Since it was late in the breeding season, Little scrambled to arrange matings for the three broodmares. Carol Lee went to The Doge and Sis Brier was booked to Model Cadet. After hearing that 1949 Kentucky Derby winner Ponder had been retired, Little seized the opportunity to breed the undistinguished Noodle Soup to the vaunted Calumet Farm runner who had earned more than \$500,000 on the racetrack. Not only was Ponder a Derby winner, but his sire, Pensive, had won the Derby in 1944. A little further back in Ponder's pedi-

DAVE ERB'S FOND MEMORIES

At the very center of the racing photographs hanging on Dave Erb's living room walls is a collection of images from his most important and memorable year as a jockey: 1956, that championship season with the colt Needles.

To the far right on the north wall is a copy of the *Sports Illustrated* cover of Erb and Needles, published just before they won the Kentucky Derby on May 5. A few feet to the left is a black-and-white photo of Erb's appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, the evening after the 82nd Derby.

The display includes images of Erb and Needles from their victories in the Flamingo Stakes at Hialeah, the Florida Derby at Gulfstream Park, and several more from the crowning achievement under the Twin Spires at Churchill Downs. Trainer Hugh Fontaine, walking cane in hand, is in some of the shots. So are Needles' co-owners Jack Dudley and Bonnie Heath.

After 49 years as a jockey and a trainer, Erb has left racing behind. Now 82, Erb is enjoying a comfortable retirement with his wife, Lee, in Greenfield Center, N.Y., a few miles northwest of Saratoga Springs. It has been their full-time home since Erb retired in 1988. Though he does follow the sport that carried him from his boyhood home on a farm in York, Neb., to every major U.S. racetrack and, finally, to his 22 rural acres in the foothills of the Adirondacks, another game has become his passion: golf. "I play about four times a week," Erb said.

Racing was Erb's business, though, and that triumph on the first Saturday in May 1956 was the highlight of a career that included many other notable successes.

"Every rider's dream is to win the Derby," he said. "That's what we set our goals for."

Erb, who began riding professionally in 1938 at age 15, earned his first victory March 8, 1939, at Oaklawn Park. But it wasn't until a dozen years later in Chicago when he was able

to find consistent success at major tracks.

In 1955 Erb rode Swoon's Son to victory in the Washington Park and Arlington futurities. During the next two years Erb rode the colt to major victories, including the Arlington Classic, Clark Handicap, and Equipoise Mile.

Filling in for a suspended Bill Shoemaker, Erb rode Swaps to victory in the 1955 Californian at Hollywood Park. Swaps defeated 1954 Derby winner Determine in the world-record time of 1:40 $\frac{3}{4}$ for a mile and a sixteenth. Among the other prominent horses Erb rode to wins were Summer Tan in the Pimlico Special, Leallah in the Churchill Downs Handicap, Pucker Up in the Misty Isle Handicap, and Pardella in the Black Helen.

But of all the great horses he rode, Needles holds a special place in Erb's heart.

Erb rode for just three more years after Needles' Derby win before retiring from the saddle in 1959.

"I always had to fight weight," he said. "Finally, it just got to where I was reduced out. You couldn't get blood out of me anymore. That hot box was getting me. It eventually gets them all (jockeys) at some time or another."

Though he had not planned to move into training — he had no plans, actually — after he stopped riding, Erb soon started his second career, which lasted 28 years. The opportunity came in a call from Bull Hancock of Claiborne Farm, who told Erb that oilman Roger Wilson was interested in sending the former jockey some horses to handle. Erb trained primarily for Wilson and Darby Dan

Farm before opening a public stable in 1970. His best horses included Wilson's Hurry to Market, the champion two-year-old male of 1963. That season Hurry to Market defeated Roman Brother in the Garden States Stakes. In 1967 Erb saddled Wilson's filly Jet to Market to win the Fair Grounds Debutante, the Bewitch Stakes at Keeneland, the Debutante Stakes at Churchill Downs, and the Fashion Stakes at Belmont Park.

Erb acknowledges that Swaps was the most talented horse he rode, but it was Needles, his third and final Derby mount, who was the special one. Needles delivered the most important victory of them all and 50 years have not dulled the memories of that Saturday afternoon in 1956 at Churchill Downs.

By Mike Kane



Dave Erb

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gree were Epsom Derby winners Hyperion and Gainsborough.

Due to the timing of Ponder's retirement — in May 1952 — and return to Calumet, Needles was one of only five foals in the stallion's first crop in 1953.

Because Leach insisted that the three mares deliver their foals in Florida, Little opted out of the arrangement that had been brokered only a few months earlier. The mares went to Dickey Stables in Florida.

On April 29, 1953, Noodle Soup foaled a bay colt with a white star and two white stockings. Five weeks later the colt contracted severe pneumonia. Thanks to constant attention by Leach's wife, Madeline; veterinarian Dr. W. Reuben Brawner; and Roy Yates, a farm employee, the foal managed to survive. Because the Ponder colt had received so many injections when he was sick, Mrs. Leach suggested that he be named Needles.

A few years earlier, Heath and Dudley, two successful Oklahoma oilmen, had extended their business partnership to a small racing operation, D & H Stable. In 1950 Heath was introduced to Hugh Fontaine, a decorated World War I flying ace and a polo player who had saddled Ladysman to beat Equipoise in the 1934 Suburban Handicap and developed Brookmeade Stable's Handcuff into a top runner. At the time Fontaine was out of racing and selling boats in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

"He was kind of down on his luck when they first met him," Bonnie Heath III said. "He was living on a boat. I think Dad bought a powerboat, and they met Hugh Fontaine through a yacht broker."

With Fontaine as their guide, Dudley and Heath went to a horse sale. They intended to buy one horse but left with a few. Their wives, Phyllis Dudley and Opal Heath, selected the colors for the racing silks: Texas orange and Carolina blue. The first horse to

carry the D & H colors was Foster Son at the 1953 Hialeah Park meeting.

As a yearling in 1954, Needles was attracting some attention at Dickey Stables. One newspaper report described the son of Ponder as a nice-looking racing prospect. That winter, trainer Sherrill Ward selected him to receive the blue ribbon at the Florida Breeders' Baby Show. Heath and Dudley had heard about Needles through Fontaine, who had been touted on the colt by a former employee who now worked at Dickey Stables.

By then, though, Heath and Dudley were questioning whether they should stay in racing.



Needles as a stallion at Bonnie Heath Farm

"They had a few horses, but they weren't much count," Bonnie Heath III said. "In fact, they were wanting to get out of the business; they were wanting to sell their horses and just go on and do something else.

"Hugh Fontaine came to them and said, 'I want you all to buy this horse. If you don't buy him, I'm going to sell my car and mortgage my house.' That may or may not have been true, who knows? But they went for it and paid \$20,000 for Needles, which was a lot of money back then."

Needles made his debut on March 25, 1955, and won a 4½-furlong race at Gulfstream Park by five lengths, missing the track record by two-fifths of a second. He went on to win the Sapling Stakes at Monmouth Park and the prestigious Hopeful Stakes at Saratoga. By season's end he had six wins and two thirds from 10 starts, a pair of track records, and earnings of \$129,805. Needles and Nail were named co-

champion two-year-old colts because they each finished first in two of the four polls then used to determine year-end champions.

HE'S A RUNNER

Veteran jockey Dave Erb first spotted Needles in the \$282,000 Garden State Stakes at Garden State Park on Oct. 29. They were rivals that day: Erb was on Polly's Jet, who set the early pace before finishing ninth in what was then a top race in America for two-year-olds. On the way back to unsaddle, Erb made a point of looking at the tote board to find out the name of the third-place colt, who had made an impression as he ran by Polly's Jet.

After flying back to Florida, Erb contacted his agent, Eddie Rice, and asked him to talk to Fontaine about Needles.

"I said, 'See if you can't get me on that damn colt; he's a runner, that guy,'" Erb said.

Fontaine invited Erb to his barn to talk and Erb agreed to get on the colt a few times during training hours in the morning in what amounted to an audition. Erb passed. The test drives were necessary because Needles had developed a habit of training only when he felt like it. He stood. He stopped.

He kicked up his heels. He stood some more. Because the colt had been so successful, Fontaine decided to be patient and not risk breaking his spirit by pushing him too hard.

"He was just a sucker who had a mind of his own," Erb said. "You couldn't nudge him or try to force him to do anything. He had to be on his terms."

Needles and Erb began the 1956 season on Feb. 6 with a second-place finish in a seven-furlong allowance race at Hialeah. On Feb. 25 they rolled from well back to a 2¾-length win over Golf Ace in the mile and an eighth Flamingo Stakes. A month later they rallied again from far off the pace to win the Florida Derby at Gulfstream Park in track-record time. That race, run on March 24, was Needles' final prep for the Kentucky Derby.

Though Fontaine downplayed the time between races, insisting that Needles ran well fresh, the six-week break was discussed in the

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press leading up to the race. Still, Needles was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* the week of the Kentucky Derby and a preview article tagged Needles as the likely winner. All six of the prominent Turf writers *Sports Illustrated* asked to analyze the race, a group that included Charles Hatton of the *Morning Telegraph*, selected Needles. The article did not mention Needles being a Florida-bred.

Despite the long layoff between races (Needles is the last horse who did not have a start since March to win the Derby) and drawing the rail, Needles was the 8-5 favorite in the 82nd running of the Derby. Typically, he was well off the pace early — the chart shows him some 15 lengths back at one point of call — but the colt put in his usual run off the turn and in the stretch to overtake Calumet Farm's Fabius.

Two weeks later in the Preakness at Pimlico, Needles made his charge but failed to catch Fabius in the stretch and finished second by one and three-quarters lengths. Needles added a Belmont Stakes victory to his resume on June 16, winning by a neck over Career Boy.

RETURNING HOME

Needles made only two more starts, both on the grass, in 1956. He finished off the board in both races at Washington Park, but those losses did not affect his standing in the division and he was voted the three-year-old championship.

In 1957 Needles returned to competition at Gulfstream Park with a second-place finish by a nose in a small sprint handicap. He then ran third in the Gulfstream Park Handicap. In what turned out to be his final race, Needles won the Fort Lauderdale Handicap by two lengths, equaling the track record for a mile and a sixteenth with a time of 1:42.

Later in the year Fontaine announced the colt's retirement due to a nagging tendon problem. Needles finished with a record of 11 wins in 21 starts and earnings of \$600,355.

Dudley and Heath were ready. In his three seasons on the track, Needles had changed their view of the Thoroughbred breeding and racing business. Long before Needles retired,



Needles poses with owners Dudley (left) and Heath (right, both holding blanket) at a 1956 University of Florida football game

plans were in place to keep him in Florida. Bonnie Heath III said his father had purchased the farm on Feb. 8, 1956, three months before the Derby was run.

"Dad laughed later about how naïve they all were," Heath said. "In his mind when they bought the farm was that Needles was the co-champion two-year-old and he's going to win the Derby, so we need a place to stand him at stud ... He realized later how difficult this whole thing was."

According to Heath, one of the Kentucky breeders who made a play for Needles was Bull Hancock of Claiborne Farm.

"The story I always got," Heath said, "was they offered Dad and Dudley a quarter of a million bucks and two unraced two-year-olds that were at Hialeah. One of those two-year-olds was Round Table, as it turned out."

Heath and Dudley passed on the deals they received.

Decades later 93-year-old John Nerud, a monumental figure in the development of Florida breeding at Tartan Farm, chuckled as he delivered an old line:

"The Kentuckians said, 'You breed the alligators; we'll breed the horses. Don't try to breed any horses in Florida; it won't work.'"

Nerud was part of the vanguard of Florida breeders who blew away that theory. But before Nerud purchased part of the Heath farm to establish Tartan Farm for William

McKnight, there was Needles.

"When Needles won the Derby, Bonnie Heath and Jack Dudley did the same thing I did. They took the horse back to Florida," Nerud said. "They didn't take the big money; they bought a farm and started breeding."

Nerud acknowledged that Needles was a historic figure in the state's breeding program, not so much for what he produced, but for who he was.

"It was a big boost to Florida," Nerud said. "Of course, there weren't enough mares in Florida to supply him with the mares he needed. He never was a success, but, nevertheless, they were the pioneers who did it."

During 20 seasons at stud, Needles sired 320 foals, 21 of them stakes winners. Though he did not sire any champions, Needles was a dependable stallion: A remarkable 93 percent of his foals made at least one start and 73 percent of his foals were winners. Needles' foals won more than \$6.2 million in purses.

His real value to Florida breeders dwarfs those numbers. 🍀

During his 30-year newspaper career in upstate New York, Mike Kane won the Red Smith Kentucky Derby Writing Award a record five consecutive times. He is the communications officer at the National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.