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## Road Trip

**Hardest Core wins Arlington Million  
off farm training in Pennsylvania**

October 2014

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# One in a Million

*Unlikely Arlington hero Hardest Core takes Pennsylvania connections on the ride of their lives*

*By Joe Clancy. Photographs by Anne Litz.*

Almost a month after winning the Arlington Million-G1, Hardest Core walked out of the Pennsylvania barn he calls home. It was time to go to work after two hours of turnout and some quiet time in the stone barn snuggled up to a Chester County hillside not far from the steel mills of Coatesville but a long way from any racetrack.

The 4-year-old gelding walked alongside the barn, once home to steeplechase star Fire Control and others in the Woodcrest

Stable of Diana Strawbridge Wister, and exercise rider Jody Petty climbed aboard. They turned right at the driveway, made

a left through the trees, made another right at another driveway by Doe Run Creek and headed toward the road. Trainer Eddie Graham pulled alongside in his silver Dodge Ram pick-up truck and smiled.

"He feels great, Eddie," Petty told his longtime friend. "Real relaxed, but bright."

Graham and Petty joked about the fox hunt meeting over the hill and how much fun it would (and wouldn't) be if the hounds and horses came through. Looking left and right at nothing and everything, Hardest Core kept walking and turned left at the end of the lane. He broke into a



Eriluis Vaz stands tall in the stirrups after crossing the wire first in an upset win in the Grade 1 Arlington Million aboard Hardest Core.

loose jog on the bridle path along untrafficked Creek Road and just flowed. He could be a world-class dressage horse, an Olympic eventer, a Grade 1 steeplechaser, a ladies hunter out for a hack.

But no, he's (as of this summer anyway) one of the best turf horses in the world, training for the Breeders' Cup on the hills and fields and roads of Chester County.

He's owned by Andrew Bentley Racing, the stable name of Andrew Bentley and his parents Greg and Caroline. Last fall, the Bentleys sent Graham and advisor Rusty Carrier to Kentucky for the Keeneland November breeding stock sale for the express purpose of buying Hardest Core. Long term, steeplechasing was the plan and if Graham and Carrier liked what they saw they had a green light to buy the bay colt—at that point a stakes-placed winner of three races for Ghostzapper Racing and trainer Kiaran McLaughlin.

"We were following him, we knew we wanted him," said Graham. "At the sale, I think everybody was looking at him, but they were all thinking somebody was going to go after him or maybe they were going to buy him back. Nobody thought we were going to have the money to go in and get him. We knew we did, but we acted like we

didn't. If I saw somebody at the sale I tried not to mention him."

The bidding stopped at \$210,000 and Carrier, who'd first seen the horse on television when he broke his maiden in May 2013, signed the ticket with a shaky hand.

"Everybody says you've got to act professional, but as soon as we were the final bidder, we stood up and yelled so I guess we weren't acting like we'd been there before," said Graham. "Hats off to Rusty, he's picked out a lot of nice horses and he really wanted this horse."

Graham, involved with steeplechase horses throughout his life, calls Hardest Core "everything you want as a jumper" physically. The son of Hard Spun is big but not overly so. He's got a long stride at every gait. He brings power to those strides with a massive shoulder, a strong hind end and plenty of top line. Those last two ingredients weren't always there, said Graham, who paid credit to making the colt a gelding and to hours of long, slow training sessions.

Of course, Hardest Core is not a steeplechaser and won't be any time soon—though he's a lovely, natural jumper—which means all of those physical strengths get put to use on the flat.

"He had that flat-track body when he came," said Graham. "He's changed. When he was still a colt, his hind end looked weak. We thought there was something we could build on, which was part of the reason why we wanted him. I knew he would improve if we cut him and I knew he would improve at the farm."

Graham also knew he'd keep the horse on the flat for a while, to see how much improvement was there.

Hardest Core nearly didn't get the chance, because after being gelded he needed emergency surgery at New Bolton Center to remove several feet of intestine and nearly died. Though rocked, Hardest Core recovered and was soon back eating normally and started training in February. By summer he was ready to run and won an allowance race at Parx June 28. Two weeks later, he won the Cape Henlopen Stakes at Delaware Park.

Then came the Million, but not before plenty of debate as Graham mulled other options—the American St. Leger on the Aug. 16 Arlington Million undercard, the Grade 1 Sword Dancer at Saratoga, a more conservative turf stakes in the region. . .

The trainer with zero graded stakes starts aimed high, and took along Parx-



Owner Andrew Bentley hoists the Arlington Million trophy while celebrating with his mother Caroline.

based jockey Eriluis Vaz (two graded stakes mounts from nearly 5,000 rides). In Chicago, Graham went all steeplechase trainer.

"I want you to do one thing for me," he told the jockey the night before the race.

"What's that, Eddie?" Vaz replied.

"Walk the course with me."

So, the morning of the race, they walked the course.

"He didn't ride any other races that day and you've got that long backside there," said Graham. "It's so wide open, it's just a little different. People thought I was crazy, but I think it helped."

In the winner's circle afterward, Vaz thanked Graham for the suggestion.

Course walk or not, Hardest Core ran like he belonged. The nearly 12-1 shot broke from the rail, and backed off the early pace of Side Glance (GB) and favorite Magician (Ire) while fifth. The winner held his ground and moved to fourth behind the top pair and 2013 winner Real Solution as they went up that wide-open backside. With a half-mile to go, Vaz gave Hardest Core a little rein and he eased to Magician's flank while still on the rail. With giant strides, Hardest Core eased off the

inside near the end of the turn as Magician went on, and drifted wider at the top of the stretch. Like a car shifting gears, the second-longest shot on the board lowered his head and went after last year's Breeders' Cup Turf winner Magician to win by a length.

Somewhere, Graham watched nervously.

"I looked down at the cement for a little bit and thought we might be second or third," he said. "Second or third in the Arlington Million? That's amazing. Then I looked up and he pulled him out. I thought he might get a bigger piece of it. He likes to run out there. Not losing stride is important to him. Then I felt like, 'Oh my gosh we might get this.' His stride just lengthened like you wouldn't believe."

At the time, Graham had won four races from five starts this year—led by Hardest Core's Cape Henlopen victory of course but also Nat Grew's triumph in the 3-mile My Lady's Manor timber stakes in April. For his career, Graham had won 26 races. He saddled his first starter in 2001 and, before this season, 13 years of training had yielded \$530,975 in purses. Hardest Core made \$594,000 in the Million.

The moment wasn't lost on the 43-year-old. As a kid he went to Pennsylvania

farms with his father, Lester, to gallop steeplechasers. While in high school at Bishop Shanahan in Downingtown, Eddie took a job with Ronnie and Betsy Houghton. The future trainer moved over to Amos Fenstermacher, Paddy Neilson, then Carrier, then Bruce Miller. In 1989, Cabral (Chi) won over timber at the Manor for Miller. And Graham was hooked.

He absorbed all he could in eight years with Miller, riding stakes standouts in the mornings, going to the races in the afternoon and poring over training charts of greats such as Lonesome Glory.

"His horses would be fit, but happy," said Graham. "If we had a sour horse, he would always let that horse pull up in front of everybody. By the fifth day, that horse thought he was the man without doing anything. They all got confidence."

As an exercise rider, Graham would test himself and predict how horses would run based on how they were training.

"If they ran well, or if they didn't, I'd try to remember how they felt training before the race," he said.

Graham rode a few jump races—winning a starter handicap on Bryan Station for Carrier in 1997 and partnering Lonesome Glory to a training flat win at Pennsylvania



Trainer Eddie Graham enjoys a quiet moment with Hardest Core after training at the farm near Coatesville, Pa.

## So, Eddie Graham, has Hardest Core jumped a fence?

“Oh yeah, I’ve jumped him. He’s great. He’s athletic, he likes it. That’s the backup plan. We’d have been thrilled with a win or two on the flat around here and then run him over jumps in 2015.”

Hunt Cup in 1998. Graham parlayed the connections into some horses to train of his own. They were always a sidelight, while he got paid to work for Miller or Sanna Hendriks. Eventually, he struck out on his own more fully. He rented barns, recruited owners, bought horses, won two races a year (2009-12) and nearly quit.

“It’s not easy,” he said of trying to start a training business. “One day you’re doing

all right, the next you’re like ‘oh no, something bad happened.’”

Graham met his wife, veteran trainer Bill Starritt’s daughter Wendi, in the racing office at Parx and she made sure her husband kept working at it. When Eddie was down to two horses and talked about giving up, she told him, “Figure it out.” Their sons, Mason and Chase (now 7 and 5), and she were behind him. No matter what.

“She never wavers,” Eddie said of Wendi, who still works at Parx. “She never once said quit and get another job. That means the world.”

Graham worked at it, hard, and still does most of it himself with the two flat horses based at the Bentleys’ farm and the steeplechasers in a rented barn a few miles away. Buying a horse at Keeneland? For six figures? And winning the Arlington Million? He’d have been happy with a \$15,000 maiden hurdle win at Shawan Downs with a horse he’d had in the barn for two years.

“What does it mean to win a race like that?” Graham asked himself. “There are no words you can express, for me, that say what it meant. It’s a dream. The only people who would understand it are the people who work hard every day and dream of winning a race like that. They get it, but they’re the only ones.”

Graham first teamed with the Bentleys in 2011. Their trainer, Paul Rowland, was sick and recommended his friend Graham as the trainer for timber horse Rainbows for Luck. He won the first time they ran him, and added two more the next year. Now he babysits Hardest Core and 3-year-old filly Giant Shadow, who broke her maiden at Parx Racing and earned an allowance win at Laurel Park in September.



Rowland, who died from mesothelioma in 2012, is remembered as a big part of the Hardest Core story.

“None of this would have happened if it wasn’t for Paul,” said Graham. “He was always making sure that Greg and I were communicating and wanted to make sure we were going to work together.”

For the Bentleys, the success is about Rowland, Graham, Carrier, Petty and the other people involved. Their son has Down Syndrome and the horses mean everything to him. He knows pedigrees, past performances and the enormity of it all. He’s the one kissing the Million trophy in the winner’s circle. His parents bought their first racehorse, a steeplechaser named Stop and Listen, in 1995. He won his first start, and added a stakes the next year. Others, including Grade 1 jump winner Clearance Code, followed but the stable was never large and never more than a diversion.

Hardest Core was a 30th birthday present for Andrew.

“Andrew knows and loves all the horses,” said Greg. “We’re at the track and he goes through the program and finds who’s by Cryptoclearance (sire of Clearance Code) and who’s related to horses we’ve had. He knows it all. It means a lot to him.”

And Hardest Core turned out to be a good investment, too, but he’s worth more than money.

“It’s a terrific return on people that you believe in,” said Greg. “It also shows that the steeplechase people are world class, that they can produce a horse like this.”

Caroline Bentley agreed with her husband, and put it in perspective.

“It’s people we’ve been so close to over the years,” she said. “We’re so happy for



them, all these guys deserve this. Doing it with people you really care about adds something special to it. Eddie, you couldn’t find a nicer guy, or Jody, everybody. This is a magic circle right now. We just thank our lucky stars.”

Greg Bentley is the CEO of Bentley Systems, which specializes in software for engineers, architects and contractors. Founded in 1984, the company has more than \$500 million in annual revenue and is active in 50 countries. Bentley works out of the company’s headquarters in Exton, Pa., and has long lived in Chester County. He recently purchased a 400-acre portion of Runnymede, a 2,500-acre historic oasis of a farm owned by Wister, sister of leading Pennsylvania owner/breeder George Strawbridge Jr. The Bentley horses, including Hardest Core, are in a barn on the property run by longtime Runnymede employee Tim Durborow.

“I came with the place,” he joked of 42 years at the farm, while rolling bandages during a September visit. Durborow cares for Hardest Core, Giant Shadow and Rainbows for Luck much like he did 1976 jump champion Fire Control and others who raced for Wister or otherwise called Runnymede home.

The spot includes a courtyard-style barn, turnout paddocks, plenty of galloping fields, quiet roads for jogging, peace, quiet and proximity to even more facilities. Hardest Core frequently trains on the turf gallops at Joy Slater’s farm nearby and also ships to Fair Hill Training Center (where Graham rents a stall) for workouts. Petty, a steeplechase jockey who won the Maryland Hunt Cup this year, gets on Hardest Core and some of the others and accompanied

Steeplechase owners since 1995, Caroline and Greg Bentley call the Arlington Million win a big reward to believing in people such as trainer Eddie Graham and the others involved with Hardest Core.

the horse to the Chicago area for the Arlington Million along with Fair Hill-based van driver Keith Cooper and former trainer Brianne Slater.

## Now What?

After two 13-hour van rides and a hard race in the Million, Hardest Core returned to the farm and recovered. He was tired, weakened, Graham said, and the trainer backed off. The Kentucky-bred got turned out, jogged, walked the fields, grazed, rested.

And came back.

“This horse is really helped by the hills,” said Petty. “I don’t think he’s physically strong behind and work on the hills just keeps him going. After Arlington he kind of fell off a little bit and Eddie said we were going to jog hills for 10 days. You couldn’t do that at the racetrack.”

Hardest Core went for a jog/hack on the bridle paths and an easy uphill gallop Sept. 9. He enjoyed every second while bouncing and dancing and making Petty laugh.

“He’s on his toes, Eddie,” said the exercise rider, who rode champion steeplechaser McDynamo in the afternoon and champion 3-year-old Animal Kingdom in the morning.

“I switch it up on him,” Graham said of the training routine. “He’s fine training by himself, which is a big help. Some days I tell Jody to go out there and pretend he’s foxhunting. He becomes a racehorse when you go to gallop, that’s the class in him.”

Graham planned to train up to the Breeders’ Cup—the Arlington Million was a Win and You’re In race for the \$3 million Turf—where Hardest Core would again take on the world’s best at Santa Anita Nov. 1.

“I nominated to a couple races just in case he’s kicking the barn down,” said the trainer. “But in the back of my head I’d like to freshen him up and run in the Breeders’ Cup without a race in between. He had three races pretty close together.”

Petty likes that thinking, loves the horse and likes the way Graham calls the shots.

“A horseman is a horseman at the end of the day,” he said. “There are a hundred ways to get a horse fit and everybody thinks theirs is right. Eddie listens to his horses, and we’ve been doing this long enough to know that it’s the horses who matter and he’s a serious horse.” ✨