

# Lance BENNETT

## His Passion Is His Profession

BY JENNY GREY

Lance Bennett, owner of Rancho Vista in San Marcos, California, is a gifted, self-made horseman. We follow his story from the time he learned to ride hunter/jumpers as a young boy, discovered the excitement of Saddlebreds as a young man and then fell in love with the power of the mighty Friesian breed as his career progressed. In talking to Lance we understand why he is a superb trainer, but when we speak to his clients, we learn of an added dimension – that of his kindness and compassion toward all of the people and animals in his care. With his passion as his profession, he is enjoying every day of the journey.

As far back as he can remember, Lance loved horses but it was to be several years before he began to realize his dream. With parents who had no interest in anything equine, it was up to him to find his own way. Trying many other sports including gymnastics, baseball and basketball, nothing else held his interest. His father, a salesman, relocated several times while Lance was young, so it was not until the family relocated to New Hampshire that he was finally able to fulfill his ambition to ride a horse.

Taking the first step in what would be a lifetime avocation, Lance knocked on the door of a local thoroughbred stable, arranging to work in exchange for being able to ride. Readily agreeing, the owners made a broodmare available for his use in a mutually satisfactory arrangement. He gained essential skills, even learning how to jump; but most of all, horses fed his soul. “When I’m with a horse I’m connected and at peace,” he reflected. “It has always been that way.” For Lance, horses were a solace during a sometimes difficult childhood and a joy all of his life. “It’s a calling,” he explained of the power horses have to move him. “It’s all I ever wanted. My passion is my profession.”

After working at the thoroughbred farm for a few years and riding hunter/jumpers, Lance became friends at the horse shows with Chuck and Nancy Odams’ deaf son, Todd, who was about the same age. “They are very special people,” Lance said about the Odams family with whom he still remains in contact. Chuck, who specialized in hunters, began helping him work his thoroughbred but when Nancy, a well-known trainer in the Morgan/Saddlebred world offered him a lesson one day, she opened up a whole new world. “That was it,” Lance declared. “No more jumping; I was hooked on Saddlebreds. You can take all of that energy, contain it and use it. I really enjoy their brain and kind nature.” Lance’s hunter was sold within 90 days. Purchasing his first Saddlebred in

1986, he rode as an amateur on the East coast show circuit before moving to California.

It was to be a few years before Lance would turn professional. In the meantime, when taking a vacation to San Diego while in his early twenties, Lance decided to relocate, working in retail fashion and showing as an amateur on the weekends. His retail experience led to a great opportunity with Miller Harness as their West coast sales representative. Responsible for over 60,000 items, Lance was thrilled with both the job and the



*Itse and Lance Bennett showed the versatility of the Friesian horse by taking top honors as the Grand Champion in Friesian Hunter Pleasure at the Diamond Jubilee horse show.*

opportunity to travel. Establishing a successful record in this venture, he was ready to open his own equestrian store in 1993, well before the Internet took over much of the direct sales opportunity.

As an amateur riding with Barbara Beamer at Seaview Farm, Lance amassed a strong show record but was still looking for that ‘once in a lifetime’ horse. Finding exactly the right mount in Preferred Mister (by Preferred Property), an exceptional three-gaited horse, Lance enjoyed an outstanding debut show. When he exited the ring, an older gentleman followed him back to his stall, opening his checkbook and telling him to name his price. Knowing Preferred Mister was destined for a great career, Lance said he was not for sale.

Sadly though, a bright future was not to be. Two weeks after the show this great horse had colic surgery. Two weeks after the surgery, he died. Feeling devastated, Lance even thought about quitting the sport. While proud to have come to this point as a ‘self-made kid’, he was both discouraged and in mourning for what might have been.



*Lance Bennett and his partner since 1995, Scott Hickey, own and operate Rancho Vista in San Marcos, California. They also own a horse show production company, managing existing shows as well as creating new ones. They are excited about the addition of a new all Friesian show in Las Vegas at Halloween this year.*



*Lance posed for a picture with ‘The Bear’ – one of the prizes for a year-end awards banquet.*

Knowing Lance needed a project to help him through this difficult time, a friend offered him a horse needing rehabilitation. Mentally damaged, this animal needed Lance's intuition, kindness and skill in order to regain confidence and trust. While working with him, Lance was able to come to terms with the loss of Preferred Mister. Just one year later, the rehabilitated horse went to a show and won a class, leaving Lance re-energized and fully committed to the sport he loved.

With no plans to turn professional, Lance was later approached by a lady needing lessons and somebody to train her horse. Originally turning her down, he finally agreed to teach her with the proviso that his instruction would be at a level where he felt confident. Before long, he had Morgans, Saddlebreds and ponies in training while still operating the equestrian store.

Lance and his partner, Scott Hickey, who met in 1995, first leased stalls for Rancho Vista at a public facility. After outgrowing the space, they leased their first private barn, then in 2009, arrived at their current location on 10 beautiful acres with 50 stalls in San Marcos, CA. Before the move to San Marcos, Lance's life with horses began to take an unexpected diversion when Joan Fernandez, who was at their barn on a quest to buy show clothes, saw Lance giving a driving lesson with a Hackney pony. "It was so elegant and beautiful, my jaw dropped," she recalled. Also a frustrated hunter/jumper rider, Joan learned how to ride saddle seat at Rancho Vista, later purchasing an American Saddlebred, Cinnamon Cider. When Cinnamon Cider retired from the show ring, it was time to shop for a new horse. Joan, who often competed against Friesians on the Southern California show circuit, tried to persuade Lance they were her breed of choice. Unconvinced, Lance took Joan to try out more Saddlebreds but she remained adamant. Intrigued by these beautiful animals she often showed against, Joan was determined to own just one outstanding Friesian.

Part of Lance's reluctance was due to some misconceptions about the Friesians, who were a relatively new breed in the USA. However, he agreed to help her purchase the right horse. "I was so grateful that Lance never said 'You are crazy!' and was willing to help me go in a new direction,"

said Joan. Several buying trips within the USA followed but each time Joan found something she wanted to purchase, it was sold out from under them with no warning. Disappointed in this frustrating series of events, Joan and Lance decided to take a trip to Friesland in the Netherlands where these beautiful animals had their origins.

Joan's husband had suggested they buy two horses when in Friesland – one to keep and one to sell to pay for the expense of the trip. (It was a great idea but the second horse is still resident at Rancho Vista!) While the majority of Friesians in the Netherlands are used for dressage, Joan was looking for what Lance describes as 'X-factor' horses who would be considered more exotic and suitable for use as saddle seat and harness horses. Lance and Joan have found through experience that carriage driving stables in the Netherlands have been the best source for buying the kinds of Friesians they seek for their preferred saddle type mounts.

Looking at several different farms in Holland, they selected Wodan (Wodan van Klaverfjouwer) and Otto

(Otte Van T Riethof), who both came from a carriage horse background. They were to be two of the biggest stars showing under Lance's direction. When Lance saw the quality of horses offered for sale in Holland, he immediately became enamored of these magnificent creatures who had all the great qualities of an American Saddlebred but with some additional advantages. "They are not as hot as Saddlebreds so there is less drama. They are a nice, quiet breed with absolutely no stall vices. But they aren't dull. They are game and bright with a high head set and big trot...and they are majestic, with brains and character, like a horse in a romance novel."

"People tend to have a misconception about Friesians," Joan observed. "They may think because they are so big, they must be bullies or they are hard keepers. None of this is true. You get used to their size and big motion. They are really sweet-natured and willing to accept new things. They are super versatile, trainable and malleable. And they are really people oriented. They look for affection like a pet. When you work them, it's like a lit fire-cracker but with total control."

Remembering the difficulty of acquiring Friesians in the USA, Joan founded Friesian Focus in 2004, a business that imports high quality Friesians from Holland. While many US based brokers were simply buying Friesians on the Internet, Lance and Joan travel to the Netherlands to ride and drive prospective horses, then personally escort them back to the USA. Originally housed at Rancho Vista, when Joan became interested in breeding, it became more practical to build her own facility in Murietta, CA, where she keeps around 18 Friesians, raising 2 or 3 foals a year. "I really enjoyed having my horses at Rancho Vista; it took the stress away. Lance made it easy for me," Joan said. Fortunately, Lance was willing to make the one hour trip each way every week day to work Joan's horses in Murietta, before returning to San Marcos to work his own show string. "I couldn't have done it if Lance were not willing to work with me. It would have left a big hole. He's such a face of Friesian Focus," Joan stated emphatically.

Every Friesian must go through an inspection process prior to registration in an event called a Keuring where a number is assigned based



Also a trainer of American Saddlebreds, Lance Bennett showed Linda Nicholas' Osetra in Open Three-Gaited Park and Park Pleasure.



Five-time world champion Otto (Otte Van T Riethof) was one of the first two horses imported from the Netherlands by Friesian Focus. Lance Bennett, taking a world championship victory pass, went on this first buying trip with Joan Fernandez and fell in love with the Friesian breed.



Lance Bennett has successfully trained and shown many of the Friesian Focus owned horses including Snoepje, a talented mare who has maintained an unbeaten show record since 2011.



**World Champion Wodan, Lance's personal favorite, was the Grand Champion in Saddle Seat Pleasure at the 2014 Del Mar Charity Fair. He was also the first Friesian to have ever appeared on the cover of Saddle Horse Report.**



**Always a star, two-time world champion Wodan romped down the rail for a well-deserved victory pass as the Friesian Saddle Seat Pleasure Champion at the Jingle Bell show.**



**The most fun Lance ever has with a horse is when he rides Wodan and his best memory is of winning a world championship with him. This great shot from Jingle Bell says it all.**

on certain criteria, then added to a horse's papers. For a breeding animal, this score is of utmost importance, especially for a stallion. In order to be approved, a stallion must be approved by a Dutch panel. "You have a better chance of winning the lottery!" Lance observed. For that reason, Joan imported an already approved stallion named Monte (Monte 328 Sport). Monte, who has achieved the Prix St. George level in dressage, was approved in 2000, earned First Premium status in 2004, then his Sport Predicate title in 2008. All of these designations are incredibly difficult to achieve. While Joan appreciates the rigorous inspection process in place to preserve the quality of the breed, she respectfully suggests genetic diversity be added to the list of criteria considered. A molecular biologist, Joan is aware that a small gene pool may cause problems within a breed over time.

2008 was an amazing year with three world championship wins and an undefeated show for Otto, who won the Friesian Park Saddle Open National Championship, the Friesian Park Saddle World Championship and World Champion Senior Friesian Geldings Six and Over. Wodan, Lance's personal favorite, won the 2008 Friesian Saddle Seat Pleasure Open World Championship as well as reserve world championships in 2007 and 2010. Otto's phenomenal show record continued in 2009 when he was the undefeated Friesian Park Saddle Seat Open World Champion and the Senior Friesian Geldings 6 and Over World Champion. In 2010 he was again the undefeated Friesian Park Saddle Seat Open World Champion. These first big titles will always stand out in Lance's memory. "It felt like a validation for that horse-crazy kid who was self-made in this sport, now accepted by other respected professionals."

Asked about the most fun he ever had with a horse, Lance's first choice was that of winning a world championship with Wodan, although he admits this outstanding performer can be daunting. When Lance first rode him in Holland, Wodan ran away with him. "You ask him but never tell him what to do. The moment I put a leg over his back I can feel all that power – it's humbling. At 16 he still shows no signs of stopping. Winning a world championship with him was by far the biggest thrill!" Now Lance is looking forward to showing Snoepje, an exceptional 10 year old mare he dried off as a foal. The 2012 World and National Champion in Friesian Park Saddle Seat Open, she later returned to the breeding shed, had a foal, and is now ready to run to the show ring.

Dick Martin, who leases his farm to Rancho Vista, has become a very satisfied customer. With a wife (now deceased) who bred and showed Arabian horses for many years, he bought the property several years ago and hired a trainer, but in 2009, he decided it was time to close the Arabian business. Coincidentally, Dick's sister-in-law, who was taking lessons with Lance, suggested that he visit Dick's farm to see some Arabian foals. Accepting the invitation, Lance asked Dick if he knew of a large facility that might be for lease. A short time later, all the Arabians had moved and the Rancho Vista horses were now at home in this lovely ten acre property with enough room for 50 horses.

While Dick never learned to ride or drive, he knew a lot about horses and farm management.

Leaning over the fence, watching Lance drive a horse one day, Dick was asked if he would like to take a trip around the arena. Driving side-by-side in the cart with Lance, he enjoyed himself immensely, thinking, "I could do this!" Lessons followed, with Lance in the two-wheeled cart next to him each time, talking him through the basics of driving and how best to communicate with his horse. "He's a fabulous teacher," Dick told us. Learning to drive as an adult can be a daunting prospect but learning to drive at 75 years old is pretty remarkable. Now 80, Dick has no plans to quit any time soon.

Dick made his first trip around the show ring driving a safe, but aging Saddlebred, Fornear's Bright Step, listening intently to Lance's admonitions to stay on the rail. "The other drivers must have passed me three times," he remembered, "It was like driving on the freeway at 30mph when everyone else is doing 60!" Dick's skills quickly improved to the point that Lance talked to him about getting a better horse, asking him if he would be interested in driving Otto who was no longer going under saddle. Replying, "Let's do it!" Dick was soon in the ring with this mighty powerhouse. "It's like driving a Santa Fe Railroad train," he enthused. "He's so big and strong." Around the same time he also purchased an American Saddlebred, CH Ultrasuede, for the pleasure driving division.

"One of the things I like most about Lance and Scott is that they are solid businessmen. You don't always find that in horse people," Dick emphasized. Describing both Lance and Scott as being very easy going and likeable, Dick observed they have complementary skills. Scott takes care of the myriad details involved in running all of their businesses while Lance is fully responsible for training both horses and customers. "I watch Lance work," said Dick. "He starts out the proper way; builds confidence and takes care of everybody. He can be stern but he's conscientious of their feelings."

As astute business owners, Lance and Scott believe in diversification. Still running the equestrian retail business from their office, they also own a horse show production company, managing existing shows as well as creating new ones. With several shows including Diamond Jubilee and Jingle Bell in their lineup, they provide classes for Friesians, Morgans, Saddlebreds and ponies. Excited about adding a new annual all Friesian show this year in Las Vegas during Halloween, they plan to make the newly minted Friesian World Cup a great end of season event for both competitors and spectators with a varied lineup of competitive classes and their signature lavish parties, great food and, no doubt, creative Halloween tricks and treats.

Dick Martin enjoys attending shows with Rancho Vista, especially appreciating Scott's ability to create an elegant aisle way for the barn or to provide the best possible environment at the shows they manage. "He does a beautiful job. It's impressive! We have the best set up at the shows. What they do when they manage a show is mind boggling with wonderful food and entertainment. You never hear any complaints from the exhibitors – that's rare." At the Jingle Bell show, for example, the Horse Show Productions team decorates Christmas trees and has carol singers on the grounds, putting everyone in a good mood for the season.

Terri Williams, another long-time client, agreed with Dick. "Having fun is one of the reasons I have stayed so long. At the horse shows we are treated like princesses (and princes) with wonderful parties and entertainment. Lance draws decent human beings to the barn. There is no in-fighting. I feel lucky to be training with him. He's a phenomenal inspiration with an innate talent for matching a person with the right horse. He is the whole package."

Terri first met Lance when her daughter was taking lessons at Rancho Vista. Eleven years ago, when Terri was diagnosed with cancer, she decided there was no reason to wait to take lessons herself. Showing Doeke H in Friesian classes for five years, she then became the proud owner of a lovely amateur three-gaited park mare in 2014, Ridgfield's Flower Girl, with whom she won the Amateur Three-Gaited Park Reserve Championship at the Diamond Jubilee show in Del Mar this year.

Terri also made us aware of the kindness shown to the Rancho Vista customers. One day, when Lance was on his way to Friesian Focus, he received a distraught call from two young boarders. While on a trail ride, one of their horses had dropped down and died. Immediately heading back to the barn, Lance spent the rest of the day making arrangements to ensure the horse had a respectful burial as well as consoling the owners. On another occasion when a customer's spouse died, Lance and Scott took care of many of the necessary details both before and after the funeral. These small kindnesses generate both loyalty and a sense of belonging in their customers.

Joan Fernandez told us Lance has always been there for her both professionally and personally. "Professionally, you are prepared in every way. He will never let his clients flounder. If you have performance anxiety, he gives you confidence. That's huge! He has always been a good friend who has my best interests at heart." When Joan's spouse had to be away on a business trip at the same time as their 25th wedding anniversary, Lance and Scott arranged a Happy Anniversary party for her, took pictures and sent them to her husband.

Lance and Scott also have their fans among the younger set at Rancho Vista. Nadia Marjanovich remembers first going to the farm when she was four years old. Lance threw her up on a horse and led her around. She and her sister took lessons, eventually showing Morgans (their parents preferred breed). Although Nadia enjoyed Morgans, she absolutely loved Saddlebreds. Knowing her preference, Lance would kindly find opportunities for her to ride the Rancho Vista Saddlebreds or just come in before her lesson time and brush them, getting to know them as horses.

Now studying design in New York, Nadia sorely misses Lance and her time at the farm. "He taught me much more than riding. It was about character and life in general. He took the time to get to know me. I really miss my time at the barn," she said wistfully. "I grew up there. My mom was working and my dad travelled a lot so the shows were our family time. I got to know everyone at Rancho Vista as a team where we all support each other and catch up with the news. When my sister and I took a break for a couple of years, Lance and Scott were so excited when we came back that they surprised us with new jodhs! I really appreciate their thoughtfulness." When Nadia and her sister, Nichole, were old enough, Lance and Scott would keep them amused by allowing them to sit under



**Winze Fan Wyns, owned by Friesian Focus, won the 2007 Friesian National Championship in Show Pleasure Driving Open with Lance Bennett at whip.**



**Lance and Scott are well-known for running great shows with wonderful food, entertainment and decorations. The center ring at Jingle Bell last year is just one example of their focus on creating the best possible environment for the exhibitors.**



**Dick Martin learned to drive with Lance at 75 years old. Now 80 and showing Otto in harness, he has no plans to quit any time soon.**

the tent at the shows and hand out ribbons. When Nadia was still riding as a junior exhibitor, Lance took care to let her progress at her own pace. "I always felt safe and confident. He knew what I was ready for. Lance and Scott have been such blessings in my life. I am so grateful to have trained there and to have known them."

Electra Mustaine, who moved to Nashville to pursue a promising country music career, had a similar set of experiences at Rancho Vista. Beginning riding with

Lance at 8 or 9 years old, she became a show ring star but like Nadia, she places a primary value on what she learned there about being a worthwhile person. "He taught me character, manners and etiquette. He made me sit up straight and keep my head high. It was so hard to leave there. If I ever get another horse I'm going to have to persuade Lance to come to Nashville!"

Also remembering Lance's kindness, Electra told us about her grandparents, who loved to come to the barn and watch her ride. Although her grandfather did not have much exposure to horses, he still wanted to be involved. Sensing his interest, Lance offered him a ride in the cart. Grandpa was ecstatic and although Electra's grandmother was stricken with Alzheimer's disease, she was aware enough to know how much this meant to her husband as she watched him go around the ring with tears in her eyes.

Also part of her extended family, Scott was 'Uncle Scotty' while Electra was growing up, calling Nadia and Electra his 'little pumpkins'. "We had so much fun. He would tease us – sometimes texting me 'I'm riding your horse!' Being there is the best experience I've ever had. They are so supportive of the clients; the grooms are fabulous – they are so reliable and everything is spotless. When we went to a show they would pack a huge equipment trailer to make the most elegant set-up. It was top-notch."

When Electra's show horse, Gerrit (Gerrit V H Galgendaal) came to Rancho Vista, he was a little show-ring sour and did not really like people. Lance re-programmed him to be a walk-trot horse while helping him regain his confidence. Sometimes frustrated, Electra trained hard with Lance to get Gerrit to listen to her. The results were spectacular, resulting in an impressive number of first place ribbons and championships, the most recent being an undefeated show at Jingle Bell in 2013. Gerrit, who went to Nashville with Electra, is now sweet and very friendly, loving people and running to the front of his stall to meet them.

One might wonder how Lance manages to train horses at both Rancho Vista and Friesian Focus, given that he has no assistant trainer. "I have six great employees including a foreman who has been with me for ten years," he said with gratitude for his hard-working staff. Described as an 'Energizer Bunny' by his customers, Lance is clearly going above and beyond expectations to deliver a first-class product. Great credit also goes to Scott Hickey, who applies his extraordinary creative and organizational skills to make the customers feel pampered and special. With a daunting workload, Lance and Scott sometimes take a short break for rest and relaxation in Palm Springs but Lance is quite satisfied to go home at the end of the day to a nice bottle of wine and perhaps a cheese board. "This is my definition of success," he stated.

Transforming from a young boy with a great love of horses into a self-made, well-respected professional horseman, Lance Bennett has never lost his humanity --treating both horses and people with kindness and consideration. A gifted and dedicated trainer, he and his clients have earned multiple accolades and world championships. His willingness to listen to his customers and try new things has led him into the wonderful world of the Friesian horse. With his passion and profession one and the same, every day with horses brings him joy.