

Fire Stables Equestrian

A NEW CHAPTER

by Kendra Peeples

After 15 years of working at the Fire Stables Equestrian, formerly called Peeper Ranch, Phil Fountain still describes his work office as being “the Taj Mahal of horse facilities,” and it’s easy to see why. Fire Stables sits upon 700 acres in Lenexa, Kansas and is currently the largest equestrian center in the Kansas City area. When the gates open, you are greeted by high waving flags and a life-size bronze statue of Treble’s First Take, or “Jessica” as she was known outside of the ring. The viewing rooms and lobby are air-conditioned; there are an abundance of wash and tack-up stalls; and even the aisles are made up of soft rubber artificial bricks. There are two heated indoor arenas, as well as a round-pen and a huge 250’ by 125’ outdoor arena. Before any of the horses even leave their stalls, it is apparent that quality is the priority.

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“Working at Fire is without a doubt the ‘dream job’ that I was always hoping to find,” assistant trainer Julianne Rafferty explained. “Fire separates itself from other top show barns with our customer service. I really think that what takes us up one step is our client care. It is truly an extended family and we try to make sure that the experience they have with us on

and off the horse is the very best that we can provide.”

In addition to their large string of talented show horses, Fire Equestrian also supports an academy program that travels all the way to Murfreesboro, Tennessee to compete in the National Academy Championship Horse Show. Since 2009, the students of Fire Equestrian have traveled to compete for the blue and to repre-

sent the Morgan breed. Nicole Morton is the instructor of this program, and she says that the National Academy Championship is her favorite show of the year since it is the culmination of their year’s hard work and it is an honor to represent the Morgan breed there. She thanks Brad Fire, owner of Fire Equestrian, and Teresa Beers, farm manager, for their continued support



Julianne Rafferty and Phil Fountain joined Hannah, Roseann and Russell McBain following Hannah’s winning ride with Graycliff Tony GCH in the 2016 Youth English Pleasure World Championship, repeating their win from 2015.



Jake Ryan (Graycliff Tony GCH x Erotic Dancer) debuted at the 2014 Gold Cup Regional winning the Three-Year-Old Park Saddle with Phil Fountain. Later that year, he would go on to win the World Championship and in 2015 owner and breeder Dawn Fire would ride him to the Park Saddle Four-Year-Old World Championship.



Elaine Galatz enjoyed a victorious 2016 under the direction of Phil Fountain capped off with a Grand National win and reserve world championship with Playmor's Prinz Of Bellair.

of the academy program over the past years, and especially in recent years.

Last but certainly not least, Fire Equestrian is also a breeding farm. Kenda Benn is the breeding manager of the farm and serves as the point of contact for people interested in breeding to the

much sought after Graycliff Tony GCH. Breeding of Fire Equestrian owned horses has slowed a bit in recent years, but the demand for Graycliff Tony GCH has sky rocketed after it became apparent that he could pass on his beautiful looks and athleticism to a variety of mares.

The entire operation of Fire Equestrian seems like a daunting task. Phil Fountain expressed his awe in how it all worked when he first came to the farm in 2002. "My farm in Independence, Missouri at the time was totally functional, but it was just a work house," Fountain explained. "The farm wasn't for show. There was a lot more activity going on at Peeper than I was used to. They had a whole team already put together there, and there was a lot more going on than just training horses."

Fountain got his start in horses when he was a child. He grew up in Clinton Corners, New York, which is near Poughkeepsie. His parents raised Morgans under the Hibernia prefix when



Doug and Tadgy Stacy along with daughter Mallory have enjoyed a successful partnership with trainer Phil Fountain for the past several years. They celebrated a tricolor culmination of their 2016 show season as Phil Fountain drove DRF Charlemagne to earn the Pleasure Driving World Championship.

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he was young. While there was some limited showing, these horses were mostly just family owned pets. Before long, though, Fountain would go to work at Saddleback Farm and learn from Morgan icons Fred and Jeannie Herrick. He worked at Saddleback during the summers of his high school years and returned to work there once more after he had graduated from the University of Vermont. For the next year and a half, Fountain was able to learn hands on from one of the great horse trainers of the time. "I was allowed to do a lot myself, so I not

only got to learn under Fred's tutelage, but I also experienced a lot of trial-and-error and was able to find out myself what works and what doesn't," Fountain recalled. "Saddleback Supreme was getting older at this point, but I remember getting to work with Philharmonic and he was incredible. It was all so effortless for him, just a really neat guy."

Following his time at Saddleback, Fountain moved on to Rye Meadow Farm in Rye, New Hampshire. Again, Fountain worked there for about a year and a half before being introduced to Pam Ellingsen of Chandel Morgans in Smithville, Missouri. Once again, it was time for Fountain to pack up and move to try his hand at a new farm with new horses and new practices. This was an especially important opportunity for Fountain, because it was his first chance to come in and train a string of colts on his own. This was his first opportunity to be seen at the national level. Thus, 1992 marked the first year that Fountain was able to step foot into the Oklahoma City coliseum. Some of those clients from his days at Chandel are still clients of Fountain's to this day including Sally Anne Lyle, Erica Dorwart, and Glenn and Sharon McCoy.

After two years, Fountain started his own business named Avalon in Smithville, Missouri. It was also then that Fountain began what would be a long and treasured business relationship and friendship with Wendell Williams. Avalon would stay at the Smithville location for the next eight years.

Fountain first met Dawn Fire at the Circle J Regional Horse Show. They got to know each other a little bit, and Fire invited Fountain to come visit the farm in Lenexa. Fountain was impressed with the facilities and wrote Fire a note after he returned from his trip. He let her know that he was quite impressed and that she should be proud of what she had. He also let her know that if she was interested in taking things to a higher level that she should call him. About 6-7 months later, she did just that. Making the move to Lenexa, Fountain brought with him his personal clients and began his career of personally training the Fire family's horses.

When asked about moments that stand out from his time in Lenexa, Fountain's list of horses sound like a who's who of the industry. Fountain remembers Erotic Dancer as being the first horse that he explicitly told Fire that she should buy. Fountain brought this mare with him from Missouri for Bonnie Fox and Soldier Creek Farm, her breeder. Fountain and Erotic Dancer had already captured a reserve world champion title, and Fountain had the foresight to recognize this mare's potential with Fire. "I told Dawn, 'I think you should buy this horse. A year from now, we will be looking for this horse and we won't be able to find her,'" Fountain reminisced. "She was one of the most intuitive horses I've ever met. It was like communicating with a person."

Fountain went on to gush about her work ethic and the energy of this mare. One memory that stood out above all else with her was when Fountain was warming her up prior to the Park

Saddle Amateur Championship on the New England Regional track in 2005. "She came down that track like I'd never felt her before," Fountain explained. "It was one of those moments that was just hypnotic."

He also recounted leading Boogie Nights GCH to the World Champion Gelding title. He had explained to breeder Lynn Peeples that it seemed like it was a birthright for "Mad Dog" to win the title since both of his parents, Born To Boogie and UVM Unity, had won World Champion Stallion and World Champion Mare, respectively. Treble's First Take, DRF Charlemagne, Jake Ryan, and Graycliff Tony GCH are among the other notable horses that Fountain has trained. When Dawn Fire and Graycliff Tony GCH won the 2013 and 2014 English Pleasure World Championship, it was an extra thrill as this was the first time a horse ridden by an amateur had won the open in consecutive years.

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Recently, Fountain had to overcome a major injury: rupturing his Achilles' tendon. In July of 2015, he took off running after a loose horse and fell to the ground knowing that something serious had just happened. His doctor diagnosed the injury and told him that he was looking at a recovery period of 9-12 months. He was suddenly faced with a barrage of questions: How do I keep training? Do I find another trainer? What about my clients and their horses?

"Howie Schatzberg was one of my first calls," Fountain said. "I explained my situation and I said that I needed somebody to come in. I was in a tough spot and through Howie, I found Julianne Rafferty. JuJu was a godsend then and continues to be so."

Rafferty says that her first interaction with horses was probably through Barbie horses, which led to her begging her mother to let her



Nicole Jackson capped her Academy career as a National Champion in 2012 directed by Nicole Morton and cheered on by proud grandmother Sally Jackson.

take riding lessons. She then began riding at the age of nine at Altadena Stables near her home in Pasadena, California. The farm just happened to teach saddle seat and have both Morgans and American Saddlebreds. Her passion continued and led her to William Woods, where she roomed with Alyssa Wick of Hardwood Creek who further opened her eyes to the world of Morgans as well as Saddlebreds.

"I knew of Peeper Ranch and their show horses from the magazines and online," Rafferty explained. "I had been to the Morgan Grand Nationals one time before, and I saw their horses at the show, but that was really the extent of my knowledge. Both Howie Schatzberg and Alyssa Wick had such great things to say about Phil and about how talented he was, so that helped to solidify my decision to take the opportunity to work here."

Rafferty dove head first into the opportunity she was given. With over 20 twenty horses that she had never seen or touched and the 2015 Grand National steadily approaching, she had plenty of work to do. She remembers meeting with Fountain in his kitchen where he wrote a list of what the horses were to do and what equipment they used, and then she began her work. "I will always remember the first two horses I worked at Peeper: Graycliff Tony GCH and Jake Ryan, two of the nicest horses I've ever had the opportunity to work," Rafferty said.

Rafferty certainly proved her worth when Peeper packed up their things and traveled to Oklahoma City just three months later. The farm brought 18 horses to show, and they brought 18 World and Reserve World Champion coolers home. In that short time, Rafferty had established a strong connection with the clients and horses. Though she did briefly leave to

work in the Saddlebred industry in 2016, she ended up returning to Lenexa, much to the delight of the customers and Fountain. "The best part of my injury was having JuJu come into, not only my life, but the entire farm," Fountain said.

The clients sing their high praises of both Fountain and Rafferty. Leesa Galatz and her mother Elaine met with Phil when Harold Angell, their trainer at Vegas Valley Morgans, had decided to retire. Angell and Elaine had gone to Peeper to look at a new horse and ended up purchasing Warchest. Since Angell knew that he would soon be retiring, they made the plan to leave Warchest in Lenexa so that he could be trained under saddle.

"We chose Phil because he was always very professional and we felt like he was a very honest person," Leesa recounted. "After having a horse trainer that worked for only our family for so long, we wanted to make sure that we were with someone that we could trust. Phil's horses always were turned out well, they looked happy, sound and well cared for, and that was very important to us." The Galatz's have seen great success with Warchest as well as Playmor's Prinz Of Bellair, VVM Encore and their newest addition SpringMill Superstition GCH under the direction of Fountain.

Another family that has chosen to bring their horses to Lenexa is the Stacy's of Oklahoma City. Mallory Stacy and her mom Tadgy ride under Fountain and Rafferty. Mallory had a well-decorated performance and equitation career as a junior exhibitor and has since moved on to success in the youth and amateur ranks with her hunter pleasure horse, LLL Tzar Alexander GCH. Mallory most enjoys the constant professionalism. "I feel that Phil really fosters an environment at the farm that encourages clients to feel comfortable not only in the barn, but also in asking questions and understanding his methods and goals for their horses," Mallory explained. "I

really respect Phil's openness and willingness to explain the ins and outs of my horses to me."

Recently, Mallory's beloved junior exhibitor horse Bell South GCH was brought to Fountain and Rafferty. She had planned on bringing him with her for her fall semester at Stephens College, and she knew that she would need some help in getting him back in shape after his age had caught up with him. This pair recently made their show ring comeback at the Jubilee Regional Morgan Horse Show where they won the Hunter Pleasure Ladies Geldings qualifier and then the Hunter Pleasure Ladies Championship. "I don't think it would've been possible for Hanz to get back in the ring if it weren't for Phil and

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Julianne," Mallory said. "Now I get to show my heart horse in the coliseum at Oklahoma City again!" She also explained that it is her goal to become a horse trainer following her completion of her Equestrian Studies degree at Stephens College, so she is soaking in all the knowledge that she can from both Fountain and Rafferty and her instructors at college.

Another relatively new client of Fountain's is the McBain family. They made the move to Lenexa when Roseann and Russell purchased Graycliff Tony GCH for their daughter Hannah prior to the 2015 show season. Hannah admits to have been intimidated by Fountain when she was younger, but explained that the feeling quickly disappeared when she made her first trip

to the farm. The McBains echoed the sentiment that it was Fountain's professionalism and welcoming nature that immediately set them at ease.

"Phil, Julianne, and everyone else at the farm are always paying attention to small details," Hannah said. "As an equitation rider, I was always paying attention to the details myself, and now as an amateur, I'm learning to pay attention to those small details in all of my show horses." Hannah also explained that she was indeed nervous to start showing Tony. After all, he was the two time reigning English Pleasure World Champion and was an in demand as a breeding stallion. She says that there is still some pressure every time she shows, but it is always a team effort with Tony and that makes the endeavor fun and less stressful. Her family lives nearly 12 hours away in Michigan, but says that it is worth it to have their horses at such an incredible facility. Hannah travels out to the farm once a month with her dog, Enzo, to practice with her horses. "The biggest and most important lesson that Phil has taught me is to always ride hard," Hannah reflected. "Even if I am not having the best class, he always encourages me to keep pushing and keep riding."

The name of the farm may have changed, but the team of professionals and dedicated clients behind the name continue to strive for the golden standard people associated with Peeper Ranch. Each year, a new group of youngsters enter the barn. Each year, clients and their horses work towards a new set of goals. And each year, Fountain, Rafferty, and the entire team at Fire Stables Equestrian build upon their years of experience to pave the way for another successful show season. The Morgan Grand National and World Championships in Oklahoma City will be the first show that Fire Stables Equestrian officially debuts under their new name, but everyone can anticipate seeing the same familiar team they know and respect.



Fire Stables Equestrian sits on 700 picturesque acres of land and is thus the largest equestrian facility in the entire Kansas City area. It is easy to see how Phil Fountain could describe it as the "Taj Mahal" of barns.