

The Backside of History

On the first Saturday in May, the stands are packed with hands holding mint juleps and heads covered by flamboyant hats. It's time for the Kentucky Derby and a record-setting 170,000 spectators huddled around the historic one-mile oval in 2019.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor

Directly across from the Twin Spires, a pair of eyes surrounded by weather-worn skin watch each race just the same as the spectators. He goes mostly unnoticed as he leans on the rail now that his work is done and the starting gates burst open.

Phil Tripp is a veterinarian by trade, a Thoroughbred enthusiast by passion and an Angus breeder exclusively by choice.

"We first moved here [Louisville, Ky.] in 1996 when the racetrack in Omaha, Neb., closed down," Tripp says. "Getting to work here every day is cool. It gives me the unique opportunity to work on some of the best horses in the world."

New Mexico to Nebraska

Tripp first laid eyes on racehorses in high school at the Raton, N.M., track. He's actually from Guymon, Okla., which is probably why he graduated from Oklahoma State University (OSU) in Stillwater.

"A high school classmate of mine had a brother-in-law that was a vet at the Raton racetrack, so I got to visit with him a little bit," Tripp says. "My brother is four years older than me and is also a vet. I got to hang out with him and his classmates while they were in vet school and I got to see what they were doing."

Prior to spending time with



veterinary students in Stillwater, Tripp wasn't exactly sure what career he wanted to pursue. His time on the track coupled with an interest in the medical side of horses led Tripp to get his DVM.

"Working on the racetrack is really fast paced, it's seven days a week and long hours, but it gets in your blood," Tripp says. "It's what I do."

When Tripp graduated from veterinary school, he launched his career as a contract veterinarian for racehorse trainers. He worked in New Mexico, Oklahoma and

Oaklawn Park in Hot Springs Ark.

"After about a few years, I started splitting my time between Oaklawn Park and the racetrack (AK-SAR-BEN) in Omaha," Tripp says. After AK-SAR-BEN closed, Tripp moved his young family to Louisville.

"Working on racehorses was always the plan. I was fortunate to get started in Raton, N.M., so when I graduated I had a job waiting for me," Tripp says. "I've been on the track ever since."

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Traveling practice

Tripp has never put roots down for his business, at least not in the traditional brick and mortar sense. Working from the back of his Chevrolet® Tahoe, Tripp splits his time between Oaklawn Park and Churchill Downs.

"Dr. Alex Harhill grew up here and worked on 28 Derby winners or something like that," Tripp says. "On three or four occasions he asked me to move here while I was still in Omaha. I finally took him up on it. He was very well respected around here and introduced me to a lot of people."

Perhaps it is because of Harhill that Tripp works for legendary Hall

of Fame Trainer D. Wayne Lucas – who has 14 Triple Crown wins under his belt – and Steve Asmussen, a two-time winner of the Eclipse Award for Outstanding Trainer with 8,000 wins to his name thus far. More than likely, it's Tripp's no-nonsense attitude and years of experience on the track that gets him such high-profile clients.

The reputation Tripp built for himself during his first fifteen years in Louisville led to a partnership with two other track veterinarians.

"The practice we have today has eight veterinarians and we work on about six different tracks," Tripp says. "Our home base is still here at

Churchill Downs. Our practice works for Bob Baffert and took care of American Pharoah and Justify, both Triple Crown winners."

Thoroughbreds and Angus

Tripp is naturally drawn to high-quality animals: both of the equine and bovine variety.

"I work here seven days a week, and I usually get to the barn around 4:30 every morning," Tripp says of the long days that pass quickly. "I usually leave around 5:30 at night."

Life as a veterinarian might be what Tripp enjoys as a career, but starting his Angus herd isn't work at all. Tripp says it is his therapy.



“I just go out there and relax, I can enjoy them for what they are,” Tripp says of his 40-head Angus cow herd. “I am not trying to take over any huge bull batteries or anything like that. Raising Angus cattle is just something I have always wanted to do, and I am getting to a point in life where I have the time and money to do it for fun.”

With Angus legends like Gordon and Anne (Patton) Schubert as close friends, Tripp is bound to build a herd his younger self always envisioned.

“Alex Tolbert has helped me buy some pretty nice donor cows to start off with, just to try and upgrade my

herd a bit,” Tripp says. “My goals are to produce some nicer females and sell a couple of bulls.”

After 35 years — and counting — on the race track, Tripp enjoys the opportunity to use artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET) with his cattle.

A whole different world

“The Thoroughbred industry is still completely live cover, there is no AI or ET,” Tripp says. “That’s part of what drives the industry, too.”

Everyone wants to breed to the grand champion bred-and-owned (B&O) heifer or the winner of the Kentucky Derby. That’s just a simple fact for both industries.

“Everyone can’t have a Kentucky Derby winner, but they can possibly breed to one,” Tripp says. “By making it live cover only, the Thoroughbred industry preserves some of their genetic base. It makes it a lucrative business for those stud owners.”

The Thoroughbred industry sticks to some of their older traditions by retaining this rule. At the same time, cattle producers lead the progressive charge as far as the reproductive side of things goes.

“It is neat to see the product of people’s ideas when it comes to mating decisions with the horses,” Tripp says. “It’s also fun to play around with the cattle genetics, but it’s just a whole different world because of the technology.”

Working on world-class athletes on the tracks has given Tripp the unique

opportunity to perform the type of procedures not seen on horses in any other profession.

“It’s exciting times in both cattle and horses for me,” Tripp says. “The stuff we are doing these days on both species, we wouldn’t have even thought about doing when I was a young man.”

The every day

Most days are fairly similar: treating respiratory ailments, lameness issues and giving lots of fluids through IV.

“We come in and work for individual trainers, so every day we make rounds to check with the trainers and see what they have going on that day,” Tripp says.

But occasionally, they get to see something out of the ordinary. Tripp has had the privilege of working on top runners at Churchill Downs.

“I worked on Rachel Alexandra and she won the Kentucky Oaks. She won that race by over 20 lengths,” Tripp says of the 2006 filly. “When she won that race, that was the only time I have ever gotten goose bumps watching a race.”

Tripp remembers thinking to himself, “I’ll never see something like this again in my lifetime.”

Crazier things have happened. For now, Tripp simply plans to keep doing what he does best at Churchill Downs. It’s also in the cards to spend his free time with his leading Angus ladies out in the pastures at home in the Bluegrass State. **AJ**