



Spotlight On

DREW FLEMING



# READY *for the* CHALLENGE

NEW BREEDERS' CUP CHIEF DREW FLEMING  
STEERS EVENT DURING UNCERTAIN TIMES

By Jarrett Van Meter | Photos By Anne M. Eberhardt

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Three and a half minutes into the 1986 cult classic “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off,” the eponymous protagonist throws open his bedroom curtains, gazes up at the periwinkle blue sky, and wonders aloud, “How could I possibly be expected to handle school on a day like today?”

Swap the overlaid “Love Missile F1-11” track for a trumpeted “Call to Post” and the striped bathrobe for a sport coat, and find sixth-grader Drew Fleming living the every boy’s dream first immortalized by Matthew Broderick on the big screen in 1986. Invited by his best friend, Gatewood Bell, Fleming blew off school for a perfect October day at Keeneland. Though waiting until middle school to first experience Keeneland might be late by Kentucky standards, the indoctrination would serve as the origin of his long ascent to his current position as CEO of the Breeders’ Cup.

“I’m embarrassed to say it, it’s probably a sin to grow up in Lexington and not be able to visit Keeneland until I was in sixth grade,” said Fleming, decades later. “We’d obviously grown up going to Kentucky Derby parties, but it was really in sixth grade, actually seeing those animals for the first time, that I was just enamored. Another good friend of mine, Price Bell, always says, ‘You’ll always remember when a horse breathes on you.’ To be up close and personal with those amazing creatures, it changed my life.”



*Drew Fleming has worked closely on Breeders’ Cup preparations with Keeneland President and CEO Bill Thomason, right.*

Fleming was tapped as the new CEO of the Breeders’ Cup in November 2019 just ahead of an unforeseen and momentous junction in 2020: the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to host his first championships in his hometown and the COVID-19 pandemic. But whether it’s a late introduction to Keeneland or trying to put on a global showcase under unprecedented circumstances, Fleming has emerged from every step along his unique trajectory prepared and enthusiastic for what’s next.

He grew up in Lexington, but his family was not connected to the Thoroughbred world. His father is a tax lawyer and

his mother an elementary school teacher. Through friends like Bell, whose family owned and operated Jonabell Farm, Fleming received the majority of his early exposure to the industry. He spent his summer breaks in high school mowing at Wimbledon Farm and loved it, soaking up as much knowledge as he could from farm manager Brian O’Rourke. As his interest grew, so too did his unexcused absence tally from Henry Clay High School.

“I think our teachers quickly realized that if Keeneland was running in the spring or the fall and we were wearing a nice dress shirt to school that morning, it was likely



*Fleming and Breeders' Cup COO John Keitt work closely with their colleagues to develop different possible scenarios under which the 2020 event might unfold.*

that we would not be there that afternoon," said Fleming.

A good student whom Bell — now the president of Cromwell Bloodstock and a Breeders' Cup board member — recalls as having an "old soul," Fleming attended Washington and Lee University in Virginia, leading Lexington-to-Lexington caravans every October and April throughout his undergraduate years to be at Keeneland. He returned home to attend University of Kentucky's law school and, upon graduation, accepted a job at a national law firm focusing on corporate transactions. Only several months into Fleming's nascent law career and before he married his wife, Tiffany, Bell had come to him with an opportunity to get his first real taste of the horse industry.

"Gatewood called me and said he was interested in purchasing a horse," recalled Fleming. "I said I would love to be involved in it and took several months' paychecks and purchased a horse with him, I think much to my father's chagrin."

The ownership group for the purchase of Nina Fever consisted of Fleming, Bell, NFL player Wes Welker along with Bell's brother-in-law, Bret Jones, and Wesley Ward.

"I didn't have to ask him twice. I asked a bunch of other buddies and nobody really went for it, but he did and it was fun and lucky," said Bell. "That was the first horse I had ever purchased with my own money, so he probably just didn't want me to go under alone."

A year later Nina Fever was slated to run in her first Keeneland race. Fleming took his parents, invited his friends, and made a day out of the occasion. The anticipation mounted, the race went off, and Nina Fever won. To this day Fleming ranks the afternoon among the best days of his life.

"It was pretty surreal," said Bell. "I grew up here going to Keeneland. I had purchased a few inexpensive horses with Wesley Ward before. We didn't really have any expectations; it was just five good buddies in on a little filly together, so it was fun just having a day out. We couldn't really believe we had a runner at Keeneland, and then she won by eight or 10 (lengths). She looked like she was pretty nice, and it was just like 'holy cow that



was fun. Let's keep doing that.' The coolest racetrack in the town you grew up in and all your friends are there; it was just fun sharing that with lifelong friends. We didn't go into it wanting anything else."

Fleming had switched law firms to focus more on equine-related work at Stoll Keenon Ogden, handling transactions for both domestic and international owners, including stallion syndications, racing partnerships, and the sale and purchase of farms. He was taken under the wing of Bobby Watt, who oversaw the firm's Breeders' Cup legal work. Watt was winding down his career, and he groomed Fleming to take over his work. Fleming was still in the role of

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outside legal counsel to the Breeders' Cup in 2015 when the organization brought the championships to Lexington for the first time.

"It was a resounding success, and the cherry on top was having American Pharoah capture the Grand Slam of racing,"

said Fleming. "To see American Pharoah make the turn and come to the finish line at Keeneland with the crowd roaring on a beautiful day, that is my favorite Breeders' Cup memory to date. It was truly magical."

Two months later Fleming received an invitation from Craig Fravel, then the CEO of the Breeders' Cup and with whom he had built a relationship through his legal work for Breeders' Cup, to join him for a Christmas lunch. They met at Malone's, and Fleming could tell there was something on his friend's mind. They exchanged pleasantries as he tried to feel Fravel out.

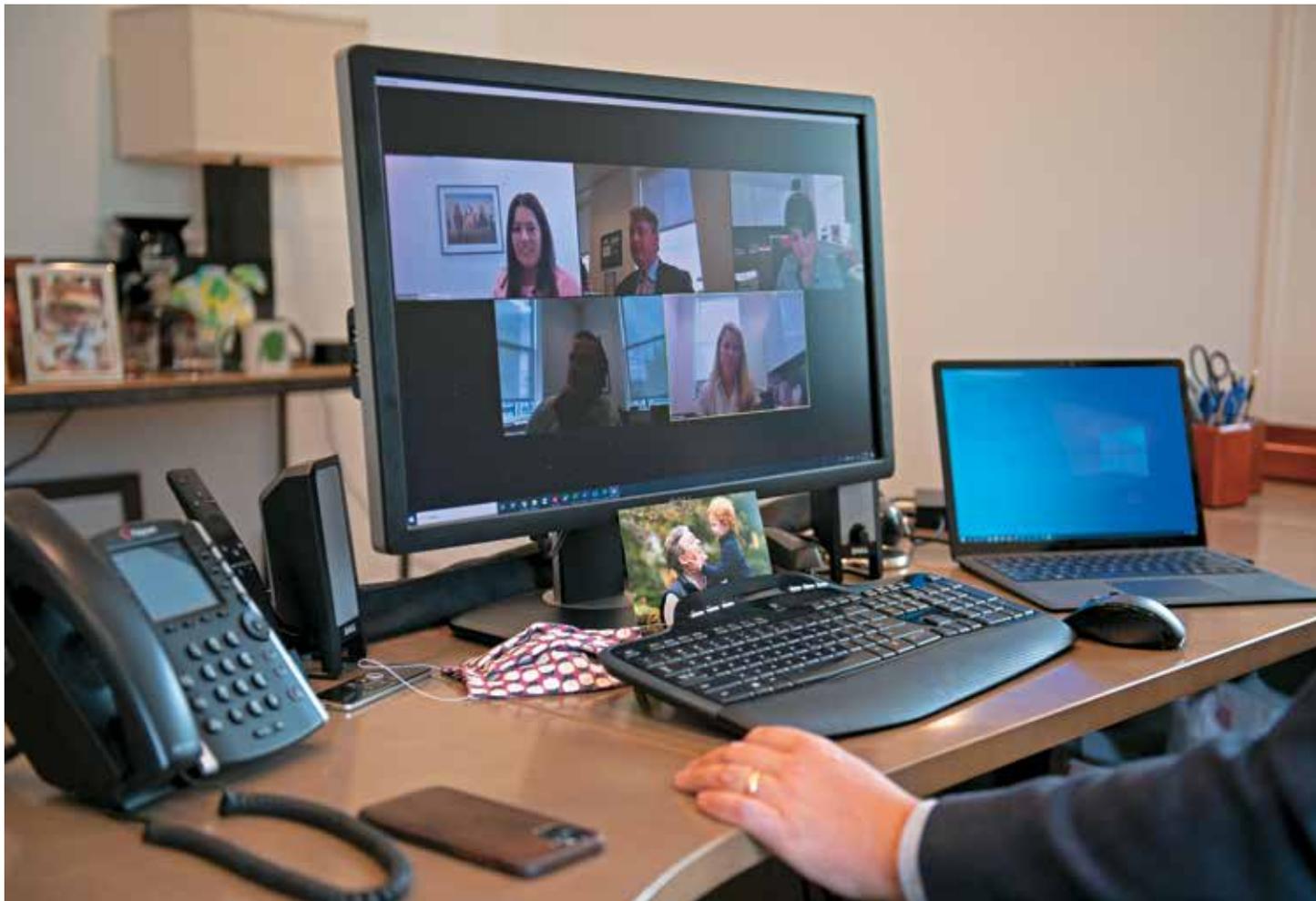
"It turned into a surprise job offer," said Fleming. "Craig never promised that I



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*Zoom meetings and conference calls have become the norm for Fleming and his staff.*

would be the CEO of the Breeders' Cup, but what he did promise was that he would mentor me and give me the Harvard education of horse racing."

Fleming asked for time to think about the offer, and Fravel obliged, only to invite him to meet again the following evening for drinks at Dudley's.

"So the press was on," Fleming said with a laugh. "The reason it resonated so much with me was because Craig said, 'I was in your shoes when I was a lawyer in my 30s and was presented a great opportunity to go work for Del Mar, so I am presenting you a similar opportunity.'"

Fravel had identified Fleming as a rising star of the Thoroughbred industry's next generation early in their working relationship. Once Fleming accepted the job as the Breeders' Cup senior vice president, Fravel took him along to attend every meeting, which is

how he himself had learned the ins and outs of the racing business at Del Mar.

"Drew has had a really good background from his legal practice from dealing with the breeder community and negotiating a lot of deals with respect to stallions and farm acquisitions, so he knew a lot of the players," said Fravel, now the CEO of racing operations for the Stronach Group. "He is a very personable, outgoing guy and has a great history in Lexington. When I started at Del Mar in 1990, I had eight years of legal practice under my belt, and I thought that Drew could bring those legal skills to bear at the Breeders' Cup and could hopefully evolve to kind of learning like I did on the job about the racing side of the equation and ultimately be in a position someday to take over."

Soon after Fleming joined the Breeders' Cup team, COO Bob Elliston accepted a position with Keeneland. Ahead of the 2016



Fleming's legal background and horse industry clientele helped prepare him for his tenure at the Breeders' Cup.

Breeders' Cup at Santa Anita, Fleming was suddenly asked to shoulder new responsibilities.

"Bob was presented with a wonderful opportunity to work with Keeneland and obviously couldn't pass that up, and I kind of lucked into a bigger role than initially anticipated," said Fleming.

Elliston's move lent even more serendipity to the decision to add Fleming to the team a few months prior.

"There's no doubt that was a baptism by fire because Bob had been involved in a great number of things," said Fravel of Fleming's summer of 2016. "It was a great opportunity for him [Elliston] to go, but somebody had to move right in. It was fortuitous that Drew was there and ready to jump in and pitch in."

Thus, when Fravel stepped down as CEO in late 2019 to move to Stronach, Fleming was ready.

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COVID-19 prevented Fleming from attending the Royal Ascot races this year, but he nevertheless enjoyed the televised version.



Thomason and Fleming meet at Keeneland often to discuss Breeders' Cup details.

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When he got the official nod to replace his mentor, the changeover was seamless.

“I was very fortunate to work under Craig,” said Fleming. “Craig mentored me and would take me to every meeting. We were involved, as it was very much a team atmosphere. So, it was a natural transition with everything he had done for me. Not a lot has changed. I am very fortunate to be surrounded by a great board. They are tremendously supportive, very insightful, and we built a very strong Breeders’ Cup team.”

Like everyone else, Fleming was forced to make adjustments in how he conducts business amid COVID-19 stay-at-home orders. The CEO position calls for frequent travel, but he has been forced to conduct almost all of the meetings that would normally take place in person around the country from his home office. Though he still dresses formally for each work day, his Zoom calls have not been without hiccups. On a recent call with Keeneland’s executive team, Fleming’s 5-year-old son, Hootie, wandered into the home office wearing only underwear.

“He was in the background, and it was fun seeing the expressions from Bill Thomason, Vince Gabbert, Bob Elliston, and Christa [Marrillia],” Fleming recalled with a laugh.

While the Breeders’ Cup is considering a number of possible scenarios for the event in November as the organization continues to gather new information, Fleming thinks with the team he has in place and a welcoming host city behind him, the event will be a success no matter the circumstances. Decades after serving as the de facto conduit between his best friend and the world of Thoroughbred racing, Gatewood Bell believes there is no better person for the job, especially amid unprecedented times.

“You’ve got to be smart,” Bell said of the role. “You’ve got to have good people skills. He’s trying to get everybody to work together, and it’s not always easy in any organization, but we’ve got a lot of big personalities and a lot of smart people in this industry. Being able to balance all of that and really be able to still do what’s right, it’s not easy.” **KM**

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