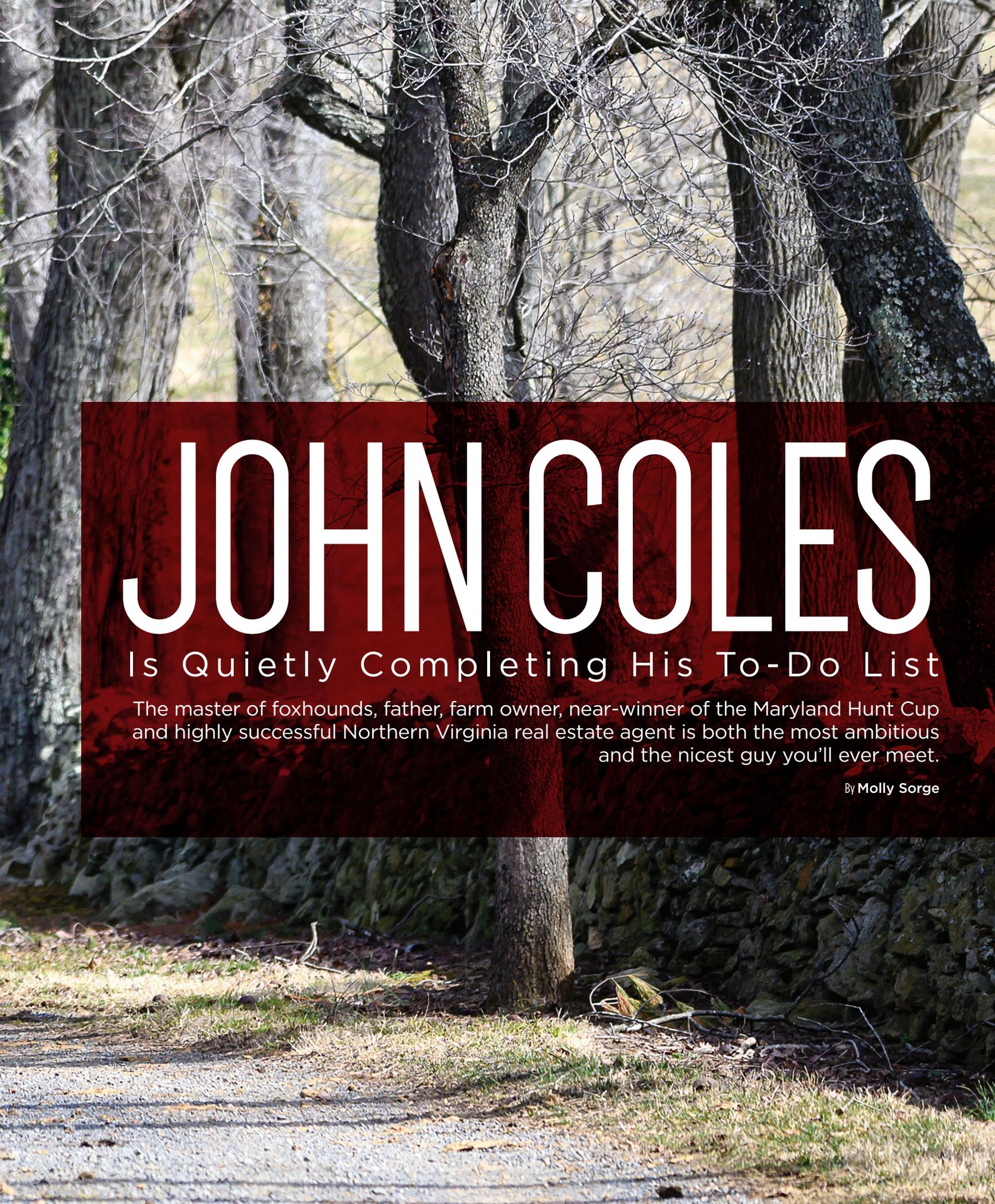




MIDDLEBURG PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO



# JOHN COLES

Is Quietly Completing His To-Do List

The master of foxhounds, father, farm owner, near-winner of the Maryland Hunt Cup and highly successful Northern Virginia real estate agent is both the most ambitious and the nicest guy you'll ever meet.

By Molly Sorge

Late one evening, Sloane Coles heard a sound outside her home on her parents' Springfield Farm, located about 2 miles outside of Middleburg, Virginia, in The Plains.

"I looked out of the window at 9 o'clock at night, and my dad was mowing my yard. He just never stops," she says. "It's amazing what he gets done in a day."

John Coles never looks like he's in a hurry. But he carries a small, handwritten list of to-dos in his shirt pocket every day. "He's always making lists, but he actually *finishes* the things on his list," says Sloane.

John is a study in contrasts. He's one of the top real estate agents in the Middleburg area, but he seals multi-million-dollar deals in faded blue jeans and worn boots and arrives to show properties driving a utilitarian, American-brand SUV. His keen business instincts and intense drive are buried quite deep under a genteel Southern drawl, easy laugh and his relaxed, unhurried demeanor.

While he's been enormously successful as a jockey, MFH and real estate agent, John will always stop and chat with a farm worker and buy him a sandwich for lunch. When he comes across a fellow equestrian on the side of the road with seized trailer brakes, he'll loan them his truck and trailer to get their horse home. He's the quintessential nice guy.

"He has a quiet way about him that helps him with both horses and people," says friend Tommy Lee Jones, who has known John for more than 50 years. "But that quiet is strong too. He has a lot of determination when he sets his mind on something."

### AN OLD SHOE

Horses have served as a constant in John's life, and he's found much success with them, but he's never forgotten the simple joys of riding. Now 68, he serves as joint-master of the Orange County Hunt and has ridden in the Maryland Hunt Cup three times. Stories about his youth riding include famous names like Kenny Wheeler, Mikey Smithwick, Melvin Poe and Marion duPont Scott, but he still has a simple blue ribbon he won as a child framed and hanging in his home.

"That was from the Pony Club days," John says. "We made the ribbons the night before, and then we had a show and tried to win them."

John's father was the master and hunted the hounds at Keswick Hunt Club in addition to breeding horses and ponies. The family farm Cloverfields, which is still in the family after 12 generations, is next to the Wheeler family's Cismont Manor Farm in Keswick, Virginia.

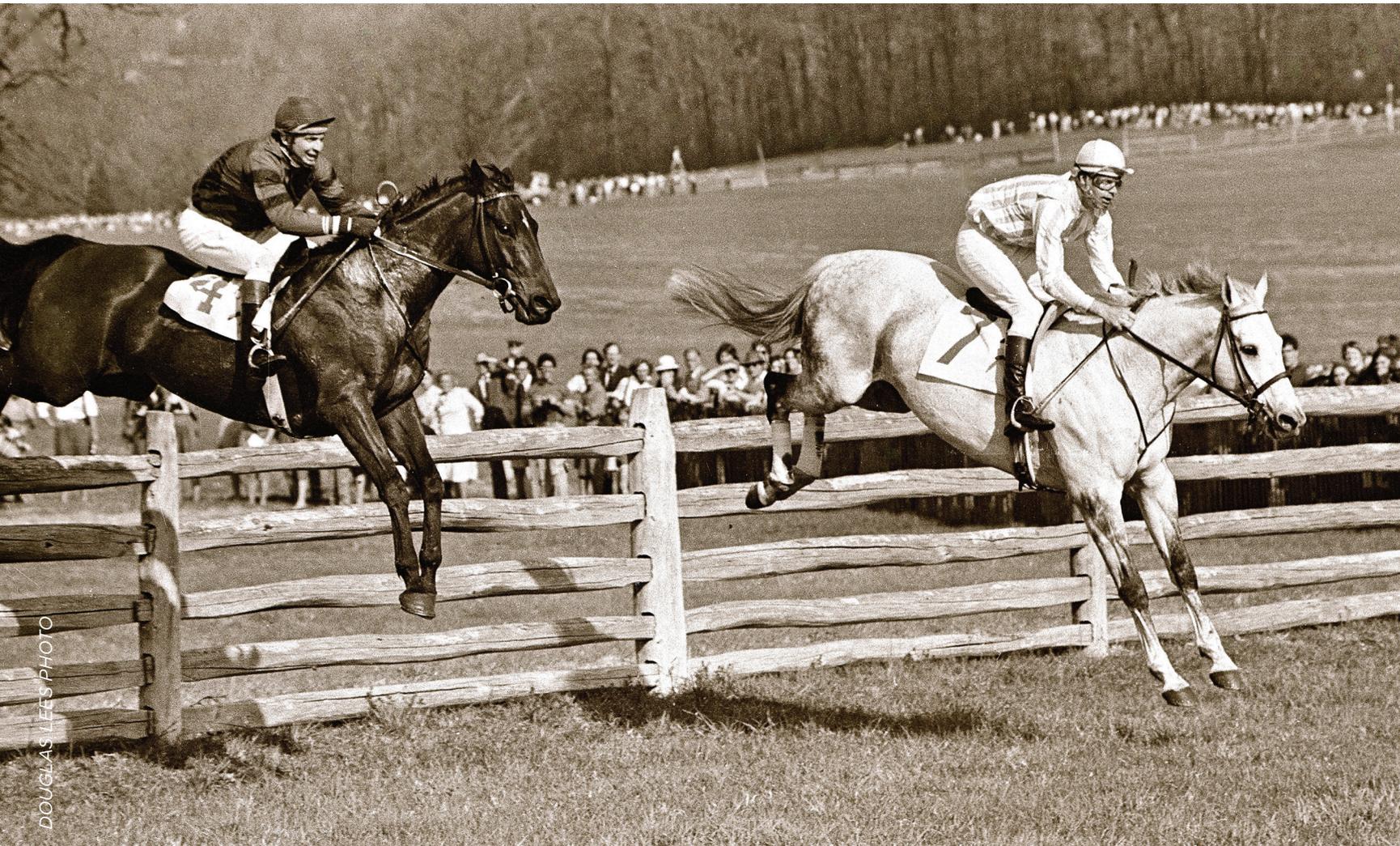
"The thing I find so remarkable about John, and I noticed this when I met him, and it's true of his family as well, is that he is just very genuine," says his wife, Julie Coles. "My mother used to say about people, 'He's an old shoe,' and that's the way John is, easy to be around. There are absolutely no pretenses. He's just a country boy from Virginia."



DOUGLAS LEES PHOTO



In addition to his other pursuits, John Coles (*leading*) now serves as Jt.-MFH of the Orange County Hunt.



DOUGLAS LEE'S PHOTO

In the 1982 Maryland Hunt Cup, John Coles and Appolinox were leading after all 22 fences before falling to third before the finish.

John, one of five children, grew up cavorting around the farm on ponies, foxhunting and watching top professionals ride.

"Nobody ever gave me a riding lesson," says John. "Back then you watched Rodney Jenkins, and you tried to copy whoever was winning at the time.

"We had a pony herd and a horse herd. We had 20 to 30 foals a year, and we would break them in and ride them," John adds. "My parents kind of let us do whatever we wanted to do and didn't think we'd get hurt."

When John's pony needed to be shod, his father told him to spend some time with the farrier and learn how to shoe. The skills stood him in good stead when his own children had ponies, and John shod them.

When John was old enough to drive, he started galloping race horses for Marion duPont Scott at Montpelier. He rode in

some timber and point-to-point races, and when he went to watch the Maryland Hunt Cup, he set a goal.

"I had the desire pretty early on that I wanted to ride in the Maryland Hunt Cup," he says. "That was really what I wanted to do. It kind of gets in your blood. There's no other race really quite like it."

### A DREAM ALMOST REALIZED

Of his college education at Virginia Tech, John says, "We probably shouldn't say too much about those years! I was probably spending more time at the races than I was at school." But when he finished school, he was ready to achieve his goals.

He found his way to Middleburg and The Plains, the heart of Virginia steeplechasing and hunt country. He rode races for trainers such as Jones and Ernie Oare.

“He was just a super jumper and a fun, easy horse. He was a great foxhunter and great jumper,” says John Coles (right, pictured with Bruce Davidson mounted on Our Steeplejack) of the George Ohrstrom-bred Appolinax, his partner for three Maryland Hunt Cups and numerous other timber races.



DOUGLAS LEES PHOTO

“John is just a natural horseman,” says Jones. “He was a good race rider; he had a lot of confidence in himself without being cocky. He was very quiet with horses and has a natural affinity with them. When he was racing, he just knew what he could ask of a horse. There were very few instructions you had to give him when you put him up on a horse.”

Then, in 1975, George Ohrstrom of the powerhouse Whitewood Stables hired him. “George had a big breeding operation. Between here and France we had about 150 broodmares and race horses,” John says. “I did the steeplechase horses and managed the flat horses. I did a little bit of everything for him.”

Ohrstrom died in 2005, but his son Gerry Ohrstrom remembers well when John started working for his father.

“John was as graceful and natural as can be, gentle and firm with the horses, and when he was tending to them

in stalls or pastures they treated him as one of the herd,” says Gerry. “He started with us as a steeplechase jockey and was such a curious learner he gradually took on more responsibilities training the horses, operating pastures and running the business side of the farm too. My dad always said, ‘John has an astute sense of costs and budgets.’ ”

One of the horses George bred was the classy gray Appolinax (Festive Dancer—Cracker, Midnight Sun), foaled in 1971. “George bred him for the Hunt Cup,” John says.

When John joined Whitewood, Appolinax was 4 and had won a race in France as a 3-year-old. John took over the ride, and they began aiming for the Maryland Hunt Cup.

“He was just a super jumper and a fun, easy horse,” says John, who hunted him with the Orange County Hunt. “He was a great foxhunter and great jumper. He was just an all-around nice horse with a lot of sense.”



KIMBERLY LOUSHIN PHOTO

Springfield Farm in Middleburg, Va., is home to many retired horses, and John Coles can often be found in the fields with them.

John and Appolinax got mileage on the timber circuit with consistent top results. By 1982, they were ready to make their first try at the Maryland Hunt Cup—4 miles and 22 jumps of solid, imposing, vertical timber over 4' high.

“John really planned every step that horse took and knew him inside and out,” Julie says. “Mikey Smithwick walked the course with him and told him exactly which panels to jump and gave him the plan, and John followed it precisely. People think of John as very laidback, but he is not. He is very competitive. His planning to win that race was years in the making.”

John and Appolinax jumped all 22 fences without flaw. “The horse jumped around really well; he never had a bad fence,” John says. “It seemed much easier when you were out doing it than when you were walking the course in the morning!”

But in the final stretch run, things didn't go their way.

“Well, the dream was coming true. Until the last fence,” John says. “We jumped the last fence in front and then were third by an inch and a half.”

Turney McKnight and Tong emerged as the winners that day. There's an unusual edge to John's voice when he discusses that race; you can tell the bitter disappointment hasn't faded over three decades.

Appolinax and John returned to the Hunt Cup together two more times; in 1984 they finished second, and in 1985, their swan song together, they were third again. By that time, Appolinax was 14, and John was married to Julie, a successful show rider, and starting a family. Their racing days were over.

John continued to hunt Appolinax, whipping-in at Orange County to the legendary huntsman Melvin Poe. The big gray hunted until the age of 22, and then he lived out his retirement at Whitewood.

## THE NEXT CHAPTER

George Ohrstrom was more than just an employer to John; he mentored John in many ways. John worked for Whitewood for more than 25 years and describes George as his second father.

“My father appreciated John’s basic decency and dedicated diligence, his curious mind, and perhaps most of all his humility and resilience,” says Gerry. “One had to be resilient to work with George Ohrstrom!”

George also introduced John to real estate and passed on his passion for land conservation. In 1976, John began practicing real estate alongside his racing career. He found another father figure in Phil Thomas of Thomas & Talbot in Middleburg.

John has spent more than 40 years with the agency, switching to real estate full time in the '90s as his three children—Fraleley, Sloane and Peyton—grew up. “I had three kids, and I needed to make a living!” John says. “I like the real estate. I enjoy making deals and making people happy. It’s fun to find the right place for the right person. Phil Thomas pretty much brought me along and helped me out.”

DOUGLAS LEES PHOTO



John and Julie Coles are both lifelong horse people, and they regularly foxhunt together with Orange County Hounds.





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John Coles' daughter, Sloane Coles, is a professional show jumper who now works out of her Spring Ledge LLC at her family's Springfield Farm.

DOUGLAS LEES PHOTO

John quickly showed an aptitude for matching prestigious clients with top-of-the-line farms. His intimate knowledge of the area after decades of foxhunting over it was invaluable, and he knew how to leverage his equestrian connections to build deals. He became a joint-master at Orange County in 2001 and still hunts regularly, always on a Thoroughbred.

“John Coles loves what he does,” says Thomas. “When he goes after a deal, people listen to him because he’s built a history of being successful, both as a horseman and a jockey and then as a real estate expert. John’s a natural—he approaches everything with deliberation and consideration. John is gentle with the horses and with his clients. He’s an all-around good guy.”

Throughout John’s career he’s prioritized conserving land, frequently counseling real estate clients in the benefits and logistics of putting their land into conservation. He’s also served on the board of the Piedmont Environmental Council.

“He’s done a great job being able to help keep the open space,” says Jones, now the huntsman at Casanova Hunt in Virginia. “People trust him. He’s as honest as he can be. When he tells you he’s going to do something, you can trust that it’s going to happen.”

Part of John’s appeal is his absolute genuine kindness, which enables him to establish a connection with anyone.

“I was attracted to him because he was just so nice to everyone,” Julie says. “He makes you feel like you’re the only person he’s thinking about at the time when he’s talking to you.”

## THE HARDEST WORKER AROUND

Over the years, John and his family have owned and lived on a number of farms in the Middleburg area, but he bought the 350-acre Springfield Farm 15 years ago and has gradually been rehabilitating the historic property. The farm is now home base for daughter Sloane, a young jumper rider and trainer, and a thriving horse retirement business.

Ever the savvy businessman, John envisioned the show horse retirement business as a way to help support Sloane as she built her career and Spring Ledge LLC.

“It’s just good, solid, steady income for her,” Julie says. “Those horses have to retire somewhere, and not everyone has a big horse farm. It just makes sense. But it is labor-intensive. It’s taken a few years to get this place ready with board fence everywhere, and waterers and sheds, and they’re fed and checked on twice a day; it’s not for the faint of heart. But it’s helping set Sloane up so she can do what she wants to do.”

John likes to be involved in the care of the 65 retired horses at Springfield, even trimming their feet. It’s not uncommon to find him standing in a field, surrounded by furry horses, having a chat with them.

John is also overseeing the complete renovation of the main house at Springfield, which dates back to 1780, and the building of an addition to the main barn for Sloane’s business.

“I think he’s successful, and I know this because I live with him, because he probably works harder than anyone else,” says Julie. “He’s a workaholic. He’s master of Orange County, which takes a lot of time, but he loves it, and he’s up figuring out good matches in real estate until late at night, and then he’s the contractor for this farm that we’re redoing. He’s just a hard worker.”

“I think he’s been successful at what he does because he’s always plugging along.”

—SLOANE COLES

John started his list as a teenager with the goal of riding in the Maryland Hunt Cup, and he checked off that accomplishment (though not checking off the win still rankles). And every ambition he’s had since has come to fruition—real estate agent, father, MFH, land conservationist, and owner of a gorgeous historic farm. But he’s not one to mull over the achievements.

“I think he’s been successful at what he does because he’s always plugging along,” Sloane says. “He doesn’t really outwardly get excited about a big real estate deal, or really about anything, but he’s just always working and getting things done.”

John says he doesn’t have anything left on his bucket list. “I’ve become a grandfather [to Fraley’s son], and that’s a lot of fun,” he says. “I’ve done most of the things I wanted to do. Life is good. I can’t ask for much more.” 🍷