

Michael Craghead and Kevin Michael:

The Saddlebred Industry's Dynamic Duo

by Sara Pizzuto



Michael Craghead and Kevin Michael (l) have been partners for more than 30 years and share a love of the American Saddlebred.

Horse shows are unpredictable, and none more so than the Kentucky State Fair World's Championship Horse Show. Each year the show ushers in the world's finest American Saddlebreds, Hackney ponies and road horses. The infamous green shavings give exhibitors the green light to trot into the fabled Freedom Hall. Though the goal for many is to return home with the coveted blanket of roses, one can never foresee what the ultimate outcome may be.

Kevin Michael and Michael Craghead were both in attendance at the 1983 World's Championship show. Their horse show fate led to their meeting, which eventually led to their strong connection to each other — all because of their mutual love of horses. Though more than 30 years have passed, the California residents have remained prominent focal points in the show horse industry.

Kevin's participation with American Saddlebreds was initially fueled by his parents. Randy and Sharon Michael were both involved with horses, showing road horses and Saddlebreds, respectively. They moved their family to Tucson, Arizona when Kevin was young, and continued to train there. Kevin developed as both a rider and driver under his mother's guidance. His first foray into the show ring came by way of a Shetland road pony when Kevin was merely eight.

"He was pretty cute, and real fast," he said.

Kevin continued his show ring career with a string of successful ponies before eventually acquiring Saddlebreds as a teenager. He then carried his love of riding with him to college in the late 1970s. While in school, Kevin obtained a job as a groom for Saddlebred trainer Larry Bacon, whose horses were stationed



Kevin's maternal grandmother Genevieve Moon is pictured here on a gaited mare known as Folly. Kevin's talents as a catch-rider and driver no doubt come in part from her.



Sharon Michael trained and showed Saddlebreds and passed on her love of the breed to son Kevin. She is pictured here on Sadie Sterling, owned by Art and Peggy Mehagian, winning Carousel Charity's Five-Gaited Stake in the mid 1980s.



1988 Roadster Pony Stallion/Gelding World's Champion and Roadster Pony World's Grand Champion Andiamo was just one of the champions that came through Larry Bacon's barn when Kevin worked for him.



The Rose Parade in Pasadena, California, that precedes the Rose Bowl college football game, has been a favorite event for Kevin Michael during his long association with Michele Macfarlane and her spotted Saddlebreds of Scripps Miramar Ranch. He is pictured with WCC CH The Fire Fox from the 2004 parade.



Michael Craghead, a Virginia native, and Rearing To Go (aka Rarin' To Go) are pictured here at the Roanoke Valley Horse Show.

in Arizona at the time. (He would later return to work for Larry once again when they both had relocated to California.)

However, it was perhaps his working friendship with Michele Macfarlane and her Scripps Miramar Ranch that cemented Kevin as a staple of the Saddlebred community. Michele and her mother were the masterminds behind the Winterfest Horse Show, which was held each year at their San Diego property. Kevin managed the show's entire 10-year run, including its conclusion in 1997.

"It was a successful horse show out here in California at the time," Kevin said. "We had a lot of horses, and we even drew horses from the Midwest to it occasionally. It was a fun horse show for everyone."

Kevin's association with Michele led to additional opportunities aboard Michele's infamous spotted American Saddlebreds. He has made numerous riding appearances in Pasadena's renowned Rose Parade — an event that precedes the Rose Bowl college football game. Kevin has been in attendance at the annual event since 1999, either riding through the streets of Pasadena or assisting with the preparation of the horses. It is an experience that he values each year.

ing horse shows in October and November including the UPHA/American Royal National Championship.

Kevin's partner, Michael Craghead is another familiar face at these horse shows. Michael Craghead's journey to a career as a horse trainer began through his cousin, Patricia. The then 10-year-old Virginia native learned to ride aboard Patricia's Saddlebreds, and quickly developed an affinity for the breed. Patricia later made the switch to Quarter Horses, but Michael couldn't be pulled away from the Saddlebred.

"My parents bought me my first horse when I was in high school," he said. "I was also fortunate that my grandmother paid for three, or four, or five horses in training at one time."

Those show horses were stabled with Allen and Bobbi Camper at their Lakeland Stables in Roanoke, Virginia. Michael continued to train and show with them throughout his youth and into his college years. It was during this time that Michael came to the realization that he wanted to pursue a job in horse training.

"I just enjoyed it so much that I knew I wanted to keep on doing it," he said.

Michael's budding career path brought him to



Decoy was one of Kevin Michael's favorites and they had many wins together including the 2000 Saddle & Bridle Working Western Pleasure National Championship at Saint Louis National Charity.

"It is very exciting," he said. "The crowd is pretty unbelievable, and it's really exciting particularly at the beginning of the parade when there are so many people and you know you are going to be on television. It is a lot of fun."

Not only has Kevin ridden down a parade route, he has also ridden down victory lane numerous times as a sought-after catch rider and driver. He had a knack for the western pleasure division, riding Decoy to a reserve finish in the Shatner finals in 1999. The pair then won the Working Western Pleasure Finals in St. Louis the following year. He lists those rides among his most memorable performances in the show ring.

Kevin has also helped capture those moments for other riders. His talents have also spanned into the photography business as an assistant for both Howard Schatzberg and Rick Osteen. His job description included taking and processing orders, and working the photography kiosk at horse shows. Kevin will once again resume his duties with Howie at upcoming

Kentucky to work with Bob and Judy Whitney followed by Dick Boettcher. He credits Dick as being his most important mentor.

In the late 1980s, Michael felt that a change was needed and made the trip west to California. He began training alongside Rob Walker and Bob Hughes at their stable in Goleta, California before operating a public barn at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center. His eight-year stint in L.A. then led him to Diamond Hills Farm and the additional opportunities the farm presented.

One of Michael's most memorable opportunities came during the 1997 Winter Olympics. Nagano, Japan set the scene for the games, and the always popular closing ceremonies. The previously mentioned Michele Macfarlane requested Michael's assistance in presenting her spotted Saddlebreds in the closing ceremony. Michael traveled to Japan with Michele and Elisabeth Goth to partake in the historic event.



One of Michael's favorite accomplishments as a trainer was directing Doug Glick and CH Fiasco to be crowned the very first Western Country Pleasure World's Champion of Champions in 2006. They came back and repeated the win in 2007 and also won the qualifier.



The ten year anniversary of Michael Craghead Stables and Rainwater Farms association is fast approaching. Michael and Kevin made the move to Rainwater's barn in 2008. Rainwater and Hammered Last Night TS have had great success in the country pleasure driving division under Michael's direction.



Michael Craghead directed CH No Jacket Required (Tex) and owner Sally Spalding to an amazing career together that included wins at Del Mar Charity Fair every year between 2002 and 2011 with the exception of 2009 when they didn't go. Tex won numerous fine harness titles with Michael showing as well during his long career.

Michael's achievements with Saddlebreds continued with the success of the horses and students he trained. Seven of his horses and rider combinations have won world's championships.

Meghan Hill was one of those riders. She achieved success both in the equitation and three-gaited pleasure divisions aboard My Special Sultan, CH Kissinger, and Light Brite. CH Fiasco is also one Michael's list of favorites, winning back-to-back western world's titles in 2006 and 2007. Fiasco also has the distinction of being crowned the first Western Country Pleasure World's Champion of Champions at Louisville.

Michael not only appreciates training world's champions, but he enjoys judging them as well. For the last 17 years, he has journeyed to shows across the country judging Saddlebreds, Morgans, and Hackneys. He takes pride in having had the privilege to judge Louisville twice.

"I think that show is the epitome of what you want to see," he said. "I can't pick one particular horse that stood out because they were all pretty fantastic. In any breed, the top four are going to stand out," he said. "To me, the hardest part of judging is when you have to find the eighth, ninth, and 10th.

Regardless of breed, Michael appreciates a horse that clearly loves its job. He said that this is what he looks for as a judge when he picks his winner.

"I like one that is showing all the time," he said. "They have their ears up and are doing what they are supposed to be doing. Each breed and each class has its own specs, but you want the horse to fill in all those specs that they have. They have to look like they are enjoying what they are doing."

It is evident that Michael himself enjoys what he is doing, having been in the horse industry for decades. He currently is the head trainer at Michael Craghead Stables, in Fresno, California. His business operates out of Rainwater Farms, where he rents stalls from Shari Rainwater. There are 15 horses currently in training, some owned by clients that have followed Michael from his previous locations. Michael says that he loves training the Saddlebreds because they embody all the qualities that he looks for in a horse.

"I think they are just the epitome of a show horse," he said. "I like the Morgan world too, and I have seen pretty damn fancy Morgans in Oklahoma. But I like the Saddlebreds and Hackneys because they are the epitome of a show horse."

Kevin echoes this statement, "I have grown up with them and I appreciate other breeds of horses," he said. "But the Saddlebreds are probably my favorite."

It is obvious that both Kevin and Michael's mutual passion for horses has remained constant, spanning years of participation with the breed. Their contributions are multi-faceted, reaching all areas of the industry. That fateful meeting in 1983 at the Kentucky State Fair led to a lifetime commitment to each other and the American Saddlebred.



Michael is often called upon to judge shows all over the country including the World's Championship Horse Show twice. He is pictured here in Freedom Hall with the 2015 panel (L-R), Jay Wood, E.H. Matthews, Nancy Troutman and Josh Greer. He also judged Louisville in 2010.