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RACING'S GREAT MYSTERY MAN

He is recognized as one of the most successful trainers in the history of Thoroughbred racing—both steeplechase and flat. But who, exactly, is Tom Voss? **by Joe Clancy Jr.**

The surf rolls in and out. The sun powers through a few overmatched clouds. An airplane tugs a banner advertising the Rusted Root concert at The Bottle and Cork. Seagulls beg for french fries. A lifeguard twirls his whistle. Children play in the waves. Women in bikinis and men in baggy surfer shorts stroll past. It's Bethany Beach, Del., in the middle of the summer. And there's Tom Voss. Under an umbrella, long pants, black socks, shirt, cigarettes, Altoids and a book. He's vacationing—as always, a study in contrasts.

He's on the beach, but not in the sun. He trains steeplechasers, flat horses too. He grumbles at adults, but he hugs cats. He reads the *Daily Racing Form* and *The Bridges of Madison County*. He drives a horse van, but studies the Titanic. He's balding, but his hair grows to his collar. He seemingly couldn't be bothered by anything beyond what he's working on, but wants to know more about the Civil War.

One client calls Voss an enigma. Another refers to the trainer as "The Great Communicator." Plenty of people are scared of the man, though there are others who would trust him to babysit their children.

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"Communication is not one of his strong points," said Mimi Voss, Tom's wife and the mother of his two children (Sam, 25, and Elizabeth, 22). "He likes kids and animals better than people—he'd probably rather spend time with them than anyone. But it depends on which Tom Voss you get. He can completely ignore someone, not acknowledge their presence—sometimes he's just preoccupied. But, he can turn on the charm like no one I've ever seen before. You go to these social functions which he says he hates, but he'll have people eating out of the palm of his hand. Some people are crazy about him."

Tom Voss can be gruff. He can be soft. He's a bear. And a teddy. He's also a talented horse trainer. Riding a career peak, Voss entered July with a commanding lead in the National Steeplechase Association trainer standings (while bidding for his third consecutive championship). His barn overflows with quality Thoroughbreds to race on the flat, over hurdles and over timber.

In the past five and a half seasons, Voss-trained horses have won nearly 200 races and $5.3 million. NSA training championships came in 1997, 2000 and 2001. The statistics include victories by homebreds, French-breds who raced in California, South American imports, race track purchases, part-time foxhunters.

"He knows when his horses are right," said Todd Wyatt, Voss's chief assistant for six years. "He can get them to a particular race and have a peak performance, which is hard. He'll

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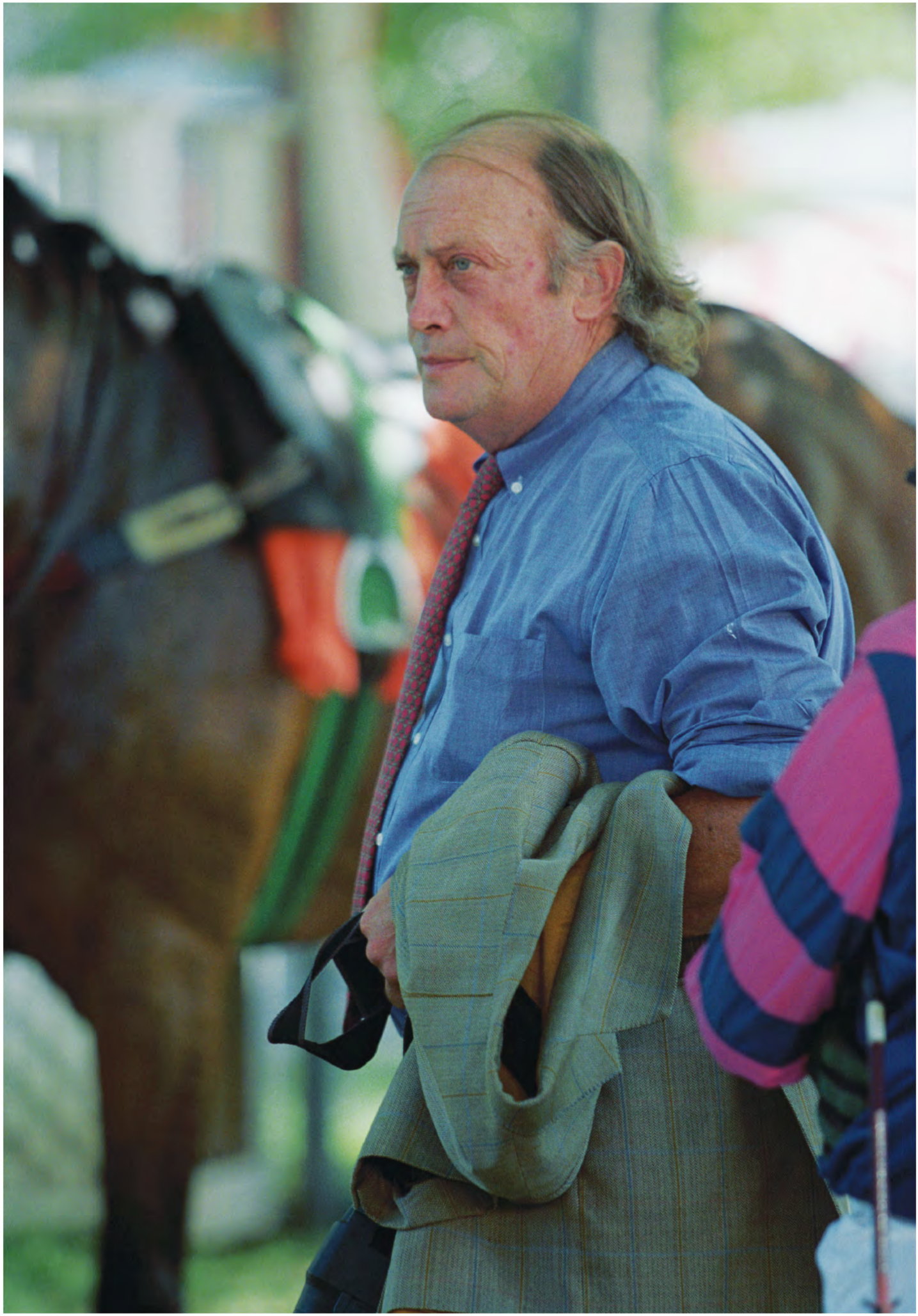

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John's Call, an aging and fragile-legged warrior, made the most of Voss's hands-on training methods and raised the stable to new heights in 2000, the season in which he won the Sword Dancer and Turf Classic (both Grade 1) and finished an impressive third in the Breeders' Cup Turf-G1.

sit on them for a while and then he'll cut them loose. He knows our horses, their idiosyncrasies, how they eat, what they do, and he knows other horses too. He knows what kind of race his horse is in and whether he can win."

Wyatt pointed to something of a sixth sense with his boss. "They always talk about people who can see character in horses. He can."

Tom Voss was born for his job, and then again he wasn't. The Voss family is steeped in horses, but Tom Voss is the first professional race horse trainer of the group. Tom's grandfather Edward can be credited with starting the process by moving from Long Island, N.Y., to Maryland in 1936. There, he maintained sprawling Atlanta Hall Farm in Monkton and served as Master of the Elkridge-Harford Hounds for more than 30 years.

The Vosses were part of a New York exodus of sorts. Many sporting-oriented families with ties to famed foxhunting clubs like Rockaway, Meadow Brook and Smithtown moved to Maryland to escape New York's suburban sprawl which began to threaten the farms, estates and foxhunting country. They wanted space to pursue their interests, and found it in places like Monkton.

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Moving to Maryland also completed a circle for the Voss family, which has its roots in Baltimore. Edward (Ned) Voss embraced the move with a passion. He rode in point-to-points (his last ride came at age 64 in 1957) and campaigned steeplechase horses like *Golpista, Flying Artist and *Atamisqui with trainer Burley Cocks. Atlanta Hall was also home to Belgian draft horses and purebred Angus cattle.

Edward Voss was also an artist, working in watercolors and oils—a talent that bloomed in his generation. His sister Jessie and brothers Stuart and Neilson were also accomplished artists.

Another brother Frank took the family skill to new heights, and became known as perhaps the greatest American equine artist in history, and one of the top five in the world. He painted

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Man o' War, Citation and countless other greats. His paintings are part of the most prestigious collections in the world. A bachelor, Frank Voss studied in New York, was a friend of famed English artist Sir Alfred Munnings and traveled often while commissioned to paint the era's Thoroughbred stars.

For Edward, however, art was a diversion. The hounds and the farm were his passion.

"He ran the Elkridge-Harford Hunt, did everything like it was his own," said author/historian Peter Winants, a longtime Voss family friend. "We used to call him 'The Boss Man' as kids and believe me, he was The Boss Man."

The man wasn't an ogre, just not very diplomatic. He dismissed ideas he didn't agree with by saying "perfectly ridiculous." Such habits didn't bother the children of the era.

"We liked him a lot, he was just a great guy and a good friend to all of us, and we respected and admired him," Winants recalled. "Tom's grandmother Elsa was without doubt the nicest person you ever met. She was always nice to us kids—a down-to-earth, genuine person."

Edward and wife Elsa Horne Voss (herself an accomplished sculptor) had one son, Edward Jr., who followed in the footsteps of a sporting life in suburban Baltimore. Eddie rode, foxhunted, attended school in Arizona, spent time at the family's ranch in Montana.

Winants and his brother Garry grew up with Eddie Voss in what was a charmed time. The "gang" included Hall of Fame horsemen Mikey and Paddy Smithwick and plenty of other compatriots.

"We used to go riding around in this old pickup truck, just drive around the fields and have fun," Winants said. "Well, like all kids would, Eddie, Garry and I got the truck stuck in a streambed one day. Nobody wanted to, but we had to go tell The Boss Man about it. We trooped back to the house to break the news, and everyone in the house was huddled around the radio listening to the details of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Pearl Harbor saved us a whole lot of trouble."

Spin the calendar to the present, and Winants could be Todd Wyatt talking about making the long walk to Tom Voss's house with bad news, only to be saved by some world-shattering development like September 11. Just the times have changed.

People call Tom Voss "The Boss." People say he's cocky, sure of himself, not all that diplomatic. But those same people say he's a gentleman, a great person.

"When I worked for Jonathan Sheppard at Saratoga, Betsy [Wells] and Graham [Motion] would always send me to ask Tom if we could use his paddocks," recalled Wyatt. "They were scared of him, and they sent me because they could boss me around. I was a kid, but Tom loves kids so we got along great."

Years later, Wyatt took a job with Voss at Saratoga.

"I thought I was going to work for a month and that would be it," he said. "People told me not to go because he's tough and all that. But he's very easy to work for. He shoots straight from the hip, doesn't shout, and calls it like he sees it. He's a rough old burly guy, but he knows those horses."

The personality seems to have skipped a generation—from Tom's grandfather to Tom—but only because Tom's father, Eddie Voss, never got the chance. He died of a stroke at age 38, leaving behind his wife Jen and three sons Tom, Jack and Ned. Jen still lives near Tom in Monkton but, like their father, Tom's brothers died young.

Born in 1950, Tom Voss grew up like his predecessors—with horses, farm life, the outdoors. He learned under the eyes of horsemen like Wassie Ball, who ran the hunter barn at Atlanta Hall for many years, Paddy Smithwick, Burley Cocks and Kenny Field. At 15, Tom trained his mother's *Idea Fija to win a flat race at Fair Hill. The year was 1966, and the horse ran under the name of R.E. Grayson since Tom was not old enough to hold a license.

Kentucky horseman John Stuart was born within a few weeks of Voss, but grew up in Virginia. Their paths crossed as teens at point-to-points.

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As picturesque as a Frank Voss painting, Voss's Atlanta Hall Farm occupies 900 acres in the heart of Monkton, Md., horse country.

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"He works all day, nitpicks at things, does a lot of work on the fences, the farm, mowing the fields. If you walked in and didn't know him, you'd ask if Mr. Voss was there."

"When Voss came to Virginia to ride, he had the fancy van and the three or four fancy horses we couldn't beat," Stuart said. "He was full of himself, and he looked the part—polished boots, stylish. After he'd won a couple of races, you couldn't talk to the guy. It came across as being cocky but if you know him you know he's just not very verbose. He was that way when he was 16."

And he's that way now.

Tom flunked his draft physical for Vietnam, dropped out of Wilmington College (while studying political science) and kept working with horses. In 1973, he took out a trainer's license. Two years later, he trained and rode Aruhapy to a win at My Lady's Manor, his hometown course.

Eventually, Tom Voss moved to Atlanta Hall—taking over his grandparents' farm some 20 years ago and following his grandfather into the Master's position with the Elkridge-Harford hounds.

Like everything else with Tom Voss, the 900-acre farm has contrasting identities. It's as picturesque as a Frank Voss painting, but it's as workmanlike as a John Deere tractor. Former owner Tim Durant, himself a steeplechase owner/trainer/rider in the 1920s, built the indoor track that keeps watch over the long, winding driveway. Tom and Mimi live in a stately home in the farm's center, while the horses occupy a variety of barns —one a courtyard-style that looks like it dropped out of the early 1900s (which it in a sense did).

Modern conveniences like hotwalking machines, tractors and automatic waterers are either hidden or not there at all. The horses chew on lush grass that's been reserved for animals for a century and sleep amongst boards that were cut at least that long ago. Doors, the place has doors that beg to be opened. Big, thick, heavy doors lead to tack rooms, closets, stalls.

In June, Atlanta Hall housed 32 horses in training (there were 15 more at Colonial Downs) and any number of others of every description. Work beckoned at every turn.

"It's a bad time of year to be shipping a horse like that," Tom says into one phone after setting another on a table. "Make sure they oil him. Put somebody in back to give him some water. This horse doesn't have an ulcer or something, does he? Horses that get colic all the time, sometimes they have ulcers. OK, we'll watch him."

Voss was caring for that horse before it arrived, and the others already at Atlanta Hall needed attention as well. Horses, employees, fields, buildings, vehicles—they all need something, all the time.

"He's very consistent in his workload, comes in every morning, looks around," said Wyatt. "He works all day, nitpicks at things, does a lot of work on the fences, the farm, mowing the fields. I call him a rich farmer. If you walked in and didn't know him, you'd ask if Mr. Voss was there. Then he comes in every night at 10 o'clock to check on the horses and feed them carrots."

For Tom, the farm is worth the work.

"The income from training gets plowed right back into the business of the farm," said Mimi Voss. "It gets the fences done, tractors repaired, fields mowed, barns painted, and Thomas spends a lot of time with that. He loves the place."

Before he died in 1996, Tom's brother Jack helped solidify Atlanta Hall's future by selling the development rights. The farm and its various yellow houses, barns, garages and sheds has been home to four generations of one family.

"He has a lot of pride and responsibility in the place," said Wyatt. "He's the only adult Voss left, really. His son is still young and Jack and Barbara's sons are young. That's a lot of pressure to walk around with."

Despite all of the steeplechase, hunting and pastoral farm influences, Tom Voss turned mostly to flat horses to build his training business. In 1983, his horses started 99 times and won nine races (almost all of them on the flat). Three years later, the stable had 121 starts and 21 wins (again heavily concentrated on the flat).

That trend (more than 100 starts per year, few of them over jumps, and even fewer in stakes races) continued until the mid-1990s, when Voss began to upgrade his barn. Steeplechasers came back, quality flat horses stayed and success followed. The stable's annual earnings first topped $500,000 in 1996, and they have stayed there.

Voss truly arrived on the national scene in 2000, when John's Call won two Grade 1 turf stakes (the Sword Dancer at Saratoga and the Turf Classic at Belmont) and finished a game third in the Breeders' Cup Turf-G1. A 9-year-old gelding with fragile legs and five hurdle starts in his past, John's Call stopped time in 2000 and missed the male turf Eclipse Award by a half-length.

The stable won 43 races and $1.8 million that year, and Voss's name was everywhere. People noticed. *The Blood-Horse,* the Baltimore *Sun, Thoroughbred Times, Daily Racing Form,* ESPN—they all came to Voss. Hall of Fame trainer Bobby Frankel said Voss could train 100 horses if he wanted.

Voss doesn't want to be Bobby Frankel, though he wouldn't mind having some of his horses. John's Call, the best horse Voss ever trained, started out as a $4,000 yearling.

"He's never had many flat horses given to him that weren't cheap horses to start with," said former point-to-point opponent Stuart, who now refers clients like Douglas Joyce and Fox Ridge Farm to Voss. "I'm not sure that if he didn't get some of the horses those other trainers get that he wouldn't concentrate more on the flat.

"He wouldn't change his mode of operation, though. He'd still stay on the farm except for Saratoga, take a few months off to foxhunt, but he's got a gift for training horses."

VOSS'S MAJOR CLAIMS TO FAME

National Steeplechase Association champion trainer—three times: 1997, 2000, 2001
NSA timber champion—Ironfist (2000)
NSA novice champion—Approaching Squall (1998), Soaringoverseattle (1997)
Major races
Turf Classic Invitational S-G1, Sword Dancer Invitational H-G1—John's Call (2000)
Breeders' Cup Steeplechase-NSA1—Quel Senor (Fr) (2001)
New York Turf Writers Cup-NSA1—Petroski (1996)
Atlanta Cup-NSA1—Soaringoverseattle (1998), Mickey Free (1988)
Joe Aitcheson Novice Stakes-NSA1—Anofferucantrefuse (2002)
A.P. Smithwick Memorial-NSA2—Brigade of Guards (1997), Mickey Free (1987), Cookie (1980)
Maryland Hunt Cup—Welter Weight (1999), Florida Law (1998)
Virginia Gold Cup—Ironfist (2001)
Maryland Grand National—Welter Weight (four times—1996, 1999, 2000, 2001), Sam Sullivan (2002)
My Lady's Manor—Ironfist (three times—2000, 2001, 2002)

Voss's training center has a variety of barns, one with an indoor track (above) and another courtyard style (below).

Stuart missed Voss for about 25 years, and now sees a complete horseman—not a kid with an attitude.

"I admire how the guy gets out and works," he said. "He doesn't have to spend that much time at it. I know what trainers do, and this guy works a hell of a lot harder than some horse trainers. A lot of people feel that way and like him for that reason."

Following Stuart's advice, Joyce sent John's Call to Voss—and waited.

"Tom had him for five months before we ever met face-to-face, but it's been a great relationship on a professional and a personal level," said Joyce. "I never, ever, have a thought that the horses are not being exquisitely taken care of—he does whatever he thinks is in the best interests of the horse, and therefore the relationship with the owner too."

When John's Call injured a tendon in 1995, Voss recognized the injury because of a feeling and a look—not a test, a guest or a veterinarian's opinion.

"Not many people know a horse that well, especially someone with that many under his tutelage," Joyce said. "The animals are first in his mind. He gets up every morning and will spend all day there—then he checks on them before he goes to bed."

All of that caring couldn't prevent the magic carpet ride of 2000 from including a crash. Jonathan Kiser, steeplechase riding sensation and longtime member of Team Voss, died in July (in a non-horse-related accident). He was 22, and Voss had to go on.

"It was like having four legs and then all of the sudden having three," Tom said in December of that year. "He was here one day and gone the next. There was a pall over the place. An emptiness. Eventually, we had to lay the whole thing to rest."

Sort of.

"It put an awful lot of stress on Thomas," said Mimi, customarily calling her husband by his formal name. "I don't think he will ever get over Jonathan."

Kiser's mother Dottie entrusted her son to Tom Voss at an early age and still stays in touch with the family, but knows both sides of the man.

"He used to scare the hell out of me and I always tried to stay carefully out of his way," she said. "The first time I saw him interact with kids was when Jonathan went to a pony racing clinic. I saw how fair and on target he could be with children. Jonathan loved working there, and loved being part of Tom's life."

Though seemingly consumed by his horses, Voss finds time for other interests—besides the beach. He reads, he studies, feeds his inherited passion for art by maintaining an extensive collection. (Winants is in the midst of a book about Frank Voss, and the art of the Voss family will be part of a 2005 exhibit at the National Museum of Racing.)

His son Sam sparked Voss's interest in the Civil War when research for a high school project turned up family papers dating to that time. Stuffed away on a shelf at Atlanta Hall, the letters chronicled the life of Confederate soldier Frank Voss (a distant relative, not the painter) and his friend Sam Sullivan. Donated to the state's archives, the letters are one of Maryland's greatest Civil War discoveries.

Since then, Sam and Tom have extensively studied the Civil War and this summer took a walking and riding tour of Gettysburg.

"He's a little offbeat, thinks differently, very well-read," said Wyatt. "He watches movies, reads more books than most people. But he gets joy out of simple things. He goes to Sam's Club, thinks Hot Pockets are a great invention. He wanted to cater our Christmas Party because he said he could do it for $50 instead of $50 a person."

The simplicity doesn't fool Wyatt. "Oh, it's all related. He's great at throwing you off your game."

Voss's wife echoed that sentiment.

"You think of him as a redneck country boy, but his interests are quite sophisticated," said Mimi. "He just got a new car—and he was going to get a Blazer or a Tahoe, something like that. He called me the next day from the Jaguar dealership and came home with a black Jaguar. He's thrown me for a loop, but maybe he's trying to change his image."

More like feed it. If everybody knows Tom Voss as a pickup truck guy, then it's surely time to buy a sports car. ✹

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