

maryland

AMERICA IN MINIATURE

life®

saving sagamore

This Preakness, one man's vision to preserve an historic landmark.

ROCK ON!

JAMMING WITH MARYLAND-MADE
ELECTRIC GUITARS

FUN TIMES IN HUB CITY

HAGERSTOWN ROLLS OUT
THE WELCOME MAT



BY JASON TINNEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE MORGAN



• saving sagamore

Kevin Plank's plan to
re-energize Maryland racing



The Worthington Valley in Baltimore County unfolds in the moments before daybreak. Fog settles over pastures and hills, lingering among budding sugar maples, chalk-white fence lines, and grazing silhouettes, early morning specters. The fog burns off, and the red-roofed barns of Sagamore Farm rise up like giant roosters. The wind kicks up a sweet smell, spring stretches her legs, and the specters take on shape, take on color: black, bay, chestnut, the occasional grey.

Feeling spry, nostrils flare; the horses rear and break and run. The orchestra of pounding hooves sounds like rolling thunder. There's always one animal that stands out from the pack. He has something; his movement and rhythm speak their own language. He holds your attention. This valley is full of legends, and perhaps new ones are in the making.



Sagamore, a 250-acre horse farm, was named after the Vanderbilt family's stable in New York and was home to the legendary Thoroughbred Native Dancer.

More than 40 years ago, the great Thoroughbred Native Dancer, nicknamed the Grey Ghost, was laid to rest in the equine cemetery at Sagamore, the historic and legendary Glyndon horse farm once owned by Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt II. Today, a new dawn is rising on the hallowed ground of a stable that, in its glory days, was a bright star on the map of horseracing in America, rivaling the great farms of Kentucky.

Sagamore's new owner is 35-year-old Kevin Plank, founder and CEO of Under Armour, a Baltimore-based sports-apparel company. Like a wobbly-legged yearling that has matured into a well-chiseled 3-year-old built for speed and distance, Under Armour, founded in 1996, has grown from a humble T-shirt business operating out of the basement of a Washington, DC, townhouse into a multi-million-dollar global corporation.

As the company that originated "performance apparel" and whose award-winning ad campaign coined the battle cry "Protect this House," Under Armour has broken from the starting gate, going head-to-head with Nike and Adidas, challenging the old guard of the sportswear industry in an all-out Derby-style stakes race.

And while Under Armour's continued success remains Plank's top priority, he nonetheless cares deeply about Sagamore's—and Maryland horseracing's—future. Although his time spent at the 530-acre farm, for now, is limited to weekend visits with his family (which includes wife DJ and two young children), Plank has begun to lay the foundation for what he hopes will produce, over time, a new line of champions and help bring the national spotlight back to Maryland racing.

To that end, not only is he restoring the property, Plank is also developing a stable of Thoroughbreds racing under the name Sagamore Farm.

Plank, who grew up in Kensington and played football at the University of Maryland, had no prior experience in horseracing aside from being a fan; instead, his entry into the sport has much to do with his regard for the Free State.

"When you think about the great assets of our state," Plank says, "Johns Hopkins, Camden Yards, Annapolis, all these great scenic places and things that we have...Thoroughbred horseracing is such an important part of Maryland history."

Plank wants to make a statement with Sagamore. "I didn't think just having a

farm and maybe raising some horses and hoping on a winner would be enough. I thought it would be important that I send a signal to the region."

In some ways, his "signal" is more of a response prompted, in part, by the 2006 Preakness.

"Frankly, I overheard some people talking about the Preakness potentially leaving the state of Maryland," says Plank, "and that, to me, was more of a call to action."

"It's one of the events where the eyes of the entire nation and large parts of the world turn and say, 'What's happening in Maryland today?' Could you imagine if someone said, 'Live from Santa Anita, the Preakness Stakes?' It would be a tragedy. We need to stand up and fight for that. The only way to do that is by having a healthy, striving industry here."

Statewide, horseracing has fallen on hard times and has become embroiled in the debate over slot machines, but Plank does not view gambling as the only issue.

"It feels like [it's] an industry [that] is just getting passed by, and there is no better time to invest in something than when it's getting beat up a bit. The issue that I saw—especially here in the Mid-Atlantic—it's just been devoid of stories. It needs winners. It needs great story-

telling. You need to give people a reason to care.”

A man who likes to go against the odds, Plank’s mission statement for Sagamore is simple: to win the Triple Crown. “Why else get into it?” he asks.



In 1933, Alfred G. Vanderbilt, the great-great-grandson of railroad tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt, got a heck of a 21st-birthday gift from his mother: a 250-acre horse farm named after Sagamore, the Vanderbilt stable in New York. As a boy, Vanderbilt’s love of horseracing was encouraged by his mother, Margaret (the daughter of Isaac Emerson, the Baltimorean who created Bromo-Seltzer), and he was now in command of a farm that sported barns, paddocks, an outdoor racing strip, and—for its time—a state-of-the-art indoor training facility complete with 90 stalls and a quarter-mile enclosed track.

In addition to breeding and racing winners, Vanderbilt also served as president of Pimlico, and helped to organize the great match race between War Admiral and Seabiscuit. Among his hall-of-fame horses were Discovery and Bed o’ Roses, also buried at Sagamore.

But Native Dancer would be Vanderbilt’s greatest champion. The 1,250-pound grey colt won a staggering 21 of 22 races, including the 1953 Preakness and Belmont Stakes. His only loss came at the ’53 Kentucky Derby, where he was edged out by the long shot Dark Star in one of the greatest upsets in sports history.

In the 1950s, Native Dancer was America’s favorite horse. In the early days of black-and-white television, his coat made him easy to distinguish from other horses and his come-from-behind finishes—covering 29 feet per stride—made him the first equine TV celebrity. On May 31, 1954, he appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine*. The end of Dancer’s glorious reign, however, seemed to signal the end of Sagamore’s.

At its peak, Sagamore grew to nearly 1,000 acres. By the time Vanderbilt sold



Kevin Plank wants more than to raise winning Thoroughbreds at Sagamore. He wants to revive the horseracing industry in Maryland.

the farm to developer James Ward in 1986, it had shrunk to half that size. During Ward’s ownership, the barns were leased to local owners and trainers, but the farm would never enjoy the prestige Vanderbilt, who passed away in 1999, had cultivated. Over time, it fell into various states of disrepair.

“In the heyday, when Native Dancer stood there, Maryland was the hub of the Thoroughbred-breeding industry in the world,” says Donald Litz, president of the Maryland Stallion Station, which sits across from Sagamore along Tufton Avenue. “He was the top stallion. I would say 75 percent of all the pedigrees of Thoroughbreds today have Native Dancer in them. His influence is amazing.”

Ward sold Sagamore to Plank in February 2007 for an undisclosed price, but, as Plank explains, “I don’t believe anybody owns Sagamore. We’re custodians of the farm for a period of time.”



Tom Mullikin and Kevin Plank began their friendship in high school, playing football at St. John’s Prep. In 2001, after

seven years of corporate America, and much to the surprise of his family and friends, Mullikin packed his bags and set out for Paris, Kentucky, taking an eight-dollar-an-hour job at a farm called Machmer Hall. Back then, he knew two things about horses: “The front end bit and the other end kicked.”

Mullikin, a Silver Spring native, went on to cut his teeth in Kentucky and at Spring Hill Farm in Virginia before later returning to Machmer Hall as the assistant farm manager. Then, in the fateful summer of 2006, he and his family happened to be passing through Baltimore.

“We had dinner with Kevin and DJ,” says Mullikin. “Kevin told me he had this idea of getting into the game. I said, ‘Wow. That’s great.’ And he said, ‘I want you to help.’”

Mullikin adds, “He really caught me by surprise.”

“I believe in people,” says Plank. “I believe in my gut and my ability to pick people. That’s what I saw in Tom—someone I could trust and somebody who I believed had the stuff. So much of life is just somebody giving you a chance. I’ve



Plank hired longtime friend Tom Mullikin to manage the farm.

never been sold on what [someone's] résumé looks like or how they perform on paper. It's how they perform at game time."

As Sagamore's new farm manager, the daunting prospect of restoring the stable to its former glory was not lost on Mullikin. "I saw all the old buildings, the old track. At the time, I'll admit it was a little intimidating just because you could see all the work.

"It's Sagamore. It's like being handed the keys to Yankee Stadium. As you're climbing the mountain, don't look up. That's sort of how we looked at it."

Since spring of 2007, nine miles of new fencing has been installed, with another six in the works. To date, 155 acres of corn has been cleared and returned to pasture. "That was pretty intense," says Mullikin. "Six-thousand pounds of grass seed in the spring. Then another 6,000 in the fall."

Blackburn Architects, a DC firm specializing in equestrian architecture, is designing the renovations of the broodmare and foaling barns, the latter of which is nearing completion, with 18 stalls (including three foaling stalls), an observation room, track lighting, and a video monitoring system.

"This isn't just spending money to spend money," says Plank. "It's the most

modern facilities, bar none, to put our horses in the best position—the horses are the stars at our farm. It should be a place that any horse would be happy to hang their hooves."

Other enhancements to the barns include the installation of large stall windows and the removal of the center haylofts, which have been replaced with skylights. And although nothing has been formalized, there are plans down the road for the rehabilitation of the outdoor track and massive indoor facility. Plank points out, however, that Sagamore's rebirth is not a sprint, but a marathon.

"This isn't a two-year plan of how we're going to get to the Kentucky Derby," he says. "This is a 20-year plan."

In time, Plank says, he envisions Sagamore as the "Disney World of racing. There's an awe that should come with it," adding that this endeavor is "to honor the history and put a vision in for the future. And have a beautiful place that makes people proud when they see it."



"I think Sagamore has the potential to be a bigger story than just a piece of land in Glyndon, Maryland, but I don't think any of that really happens unless we win," Plank says. "That's when you put your head down and you're prudent. Not just patient, because we're *impatient*. We want to win and we want to win soon, but we want to do it the right way."

"Kevin is very comfortable with building things one step at a time and not

being a flash in the pan," says Bob Feld, a California-based bloodstock agent working with Plank and Mullikin on their horse purchases.

Having earned a reputation for having an eye for athletes, Feld has enjoyed success in recent years purchasing a number of graded stakes winners. He also has a long-standing friendship with Mullikin, whom he met in Kentucky.

"There are a lot of guys, over the years, that come in beating their chest and they disappear as quickly as they show up on the scene," Feld says. "Kevin is not that kind of guy, and he doesn't want to approach it that way. He'll be here for a long time."

True, the odds are stacked when it comes to winning in Thoroughbred racing, but then again, what are the chances that two high-school football buddies would be jump-starting one of America's premier horse farms?

"One thing about this game," says Feld. "The most unimaginable things can come true, and that's what keeps us going."

Since 2006, Plank's stable has grown to 19 horses, including 2- and 3-year-old fillies, colts, and geldings. Five broodmares are being bred to Kentucky stallions and will deliver at Sagamore, making the foals Maryland-bred. This year, the farm celebrated the birth of four foals, Sagamore's first new generation of Maryland horses.

An element that can't be overlooked is the energy of youth that Plank and Mullikin bring to Sagamore. "It's fun to see a younger-type crowd come into this game, especially with this kind of commitment," Feld says. "To me, that's a very exciting thing and a hook to the new Sagamore. If we can pull this off, it really is going to be a huge breath of fresh air for the business."

"It would be kind of neat, two city boys from Maryland..." Mullikin catches himself. "We are very humble, and we know there is a lot of work we have to do and we want to do it right and respect the game and the people who are in it. I don't want to get too carried away. *They*

raised some good horses and put a farm back together. 'I think that would make a good story, hopefully, one day.'

But for Mullikin, all this "talk is cheap. I'd rather let our horses do the talking for us."



Sagamore's first horse to do some talking is a 3-year-old filly named Bourbon Maid, who, as a 2-year-old, won a maiden special-weight race at Laurel Park last November. Maryland-based jockey Mario Pino donned Sagamore's new silks—a white diamond surrounded by a sea of dark red inspired by Vanderbilt's famed cerise-and-white diamond pattern—for that event.

"It was thrilling and good to see," Plank says of the victory. "It's what you do it for, and you get used to winning quickly."

"It makes the hair on the back of your neck go up," says Mullikin, who views horses as the purest athletes. "You think the horse knows he's going to get a trophy? He's just running because he wants to beat that other horse. It's genuine competition."

"Just the raw power of a horse is what, I think is so great," Plank continues. "It's this animal that just...it runs. It's got a very specific purpose and it's excellent at what it does. It's a powerful thing when it works."

Although he hasn't done any running yet, there's another animal folks at Sagamore are talking about. "There's a horse we like a lot," Plank says. "This 2-year-old called Tabula Rasa...it means you make your own fate."

"He looks the part," says Mullikin. "Like in grade school, he's the guy you played ball with who already had a beard, always the first one off the bus when you play an away game. That's Tabula Rasa."

Sagamore's trainers are Rick Violette in New York, who once trained for Vanderbilt, and Mike Trombetta here in Maryland. The farm's core staff has a solid pedigree as well, and includes Randy Lewis, whose father is retired Mid-

Atlantic trainer Charles R. Lewis; Jonathan Passero, son of former Maryland Jockey Club Track Superintendent John Passero; and trainer Laura Delozier.

Delozier leased stalls during Ward's ownership and says, "It's a dream come true for me to be back at this place and seeing all of these glorious things happening here."

"I believe the key to success in anything—particularly business, family—is this team mentality," says Plank. "It's a mentality that just believes that it can happen."

Plank also has little time for the naysayers. "Something I say at Under Armour is, 'We're smart enough to be naïve enough to not know what we can't accomplish.' What that statement means: I'm not interested in people telling me what we can't do. I'm not interested in people telling me that I can't train horses here."

"We're not leaving," adds Delozier. "A lot of people have up and left because the going has gotten tough. And it's gotten tougher, but I think it really says something about Kevin Plank being a Marylander—Maryland-bred himself—that he wants to come here and restore life to this place."

Plank and his team realize that they have some large boots to fill, but that's why they get up every morning, put them on, and head out to the barns.

"It's like playing for the Dallas Cowboys," Plank says. "You respect the fact that there is this long history, but you're judged on what you do today."

Sagamore will always be Native Dancer's home, but it's a big farm with many stalls. "When we put the gates on," says Plank, "and we put 'Home of Native Dancer,' we're also going to leave room for the next great horse that comes from [this] farm." 🌻

Would you like to help preserve Sagamore's illustrious past? If you have any Sagamore-related memorabilia or stories to share, please contact Sue Kenney at the Sagamore History Project, skkenney1111@aol.com or 410-458-1833.