

Sam Slater

The Quiet Force Behind the Fair Hill Foundation

Slater Family photo



Sam and his wife, Lornie Forbes, walking their dogs.

Sam Slater was up against a deadline: 30 days to raise a quarter of a million dollars.

The funds would be reserved for renovating Fair Hill's infrastructure, improving the odds of securing the country's first fall CCI5* before a presentation to the Maryland state legislature. It was late January, 2017. Slater had until March.

"I had a fair amount of fundraising experience, but I'd never had that much pressurized fundraising for that amount in such a short time," Slater, of Coatesville, Pennsylvania, said.

To add to his challenge, he was in bed in South Carolina with a case of shingles. "I wasn't in Maryland or Pennsylvania where a lot of the donors were; I was flat on my back in Aiken," he said. "I was in no position to go see people, so I raised the money by phone."

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But his friends and Fair Hill supporters pulled through. “The donors were really good,” he said. “They couldn’t have been more helpful.”

Tim Gardner, now FHF’s vice president and treasurer, and his wife, Nina Gardner, top event horse owners, were some of those donors. “He came to us as event fans and supporters and because we were very involved with Fair Hill,” Tim said. “The ask was pretty big; I had to swallow hard. But he’s very credible as a fundraiser, very good at it. We were excited about the prospect and jumped in without much detail about how the money was going to be spent other than to demonstrate that the community was serious about the 5 Star bid. He’s very effective, focused, determined, able to convince a lot of people to be active donors.”

The presentation to the legislature was a success, setting up the Department of Natural Resources and Sport and Entertainment Corporation of Maryland to work with Fair Hill to earn the 5 Star.

Soon, the field of candidates was narrowed down to two: Fair Hill and Great Meadow in Virginia. In the summer of 2017, Fair Hill organizers received the word that they’d been selected.

“That’s when the work really started,” Slater said.



Lornie Forbes competing in the 1975 Pan Am Trials at Ledyard, Massachusetts.

Slater Family photo

A Legacy and a Vision

Slater’s background makes him a perfect fit for promoting Fair Hill and establishing the Foundation. His family owned, bred, and trained horses, racing them at Fair Hill. His sister, Joy Slater, won the first sanctioned timber race at Fair Hill, in 1976. (She was also the first woman to win the Maryland Hunt Cup.) His wife, Lornie Forbes, rode in what Slater believes was the first three-day at Fair Hill in the 1960s, when she was 13. Slater captured the races at Fair Hill and all over the Mid-Atlantic from behind the lens as a videographer, running Hunt Cup Productions/HCP Sports. He also foxhunted and dabbled in steeplechasing.

“We all had a close association with Fair Hill and felt it was the perfect place for equestrian sports,” Slater said. “There’s no reason Fair

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Hill couldn't support the 5 Star or any other horse activity. My original idea was for shows, dressage, a permanent infield establishment for other horse sports within the racetrack."

He envisioned a facility like Pau in France, where the track's infield offers space for competitions, with a training center on site, and he was inspired by his experience in Ireland, where equestrians enjoy more overlap between disciplines.

"I would think Fair Hill could be a fairly regularly used equestrian facility for horse shows. There are arenas for dressage and jumping and no reason in theory why they can't have that kind of thing," he said. "There may be conflicts having horses at the training center galloping while a show is going on, but it's such a good facility, there's no reason why it can't have a lot of other things."

A wide array of sports means a wide array of donors, Slater explained, reaching beyond eventing and racing to horse show, dressage and carriage driving enthusiasts. "That was one of the dreams I had when the idea was brought up for the Fair Hill Foundation," he said. "With a bigger donor base, you have a better chance of raising money."

Although Slater clearly demonstrated his fundraising prowess, his influence on Fair Hill's success extends far beyond securing donations, Tim said.

"We'd been trying to encourage European-based riders to come to the 5 Star and had an opportunity to recruit Austin O'Connor, an Irish event rider in England," Tim said. "It turns out Sam and Lornie, who have a farm in Ireland, know Austin's parents. That's the kind of connection he has nationally and internationally, and it's made recruitment much easier with the fact that Slater is involved and supports international riders."

On top of his equestrian associations, Slater brought nonprofit leadership and fundraising experience. In 2016 he scaled back his HCP Sports commitments due to the volume of board work he was doing, including serving as president of the National Steeplechase Foundation, now the Temple Gwathmey Steeplechase Foundation.

"I knew that the Fair Hill Foundation was going to take a lot of work, and it was better to not have the day-to-day commitments of HCP Sports," he said.

In 2018, he was on 12 boards, serving as president of three of them. "I was having health issues, and I had bitten off more than I could chew," he said. "With my wife's urging, I quit all 12. I wish I'd been able to stay with it a little longer myself, but I helped to get it going, and it's been a success."

Slater also contributed to the on-going success of FHF by encouraging Jay Griswold and then Charlie Fenwick, both prominent Maryland horsemen, to assume his Foundation leadership position. He remains a board member emeritus and regularly attends board meetings.

Tim repeatedly emphasized Slater's modesty about his contributions: "He always is deferential to people and very sincere in his interest in equestrian events. Other than being an almost full-time supporter of equestrian events and the legacy we have here in Pennsylvania and Maryland, he has been a very wise and persistent supporter of continued advancements in eventing and racing and very respectful of our great legacy here in hunting, steeplechasing and eventing."



Sam speaking at The Races at Fair Hill on August 30, 2025. For his full remarks, visit fairhillfoundation.org.



Fair Hill's Future

The FHF board never received an explanation of why they were chosen for the 5 Star over Great Meadow and other venues. "We heard by rumor that [Fair Hill] had better long-term prospects with the state government involved," Slater said, while acknowledging that working with the state can be complicated.

He wishes that the racing, which returned on August 30, had resumed sooner.

"If I'd ever thought when I started that it was going to take six years to have the races again, I would have been frustrated," he said. "Getting the 5 Star going was such a priority, you could understand why, so [our efforts were] concentrated on that. It was probably the right call; we just couldn't get the races going at same time."

Donors involved in racing were frustrated, he said. "They were almost asking for their money back, but we didn't have much control over when or whether racing was going to resume," he said. "Now that it's resuming, I think our full fundraising can come back, and there are a lot of things money needs to be raised for."

Some of those needs include more infrastructure improvements, such as eliminating a crossing of the racetrack. "They're talking about a tunnel or bridge to get heavy equipment to the infield for the 5 Star and other events across the track," Slater said. "Very few American turf tracks have crossings, and people were worried, thinking you can't train on tracks with a crossing, but almost all [of the ones] in Europe have it. It makes sense with a multi-purpose venue, but those are some of the challenges currently coming up that we will need funds for."



Sam at an unidentified race meet.

Slater Family photo



Sam Slater and his sister, Joy, presenting the Foxbrook Trophy at the Far Hills Race Meeting (NJ) in honor of their late mother, Jill Fanning, in 2019.

He said the Foundation and the Department of Natural Resources have developed a good partnership. "The Fair Hill Foundation steps in where needed if infrastructure needs to be done now," he said.

Slater remains closely involved and believes the organization remains true to the vision he started with. "It's taken a while, but it's finally coming through," he said. "It has a bright future, and I want people to be aware of as many things as possible that the organization does."

Tim can't imagine where they'd be today without Slater's initiative.

"Those of us who came on the Fair Hill Foundation board after [Sam] got it started are really grateful for his amazing leadership all along," Tim said. "It's been almost 10 years, and it would never have gotten started without Sam."

Beth Rasin is a former long-time editor of The Chronicle of the Horse who now works in nonprofit communications and provides ghostwriting and freelancing services.

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