

# Year of classic dreams

Pennsylvanians Roy and Gretchen Jackson race homebred Barbaro and bred European star George Washington \_\_\_\_\_ by Mike Curry

**E**XPERIENCED HORSEMEN understand that the path to the Kentucky Derby (G1) can be as bumpy as a twin-engine plane chugging through a volatile storm front, but nothing could have prepared owners and breeders Roy and Gretchen Jackson for their first taste of the often-perilous Triple Crown trail.

The Jacksons chartered a flight from their winter vacation in the Bahamas to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to watch their undefeated homebred Barbaro make his first main-track start in the Holy Bull Stakes (G3) at Gulfstream Park on February 4. The couple embarked on the short trip at noon—plenty of time to reach Gulfstream by the seventh race when their Lael Stables' High Court (Brz) was scheduled to contest the Suwanee River Handicap—aboard a twin-engine Navajo plane that seats six passengers.

"Halfway to Fort Lauderdale, the pilot tells us, 'Be sure your seat belts are tight, because it's going to be bumpy from here on in,'" Gretchen Jackson said, recalling the impending collision with a storm off the Florida coast. "It was hair-raising.

"They closed the Fort Lauderdale airport, so we couldn't land. We had to turn back and go back to Nassau [Bahamas] to refuel. Halfway to Nassau, the pilot said that they opened the airport again, so we went back through the doggone front again."

With beverage glasses strewn all over the cabin, the Navajo turned around and set course for a second confrontation with the storm. "When we were in a holding pattern, that plane was bouncing around like you wouldn't believe," Roy Jackson said. "We were going through the [storm] and out again, through the

thing and out again."

After arriving at Gulfstream shaken and very late, but intact, the couple discovered that their reserved



Matthew Given photo

## Roy and Gretchen Jackson

**Farm:** Lael Farm, West Grove, Pennsylvania

**Residences:** Bahamas, Lael Farm

**Best horses bred and/or raced:** Barbaro, Belle Cherie (in partnership with Belle Meadows Farm), George Washington, Grandera (in partnership with Viv Shelton), Holy Ground, Palace Revolt, Showing Up, Storm Dream (Ire), Superstar Leo

table had been given away and the Suwanee was moved off the turf due to rain, forcing High Court to be scratched. Fortunately for the Jacksons, Barbaro barreled through the slop to a three-quarter-length triumph in the Holy Bull, remaining unbeaten and stamping himself a true Derby contender. He is expected to make his next start in the Florida Derby (G1) on April 1.

"The best thing was we didn't care about eating or anything, we were mainly there to see the race and that was phenomenal that he was able to pull it off," Gretchen said. "We weren't nervous at all before the race because we had just been sweating bullets coming into the airport."

The Jacksons hung on every word from winning jockey Edgar Prado, who praised Barbaro's determination, and chatted with winning trainer Michael Matz. Officially stricken with Derby fever, the Jacksons, who have been married for 46 years, floated back to the airport to resume their vacation.

As Roy and Gretchen renewed acquaintances with the Navajo, the pilot explained that the airport at the Bahamas had forgotten their

return-flight arrangements and the Navajo would be forced to touch down in darkness. Guided by the stars, the pilot located the

plane ride through a volatile storm could temper their enthusiasm.

"We've never, ever come close, but it didn't ever deter us from trying every year," Gretchen said of breeding a potential Derby contender. "Hard-headed and you always hope—I think that's the common bond in all horsemen. We're all nuts about it. You just have to love it and you keep trying. It's fun winning on all levels, but ... if you love horses, you

runway after circling several times as the Navajo landed under the shadowy guise of the Bahamas's night. The Jacksons poured out of the plane, happy to be home and eager to find their way through the desolate airport. They were quickly cut off by a van of police officers—armed with rifles—intent on snuffing a perceived attempt to circumvent customs.

"They probably thought we had drugs and contraband," Gretchen said with a chuckle. "We got frisked and spent an hour and a half talking our way out of that one, because they don't do anything very fast down there.

"When we finally got home, we still hadn't eaten and it was ten o'clock. But the electricity was out, so we had some cold soup out of the can. That's how we celebrated."

Barbaro's Holy Bull victory proved especially fulfilling to the Jacksons, who have been racing and breeding horses from their Lael Farm base in West Grove, Pennsylvania, since 1978. The couple has never had a starter in a Triple Crown race and not even a

just hope you have a horse good enough to go in the Kentucky Derby one day."

## Worthwhile trip

In early November 1998, Roy and Gretchen Jackson embarked upon a familiar trek up the New Jersey Turnpike to watch two-year-old filly La Ville Rouge run at Aqueduct in the Tempted Stakes (G3). Bloodstock agent Kathie Ringert, based at Fair Hill, tipped the couple off that the daughter of Carson City was available. Lael was becoming less of a full-time endeavor at the time as the couple concentrated more time to racing and building a broodmare band.

"We've tried all along to find horses with a good-enough family," Gretchen said. "[Ringert] just knew of her as a two-year-old that was up for sale."

La Ville Rouge was beaten only a half-length while finishing second in her stakes debut. The Jacksons liked what they saw in the average-sized filly, cementing a private deal to purchase La Ville Rouge.

Out of stakes winner La Reine Rouge, by King's Bishop, La Ville Rouge proved a talented racehorse for Lael, winning five races in 20 starts during the next two seasons and placing in three graded stakes races at four. But the best was yet to come for La Ville Rouge following a visit to Saint Ballado in 2001. The resulting foal, Holy Ground, went on to place in stakes on both dirt and grass. The Jacksons bred La Ville Rouge back to Dynaformer in 2002.

"We've always loved Dynaformer for his versatility, and we've watched some of his renowned grass horses," Gretchen said. "We use Nicoma Bloodstock, Headley Bell, and it was his advice to breed that mare to Dynaformer."

Bell shared a mutual respect for Dynaformer and believed the stallion was a strong fit for La Ville Rouge for a variety of reasons. "Really, as much as anything, I thought the mare could use some size," Bell recalled. "Dynaformer is a horse that we've always had high regard for from the standpoint of he [stood his first season for \$5,000] and made his way all the way up to, at that time, \$50,000.

"The cross of the Hail to Reason, the \*Turn-to, the \*Ribot, with all of the ingredients of the Blushing Groom (Fr) with the Carson City—all of the pedigree blend," Bell continued. "So it was a combination of size, pedigree blend, and believing in Dynaformer's ability to breed a racehorse."

Dynaformer proved a prudent selection for La Ville Rouge. The resulting foal was named Barbaro, after one of six foxhounds identified in a painting displayed in the Jacksons' West Grove home. 🐾

Mike Curry is an assistant editor of THOROUGHBRED TIMES TODAY.