

Jay Griswold Reminisces, Looks Ahead

Tammie Monaco photo

Jay Griswold's first trip to Fair Hill was unexpectedly brief. At the age of 16, with a new jockey license in hand, he was thrilled when Nancy Hannum asked him to ride in the spring timber race.

"That race ended for me at the first fence, where I fell in a heap," Griswold recalls with a laugh. "There was no irrigation back then, and I can still feel that fall from 1958 because it was on rock hard ground. That was my introduction to Fair Hill. But I became very interested in what Willie du Pont conceived there."

While some might not have been so keen to return to the site of painfully dashed dreams, Griswold had grown up in Monkton, Maryland, hunting with the Elkridge-Harford Hounds, and timber racing – as well as getting up and back on after a fall – was in his blood.

"The goal in those days was to win the Maryland Hunt Cup," he says, "so we didn't observe New Year's. Our year started and ended on the last Saturday in April."

Hall of Fame rider and trainer Mikey Smithwick, a six-time winner of the Maryland Hunt Cup, instructed and mentored the young Griswold.

"It was a magical time growing up in that immediate post-war period," Griswold says. "The Elkridge-Harford hounds were really good, and the country was beautifully paneled, so when we got to the Hunt Cup, you never batted an eye jumping a fence that was 4'6". That's what you did out hunting, and that's what you did on the racecourse."

Griswold and his friend Paddy Neilson worked during the summers for Smithwick and his brother, Paddy Smithwick.

"They were our heroes," Griswold says. "Paddy Neilson and I grew up together and were very close. That was my introduction, and I'll always have those memories and never forget it."

Lifelong Maryland Connections

Griswold credits Ross Peddicord, then head of the Maryland Horse Industry Board, with recruiting him to the Fair Hill Foundation. "He said there's a shot to get this 5 Star at Fair Hill," Griswold recalls. "I don't know much about eventing, but Ross said you've got to help me or go on the board. We had a lot of fun and did a lot of good, and we got [the 5 Star] as you know. Sam Slater, who was the chair and had the original idea for the foundation, had health issues, so he and Ross suggested that I take his position."

Peddicord says Griswold was instrumental to the success of FHF and the 5 Star. "Without Jay's lifelong superior reputation in the financial, political, social and horse worlds, none of it could have been achieved," Peddicord says. "He gave the project credibility backed by the personal financial contributions of him and his family, countless hours of consultation,



Jay Griswold studies the Morning Line at the August 30th Races at Fair Hill.



Douglas Lees photo



Jay Griswold was frequently seen wearing his Fair Hill cap in the early days of fundraising for the Fair Hill Foundation.

leaning on and persuading folks who he and his family had forged relationships with over several lifetimes, and with his fundraising expertise, especially gained when he was Board Chair and then Interim President of Washington College.”

Griswold tapped into his steeplechasing network, bringing Paddy Neilson and Bob Kinsley onto the board.

“I’m a lifelong Maryland horseman, born and raised here, and Ross convinced me it was important to get the 5 Star here, that it was hugely prestigious,” he says, “but most of us were interested in bringing back steeplechasing, and that’s finally starting to come back.”

Griswold considers one of his greatest contributions to Fair Hill his refusal to give up on chasing. “[I was] keeping the candle in the window for steeplechasing,” he says. “The state really doesn’t know the difference between eventing and chasing, and Ross’s point was the horse is very important in the state, and that’s what the Maryland Horse Industry Board does, promote all disciplines in the state. There are more horses per square mile in Maryland than in any other place in the world except for Sweden.

Photo courtesy of the National Steeplechase Assoc.



Jay and Toni Griswold enjoying the races with son Alec 35 years ago.

“The good thing about Maryland is it’s a small state, and everybody knows everybody,” Griswold adds. “Governor Hogan was hugely helpful, as was his main fundraising guy, Tom Kelso, who is now on the Cecil County Breeders’ Fair Board. I’ve worked with the state on a number of initiatives, and this is one of them, and the state’s been wonderful.”

Peddicord said the project has had its share of frustrating moments and times it seemed doomed to fail, “but because of Jay’s vision, staying power, unyielding determination and skill it has ultimately been rewarding. He didn’t ride in 16 Maryland Hunt Cups because of lack of courage and stamina!”

But he says Griswold’s greatest strength is his personality, “sense of humor, ability to make folks relax and enjoy themselves in the process. He’s so damned likable, a lot of fun and incredibly charming. The State of Maryland, and particularly its equine industry, owes him a huge debt of gratitude and thanks.”

Griswold drew on an extensive business background as well as work he’d done on countless boards of other nonprofits, from the Chesapeake Bay Foundation to the Maryland Historical Society to the Living Classrooms Foundation and many others. A former senior advisor and director of Brown Investment Advisory, he also chaired Alex Brown Realty Advisors, and co-founded Armata Partners before serving as a partner with Black Oak Associates. Additionally, he was interim president of Washington College on Maryland’s Eastern Shore from 2014-15.

“When I worked at Alex Brown, I got a lot of business through connections in England because of a guy named Frank Bonsal, who’s now in retirement; he’s practically 90,” Griswold says. “We were very different stockbrokers than most Americans. We had falls when racing or hunting, and we’d break bones and show up in a sling in London to try to get business, and they’d feel sorry for us. But we were more like them than most U.S. stockbrokers.”

Back at home, that same turf that Griswold met so intimately on his first visit to Fair Hill will soon carry the name of his best friend. Thanks to many friends who donated in Paddy

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Photo courtesy of the Griswold family

The Cathedral Builder

Tom Kelso, former head of the Maryland Stadium Authority, calls Jay Griswold the visionary behind Fair Hill's special event zone, which includes the racetrack, barns, cross-country course and infield.

"He could see the facility, the advantages of it, how it would benefit Cecil County, Maryland, and the equine world through the 5 Star and enhance racing at Fair Hill," Kelso says. "Somebody has to have the vision, and once he has it, other people could see what he was talking about and could do the various parts of it necessary to make it all happen. But if someone doesn't envision the cathedral, it will never be built."

Griswold could explain his idea, Kelso says, and bring people together to get it done. "Like the people who conceived of cathedrals in the Middle Ages, he had faith that he could convince others it needed to be done. He would take it as far as he could take it, and the power of the idea would be so strong that other people would finish it," Kelso says.

Beyond his vision, Griswold is a good listener and an incredible gentleman, says Kelso. "When he's interested in what you have to say, he's willing to listen and willing to consider what you're saying. It doesn't mean it changes his vision, but he's open to collaboration and doing things necessary to bring the vision to fruition.

"He's underappreciated at times, but he's such a pleasure to work with," he adds. "I have a lot of appreciation and affection for him. It was a great experience in my life to get to work with him."



Jay Griswold (left) on Beech Prince battles Charlie Fenwick aboard Sam Son of A Gun on his way to capturing the heavyweight timber at Elkridge-Harford Point-to-Point on April 7, 1979; it was a race he won four times from 1976 to 1980. Source: Central Entry Office, Temple Gwathmey Steeplechase Foundation.

Neilson's memory when he died in 2019 at the age of 77, the new timber course at Fair Hill will be named in his honor.

Griswold defers much of the credit for the foundation's success so far. "Charlie Fenwick is doing a great job supported by fellow Board Members like Tim Gardner, Joe Clancy, Graham Motion to name a few," he says. "Tom Kelso was critical to the original construction of the racetrack and five-star event course in his capacity then as Stadium Authority Chairman. I'm just sorry Paddy and Bob did not live to see it today."

For Griswold, the greatest reward for his work will be the dedication of Neilson's name on the hallowed ground of one of the state's premier racecourses.

"To name the timber course after my greatest friend, who was maybe the best amateur timber rider over fences that's ever been – maybe even better than Mikey Smithwick – that's the legacy," he says.

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