



Where dreams are real

David and JoAnn Hayden have created one unlikely success after another at their Dark Hollow Farm in Maryland.

Story by John Eisenberg. Photographs by Barbara D. Livingston.

A fledgling breeder isn't supposed to take three weanlings to his first sale at Keeneland and come home with nearly a half-million dollars in his pocket. But David Hayden did.

Nor is a breeder supposed to claim a mare for \$11,500, watch her break down in her first race back, but then have her produce one of the top female sprinters of all time. Hayden and his wife, JoAnn, experienced that two decades ago with their mare Safely Home and her daughter Safely Kept.

The Haydens' long, improbable and ongoing success story is full of events to which the only appropriate response is, "That's not supposed to happen!" But with persistence and hard work, the Haydens, owners of Dark Hollow Farm in Upperco, Md., have risen from humble beginnings to become top breeders, producing valuable, first-class sales horses year after year.

"We didn't have anything when we started—no family money, no background in the sport, nothing," JoAnn Hayden says. "We've worked really hard, but we owe everything to the horses. That's why we take such good care of them."

David, 66, and JoAnn, 62, who have been married for 42



years, experienced yet another "That's not supposed to happen!" moment this past June when they exhibited both the grand and reserve champions at the 75th annual Maryland Horse Breeders Association Yearling Show judged by stellar bloodstock agent Buzz Chace. Only once before in the event's history had an owner taken home the top two trophies in the same year.

"It was a huge deal for me. I was over the top about it," says JoAnn Hayden, who retired from teaching elementary school a decade ago to help run Dark Hollow.

The yearling show grand champion (who, like the reserve champion, is an offspring of red-hot sire Malibu Moon) sold for \$400,000 at Keeneland's September Yearling sale—quite a feat for an auction where many breeders took a blood bath. The colt's dam, Kinlin (by

Unbridled), is as yet unproven as a producer, but has the credentials as a half-sister to multiple graded winner Dubleo, from the family of champion Rubiano and 2008 leading freshman sire Tapit.

That the Haydens continue to survive and even thrive in this economic climate is perhaps their ultimate "That's not supposed to happen!" development.

"It's not easy right now, no question," says David, who serves many horse-related accounts with his original business, David Hayden Advertising. "Will the market ever bounce back to where it was? No one knows. But \$400,000, in this market, that's fine. We'll gladly take that. Through the years we have developed a lot of good relationships and a good track record. When you're at a sale and you overhear an agent telling a potential buyer,

"These people breed race horses,' you feel good. Hopefully it can keep us going."

Dark Hollow, originally just five acres, now includes almost 170 acres on two different properties in northern Baltimore County. David and JoAnn Hayden share the task of running the farm and overseeing the breeding program. David Hayden handles the breeding decisions and sales transactions.

JoAnn Hayden oversees the care of the horses with the help of seven full-time employees, including farm manager John Foster and his assistant, Jennifer Parsons, and David Richardson, the farm's office manager, who also manages Hayden's advertising agency from its headquarters located atop one of the barns.

The heart of the Haydens' program is the 15 broodmares they own either by themselves or in partnership with clients and friends, their band including stalwarts such as Kinlin and Group 1 producer Delta Danielle.

"A good portion" of the mares, David says, are bred to Kentucky stallions every year and then returned to Maryland to deliver their foals at Dark Hollow. The farm's horse population fluctuates between 40 and 60. Most of the young-



David Hayden looks on as JoAnn Hayden checks over the Malibu Moon filly who earned the reserve championship at this year's MHBA Yearling Show. Farm manager John Foster holds the youngster, who is a half-sister to Maryland-bred champion Ready's Image (out of Clever Phrase, by Clever Trick).

sters are sold at Keeneland or Timonium.

"It's a passion, our passion. Once it gets into your blood, it's hard to get out," says David Hayden.

The Haydens grew up in modest circumstances, in families that lived in row houses in Edmondson Village, a West Baltimore neighborhood. Taking a liking to show horses as a young man, David painted fences and cut grass to pay for his riding time at a nearby stable. After graduating from the Maryland Institute College of Art, he went to work at an advertising agency while JoAnn started teaching.

"We got married on a shoe-string and didn't own a TV set," David Hayden says.

They bought a couple of horses to ride and were boarding them with their farrier when David started his own advertising agency and began to make more money. Then he experienced an epiphany while

watching the 1973 Belmont Stakes on television.

"As Secretariat ran away from the field, I thought to myself, 'Wow, I want one of those,'" he recalls. "That's how naïve I was—I thought horses enough that you could go get one. So we started claiming and racing horses in Maryland. It was exciting. Once we got going, there was no going back to the show horse world."

In 1976, the Haydens bought their first race horse, Great Grandma Rose, and she became their first winner. By then they were already living at an early version of Dark Hollow Farm, where they set up shop with their show horses in the early 1970s.

Still the race horse operation brought a marked change of pace. "Those days proved to be a great education for us," JoAnn Hayden recalls. "We took care of everything while we worked two jobs. I was teaching; David was doing

advertising. We took care of the horses ourselves, with no help. You learn quickly. We did the fencing. David dug the post holes. My uncle and father built an addition to the barn. Help was a luxury we couldn't afford. You got up early, fed the horses, mucked the stalls, went to work, came home, exercised the horses. On the weekends we went full tilt."

Playing the claiming game on a modest level, the Haydens frequented the winner's circle in the 1970s and early 1980s, but then David Hayden experienced another epiphany when he saw a claiming mare he had lost for \$6,000 sell for \$160,000 at a sale at Keeneland.

"It was like, 'Whoa, what is happening here? Maybe I need to try doing this differently,'" he says.

He started focusing on breeding rather than racing, picking up fillies with residual value as broodmares.

"Over the years we've knocked the ball out of the

park on mares we didn't pay much money for," David Hayden says.

They started out selling their horses mostly locally, and by 1992 their program was far enough along for them to take three weanlings to the Keeneland November sale. It was their first foray to Kentucky. David's friends told him he was nuts. He was an ad guy from Baltimore. His wife taught school. Keeneland wasn't for people like them.

The three weanlings sold for a combined \$482,000. The trio consisted of Safely Kept's half-sister by Dayjur named Summer Saga (sold for \$330,000); a Forty Niner colt, Nine Innings, out of Safely Kept's half-sister Safe At the Plate (\$100,000); and a Devil's Bag colt, The Devil's Wonder, out of Joanie's Princess (\$52,000).

Actually, Dark Hollow Farm had already sealed a national reputation when those horses stepped onto the grounds at Keeneland.



Run-in shed at Safely Home reflects the ultimate in customized design (above). Its interior (right) contains seven stalls.

A dozen years earlier, at now-defunct Bowie race course, David and JoAnn Hayden had claimed Safely Home (by the obscure stallion Winning Hit). She appealed to them because of her hard-hitting race record—41 wins or placings in 73 career starts.

They bred Safely Home to the stalwart Maryland stallion Horatius for a \$2,000 fee in 1985, and the resulting foal, the muscular Safely Kept, exhibited brilliant speed early in her 2-year-old season. The Haydens sold her in the midst of her juvenile campaign for \$300,000 to Barry Weisbord, the New Jersey racing entrepreneur, and several partners, and she went on to win a career total of 22 stakes.

Runner-up in the \$1 million 1989 Breeders' Cup Sprint Stakes-G1 after being caught at the wire by Dancing Spree, she earned an Eclipse Award that season as the nation's champion sprinter. The next year,

at age 4, she came back to win the Breeders' Cup Sprint in a spectacular stretch duel with European champion Dayjur. The first sprinter ever to surpass \$2 million in earnings, Safely Kept continues to rank as the leading Maryland-bred female money-earner, with \$2,194,206.

"Her success was the most important thing that ever happened to us as breeders," David Hayden says. "It gave us credibility and laid the groundwork for everything that has followed."

With Safely Home as their anchor mare, the Haydens expanded their program and started turning up at Keeneland and Timonium almost every year with attractive horses who sold well and went on to perform well at the races.

"From the horse show world we always had a sense of conformation," JoAnn Hayden says. "Before we knew pedigree, we knew that pretty



and athletic sells. If it looks attractive, it's appealing. If you look at all of our broodmares, they're beautiful specimens. It's not that you can't fall in love with horses that are unattractive, but we just gravitate toward big, attractive horses."

Through the 1980s and '90s, the Haydens had gradually expanded Dark Hollow, buying up surrounding land until the property consisted of about 70 acres enhanced by a barn, free walker and pastures as well as the Haydens' home. Then, a decade ago, when JoAnn retired and became more involved, they purchased 75 acres of undulating fields some four miles away and put up new

barns, sheds and pastures. Now a showplace facility, with an additional 18 leased acres, the new division of Dark Hollow is known as Safely Home.

JoAnn Hayden supervises the day-to-day operation of both facilities.

"JoAnn's passion is a lot more hands-on than mine," David Hayden says. "Her attention to detail when it comes to horses is unparalleled. I like to say she could see a gnat on an elephant's butt from three miles away."

Horses shuttle between the two sites, although foaling and sales prep is concentrated at the main farm. Young horses mostly live outside as they



Scenes from Safely Home (from top): Overlooking the fields, the gate at the main entrance, a hay storage shed reflected in nearby pond. Above, assistant farm manager Jennifer Parsons mudds a weanling.

mature into sales prospects, spending time in the free walker, learning to have hose water sprayed on them and dining on quality feed.

“From day one, we have fed all of our horses Omolene 200 and alfalfa hay,” says David Hayden. “People ask us—“Try this and try that. We don’t see any reason to change. It works for us.”

“We take care of these horses better than I take care of my children,” says Parsons, who has worked at Dark Hollow for a decade.

Foster says, “They’re all treated the same here, get the same feed, the same supplements, whether they’re a top seller or not. All horses should be given an equal chance to show their best. That is what David and JoAnn want. We sell what we raise. David and JoAnn don’t run a volume operation. They want to make sure every horse gets the individual attention it needs.”

Dark Hollow has produced enough successful horses to fill any breeder’s scrapbook. Although Safely Kept remains its greatest triumph, the Haydens have bred (on their own and in partnership) and/or raised nearly a dozen graded stakes winners, including:

- Our New Recruit (by Alphabet Soup), winner of the 2004 \$2 million Golden Shaheen-G1 in Dubai who was in utero when the Haydens advised Maryland owner Tom Graul on the purchase of his dam, Delta Danielle (by Lord Avic), for \$40,000 at the 1999 Keeneland January sale. The Haydens added the mare to their broodmare band in 2002 when Graul got out of the horse business.

- Partner’s Hero (by Danzig), a speedy half-brother to Safely Kept who won the Kentucky Cup Sprint-G2, four other stakes races and more than \$500,000 in the late 1990s and is now at stud in Pennsylvania. Partner’s Hero’s top two runners are millionaire Heros Reward, winner of numerous Maryland-bred championship titles and his home state’s Horse of the Year in 2007, and champion Maryland-bred 3-year-old New York Hero,

winner of the 2003 Lane’s End Stakes-G2, bred by the Haydens and William Beatson.

- Ready’s Image, who ranked as the nation’s top 2-year-old through the summer of 2007 while leading the charge for young sire More Than Ready. A standout from his earliest days, Ready’s Image won his class at the MHBA Yearling Show judged by trainer Tim Ritchey and was sold by the Haydens for \$410,000 at the Keeneland September Yearling sale. His Malibu Moon half-sister (out of Clever Phrase, by Clever Trick) was the 2009 MHBA Yearling Show reserve champion.

The champion Maryland-bred 2-year-old male of 2007, Ready’s Image—now at stud in Kentucky—also helped David Hayden hit a home run as an original shareholder in More Than Ready. Although he no longer participates in that arena, Hayden has had remarkable success buying and selling shares in Kentucky stallions. Another of his success stories involves Dixie Union.

The parade of horses coming out of Dark Hollow includes 29 stakes winners and 40 additional stakes-placed runners.

“Our horses go to some of the top trainers in the country, which really helps our program because it gives them a legitimate shot,” David Hayden says. “Todd Pletcher has purchased five from us, and four of those are graded stakes-placed and three are graded stakes winners. It’s really nice when people come back to you. In 2008 we sold four down at Keeneland, and all four were bought by people who had purchased foals out of those same mares the previous year, so they were all repeat customers.”

While the big-name horses fuel their livelihood, the Haydens seemingly get just as much pleasure from the success of some of their lesser-known youngsters, such as a current 2-year-old named Work for a Cure.

As a weanling, Work for a Cure (by Oratory), a half-brother to Our New Recruit, accidentally flipped over and suffered nerve damage. A veterinarian



Fields at Safely Home (above) and detail from the roof peak on the run-in shed (right). Purchased 10 years ago as an adjunct to Dark Hollow Farm, Safely Home is named for the Haydens' foundation broodmare.

said he probably was blind in one eye. The Haydens brought in an acupuncturist to stimulate his nerves as fluid was drained from his hocks. Treated no differently than the farm's healthy horses, he received time on the free walker as he matured, and when he was evaluated before going to sale, he performed well on an obstacle course. He sold for \$8,000, even though the Haydens warned potential buyers about his questionable vision.

"The buyer, John Salzman Sr., said, 'He doesn't run with his eyes, he runs with his heart and legs,'" JoAnn Hayden says.

Work for a Cure has already broken his maiden and placed in the Continental Mile at Monmouth Park.

"You can't jump to conclusions," says JoAnn Hayden. "You hope with pedigree and conformation that you're going to have a superstar, but you have to look at what you have. We just look at each individual and see where they are and try to take them to their highest potential, whatever that's going to be. We deal every day with

the little things. We take the horses' temperatures every day, so we're on top of anything that develops. Steve Bright, our farrier, comes every two weeks, not every two months, to watch them walk and make subtle corrections. The babies are mudded three times a week. Little things like that, done on a daily basis, make a significant difference down the road."

Of the 18 yearlings the Haydens sold in 2008, 17 are named and 13 have started racing, according to JoAnn Hayden. Six have won, four others have placed, and three are stakes-placed. The Haydens plan to start racing more of their homebreds because of the faltering auction market, but their primary focus will remain their breeding program.

They're also involved in racing at the policy level. JoAnn Hayden serves on the board of the Maryland Horse Breeders Association. David Hayden, a former MHBA board member, has also served as a trustee of the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association (TOBA) and member of the

National Thoroughbred Racing Association (NTRA) communications committee. This past spring, he was appointed to the Maryland Racing Commission.

"It's a huge privilege," David says of his commission post. "I was excited when I was asked and even more excited when I was confirmed. I think it's helpful to people on the commission who don't know a lot about horses to have someone who brings a perspective from both the breeding and racing sides of the business. I understand both."

John Franzone, chairman of the racing commission, says, "David is one of the true gems of Maryland racing. Bringing him in [to the commission] is like hitting the trifecta. He is obviously an extremely successful breeder, but also an outstanding horseman. He's an open, honest person who knows when to hold them and when to fold them. But even if he didn't know anything about

horses, he's just an intelligent person who could listen to any side of any issue and make the right decision on how to proceed."

Between serving on the commission and running a farm, ad business and breeding program, David Hayden is as busy as he's ever been. And that's how he likes it.

"I always have to have something going, a new project or something, or I go crazy," he says. "We've been very fortunate, so we can kind of do what we want when we want now. We're not young anymore, but we're not 'old old.' We don't act 'old old.' We're still going."

JoAnn Hayden says with a smile, "When he says he needs to have a project, he doesn't mean painting shutters. David has big vision. He needs to build a building, do something major. He can look at a raw piece of land, raise an idea in his head and actually make it happen. And he's always thinking, 'If we sell a horse, [the money] goes back into the farm.' He puts it into some kind of project. It keeps the wheels rolling around here, keeps us looking for another horse, another project. And on it goes." ✨