



KEITH Desormeaux was raised right. There were bumps in the road, sure, but he absorbed each one, squirreling them away. He knew they would come in handy on a rainy day.

Truth is, all six Desormeaux kids were well-reared. The fact that each has a first name that begins with “K” has nothing to do with karma, although it well could.

Karma, as Webster defines it, has its origin in Hinduism and Buddhism and is “the sum and the consequences of a person’s actions during the successive phases of his existence, regarded as determining his destiny.”

Other than that, there is no specific reason all the names begin with “K.” “My mother started with ‘K’ and just followed suit,” Keith Desormeaux said. “I guess she liked the idea of all the names beginning with ‘K.’”

For Desormeaux, it was inevitable that he become a Thoroughbred trainer. But it was more than fate that he emerged as a rising star in one of the most competitive, time-consuming vocations on the face of the earth. Vacations, days off, a night at the movies, an afternoon at the mall are rarer than a triple dead heat.

Desormeaux, who goes by J. Keith when listed as a trainer in racing publications and track programs, at 48 is the oldest of the six children. Then comes Kent, 45; Kristie, 43; Kelli, 38; Kalen, 36, and youngest brother Kip, 35. The “J” in Keith’s race track handle stands for John.

Mom and dad Desormeaux, Brenda and Harris, in their early 70s, are “strong as ever” back in the town where their kids were born – Lafayette, Louisiana, a rural farming community. Keith and Kent, a three-time Kentucky Derby winner and a member of racing’s Hall of Fame since 2004, were raised in nearby Maurice, described as “a tiny unincorporated hamlet just south of Lafayette with a U.S. Census population of 967 in 2011.”

It wasn’t exactly Tara, but basic family values prevailed. Frankly, they did give a damn.

“Both my parents had very strong influences on us,” Desormeaux said. “My mother might have been more boisterous, but both were equally effective. Daddy was there to bring home the bacon and



KEITH DESORMEAUX

provide the discipline and Mom was there for our everyday needs and guidance. We had the sound structure a good family should have.

“My dad was mostly a self-employed entrepreneur,” Desormeaux said. “He did everything from multi-level marketing right out of college with Amway to selling for Harvestores, which provided feed grain silos for the local cattle industry. That was in the first couple years of his life. But their mainstay was in real estate.

“He went on to several other areas, and that’s how we got involved in horseracing. My father thought going into the horseracing business was a good idea, and that’s when

Keith Desormeaux aim is to win top-class races with racehorses that don’t cost a top price – and he is achieving that goal on one of the toughest circuits in racing.

WORDS: ED GOLDEN
PHOTOS: HORSEPHOTOS

Kent and I caught the bug. I was in my early teens at the time and Kent was maybe nine or 10. We did not come up as generational horse people. We didn’t own racehorses.

“It was just a time during my dad’s multidimensional period of earning a living. He dabbled with racehorses and went so far as to open a bush track in the Lafayette area called Acadiana Downs. And when he dedicated his time and effort to opening a racetrack, you knew his two oldest boys were going to be involved.

“But my dad’s time in racing lasted only two or three years. It became too mercurial and there was no way he could remain in a business like that, because he had to support his ever-growing family. He got out, but Kent and I remained. Obviously, the fire had been lit.



Swipe is led on to the track prior to finishing second in the Grade 1 FrontRunner Stakes at Santa Anita in September

“But it leveled off there for a while, because we had to concentrate on school; at least I did. For me, it was school and sports. I was a very avid basketball and baseball player, played shortstop, second base, and was All-District as a catcher in my senior year at North Vermillion High School in Maurice.

“Kent and I had fun together in sports. We kept each other active but I had no competition from him. Remember, you’re talking about three years difference, which is a lifetime between a 12-year-old and a 15-year-old or an eight-year-old and an 11-year-old. Kent was already a little pipsqueak, and I wasn’t the biggest guy in the world, but I had him beat by 50 pounds, so it was no contest. But we were pretty scrappy and enjoyed challenging each other.

“Kent and our cousin, Blair Hebert, who we were real close with, used to challenge me two-on-one.

“When I finished high school, horses were secondary in my mind. I was going to college to become a vet. I started at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (USL), but during the first year I discovered a college in northern Louisiana called Louisiana Tech which offered an animal science degree along with an equine specialty course on racehorses.

“You got to work hands-on at a track barn while you were in college, getting the racetrack experience while studying for an animal science degree, and it just seemed like something very interesting, so after one year at USL, I finished my college at Louisiana Tech.”

Keith Desormeaux earned a degree in animal science and after graduating, went to Maryland, eventually becoming an assistant to his mentor-to-be, trainer Charlie Hadry, in 1988-89.

Desormeaux moved from California to Texas in 1997 when Lone Star Park opened,



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harvesting a crop of new owners who helped jumpstart his career. Peter L. Cantrell of Cantrell & Associates, a CPA corporation out of Dallas, joined Desormeaux in 2005 and has stayed through thick and thin, “even the hard times in 2008 when I was down to eight horses, and he is a major player with me now,” Desormeaux said.

Today, the apex is in view, thanks to Keith’s self-taught acumen acquired through

a quarter century of equine education that focuses on getting the biggest bang for his buck.

“Not to sound like I’m tooting my own horn, but being successful, to me, is winning graded stakes and high-level allowance races on one of the toughest circuits in the world with horses that didn’t cost a million dollars,” Desormeaux said. “We’re winning at a high percentage and accumulating purse money that ranks us right up there with the top stables in the land. At the sales, I look for a top-class Thoroughbred without having to pay a top-class price.

“It’s how I survived. I haven’t perfected it, but we are competing on one of the toughest circuits in the country with horses that basically other horsemen passed on. It’s taken me more than two decades to hone that skill.

“You could say I’ve got an eye for a horse, but it didn’t come naturally. It took 25 years of dedicating myself to looking at the qualifications of what makes a good horse.

“I heard someone say about a trainer recently, ‘He’s a good, young horseman.’ There’s no such thing, because you can only acquire the decision-making process through experience. Horsemanship can only be learned through a lifetime of dedication. You can’t just be born with horsemanship.

“If I took you down my shedrow and told you the purchase price of each horse, you’d be flabbergasted. I’ve got plenty of horses more expensive than Texas Red, but the average purchase price is between \$10,000 and \$50,000.

“That, to me, is the interesting part of my ascendency. That, plus the fact that drug regulations are becoming more strict, allowing real horsemen to come to the fore again.”



Texas Red wins the 2014 Breeders’ Cup Juvenile with Desormeaux’s brother Kent in the saddle



Desormeaux's name glittered on racing's global marquee after he saddled Texas Red to a 13-1 upset in the \$2 million Breeders' Cup Juvenile at Santa Anita in 2014, with brother Kent guiding the son of Afleet Alex to a smashing 6½-length victory.

Other promising stakes winners among the 28 head Desormeaux has in training include Exaggerator, winner of the Grade 2 Saratoga Special in 2015; Landaluce winner Right There; Uzziel, winner of the C.E.R.F. Stakes at Del Mar this summer; Crucero, who uncharacteristically ran back in a week to capture the San Juan Capistrano Stakes at 23-1 last June at Santa Anita; and Swipe, a \$5,000 yearling who won the Summer Juvenile Championship at Los Alamitos and was second in the Grade 2 Best Pal Stakes and the Grade 1 Del Mar Futurity this year.

Desormeaux owns 20 percent of Texas Red, 30 percent less than what he initially intended when the yearling colt consigned by Three Chimneys Sales to the Keeneland Sales was purchased for \$17,000 in September 2013. Eric Brehm bought Texas Red on behalf of a partnership that included Desormeaux, Wayne Detmar, Lee Michaels, and Gene Voss. Each owns 20 percent.

Desormeaux shared this anecdote on the purchase of Texas Red: "The horse looked so good to me at the sale he stood out like a sore thumb," Keith said. "He was offered on the eighth or ninth day of the sale, but to me, he was just a physical masterpiece. I couldn't believe a horse that looked that good went so late in the sale.

"But I guess we caught him at the right time. Afleet Alex was hot and cold and the dam (Ramatuella) hadn't produced much, so regardless of how good he looked, people might have shied away from his pedigree.

"But that's why I'm there. I overlook pedigree in a lot of instances. Anyway, as soon as the gavel dropped on the horse, I called Eric and told him I wanted 50 percent and he said, 'No problem.'

"Then three weeks later Eric calls me and says, 'I hope you don't mind, but I brought

in a couple of partners on this horse.' Eric was financing the whole deal so who was I to say don't do it, so I just went along with it and my 50 percent went down to 20 percent."

Desormeaux's major client is Matt Bryan, an oil distribution magnate from Dallas, who campaigns as Big Chief Racing Stables. He stunned the racing world in 2013 when \$82,000 Ocala Breeders Sale purchase I've Struck a Nerve won the \$400,000 Risen Star Stakes at odds of 135-1, paying \$272.40 to win.

"Bryan came on board with 100 percent enthusiasm for top-quality horses," Desormeaux said. "He made a major investment and that's why my stable nearly doubled from 15 to almost 30 in two years. Matt's investment compared to the average owner at this level is minuscule. He never bought a horse for more than \$100,000, but he's won several \$100,000 races.

"As far as I'm concerned, Matt is my number one investor and I consider him a close friend."

Texas Red missed the 2015 Triple Crown series due to an abscess on his right front foot. Desormeaux wasn't dissuaded by the disappointment. Refreshingly forthright in a game where truth is sometimes sentenced to life behind bars, Desormeaux took it in his stride and promptly devised a plan that came to fruition.

Texas Red was turned out, given the time he needed to recover, and was pointed for the Grade 3 Dwyer Stakes at Belmont on July

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4. He ran second, but came back to win the Grade 2 Jim Dandy on August 1, providing solace and sustenance.

Keith's son, Bailey, 23, loves racing but does not plan to follow in his family's footsteps.

"He hasn't chosen to pursue that occupation," Keith said, "but if at some time he becomes a successful business man, he'll definitely own horses. But he didn't get involved enough as a child to partake in the business every day.

"He played football in high school and was a wide receiver in college at TCU (Texas Christian University). He didn't get a whole lot of playing time but he did make the traveling squad. He graduated and he's in the real world now."

Blood might not be thicker than water in this instance, but Keith Desormeaux does receive valued assistance in his day-to-day operation from his girlfriend of four years, Julie Clark.

"She's an integral part of our team," Desormeaux said. "There are many reasons for our success, and she's one of them. She's a great horseman and a good sounding board. She listens to my ideas and reaffirms my evaluations. I respect not only her opinion, but her physical contributions at the barn.

"Texas Red and Exaggerator are among the stakes winners in her care. I couldn't do it without her. We met at the 2011 October Fasig-Tipton Sales in Lexington where she was buying horses with a friend of mine."

Desormeaux envisions bigger and better things for racing's heavyweight venues in the future, and, if he had his druthers, better horses and fewer drugs.

"I think racing is trending more towards the boutique meets, more Santa Anitas, more Keenelands, more Churchills, more Del Mars, more Saratogas," he said. "That's the way of the world, it seems. I think less racing with more quality horses would be good for everyone.

"I also hope we keep trending towards less drug use. It's not only good for us as horsemen to compete on an even keel, but it's also great for breeders, because when horses are competing drug-free, the breeders' product becomes more desirable."

Desormeaux, meanwhile, braced by solid family values, continues towards the next horizon, with any potential hurdles to be vanquished through his confidence and enthusiasm.

"We were all raised Catholic," he said. "It was part of our upbringing as much as horses and sports. The family went to church every week and although as kids we didn't particularly care to go, we didn't have a choice.

"Even though it's not the most fun thing as kid, I think it does instill values that help you cope when tough times do occur. That's one thing religion is all about: having faith to help fight through the tough times."

Keith Desormeaux: You gotta love his story. It's as inspirational as a Souza march. ■

