

Ventura Farm:

All Roads Lead To Kentucky

By Kendra Peeples

*F*or Mary “Kathy” Snyder, deciding to move her Ventura Farm to Shelbyville, Kentucky was a homecoming of sorts. She grew up in horse country having Plainview Farm behind her childhood home in Louisville, Kentucky. Along the way, Snyder’s love of horses and her dream of Ventura Farm to be a place where riders and horses could achieve their goals would bring in two trainers not native to her old Kentucky home: Mike Hylton of Virginia and Andre van Schalkwyk of Wellington, South Africa.

“Mike and Andre are very similar,” Snyder remarked. “They are both serious, dedicated horsemen with kind hearts. Neither says much and it is always about what’s best for the horse.” Snyder would go on to say that both Mike and Andre could best be compared to Tom Smith from the movie *Seabiscuit*; quiet, determined to reach a mutual end goal, and brilliant with horses. Snyder, on the other hand, is known for her bubbly, outgoing personality. That loqua-



Heartland Queen Of The Road, or “Jelly Bean,” earned her Louisville roses in 2013 by winning the Amateur Harness Pony Championship. Owner Susan Olcott was in the buggy to represent Ventura Farm. This Friday night moment was a crowning achievement for all involved in this pony’s career.



Lynne Martin and Kathy Snyder shared a happy moment together at the 2017 Southern Saddlebred Spring Fling. Lynne’s entry Harlem’s Supreme King and Andre van Schalkwhyk finished second in the Three-Gaited Park Stake class.

aciousness is something that both Mike and Andre say is one of their favorite things about her.

Despite living next to a farm, Snyder did not begin to take riding lessons until she was 30 years old. She initially began riding in the academy division. She took lessons under Nez Ratterman Weber and it was also under Weber that she showed her first show horse. Ventura Farm’s first location was in Charlottesville, Virginia. Snyder made that move back to Kentucky in 1996.

It was there in Virginia that Snyder was able to get to know Mike Hylton better. From 1977 to 1996, Hylton ran his very own Mike Hylton Stables. Hylton’s father, Silas Hylton, was also a Saddlebred trainer. Hylton grew up with horses all around him in the Shenandoah Valley, and he recalls being three years old when he started to get involved with horses himself. He attempted to gait his very first horse at the age of 10.

“My dad was hard on me, but it paid off in the end,” Hylton says. “I train my horses with the idea that each horse is an individual and you need to train them as individuals. That’s something my dad also taught me. You will be more successful if you work with them as individuals and take into account what they need. They’ll tell you what they want to be. You just have to be smarter than the horse,” he added with a laugh.

When Hylton was beginning to raise a family, he chose to work at a financial company during the day, then tackle the task of training horses following his long day. He worked at a chain outfit for two years following high school, then opened his own small loan office next to his farm in Virginia. He worked at that office for just over 28 years while managing to



Part of that bright future that both van Schalkwyk and Hylton speak of is illustrated in this colt, Far Away Tomahawk. This Tomcat (SA) son is out of Lady Belle Elegant, a Sir William Robert mare, and van Schalkwyk led this colt to win the ASB Weanling Breeders class at the Kentucky State Fair in 2016 for owner and breeder Pieter Hugo.

train between 12 and 16 horses at night, sometimes working until midnight. In 1998, Mike finally teamed up with Snyder at Ventura Stables.

Nowadays, Hylton tends to look towards the future of the breed while reminding himself of the Saddlebred world that he grew up in. He sees the decline in breeding and overall numbers of the Saddlebred as one of the biggest issues facing the industry at this time. Hylton specifically remembers watching classes with the great Emperor, Skywatch, and My My.

He spoke about a wide range of topics that all ultimately end up influencing the climate and world of showing horses that we live in today: from the rising costs of breeding to the consequential smaller classes to the desire for people to buy a two- or three-year-old instead of breeding their own. Everything seems to be both a consequence and an active factor in influencing the decisions that breeders, trainers, and exhibitors must make when they decide that they would like to show.

As not to dwell on something that the majority of the horse world is already well aware of, Hylton nevertheless looks forward with enthusiasm. He said that looking out in the fields and seeing a bunch of promising yearlings and two-year-olds always helps you to keep going.

"You look forward to the ones you think are good and hope and pray that they really are as good as you think they are," he explained.

As far as favorite memories go, Hylton cited "finding and developing young horses into great ones" as the kind of memories that stick with him. Among those young horses turned great, he lists WC Cocomotion, RWC Romanov, WC Platinum's New Look, WC She's My Sugarland, WC Credit Worthy, Simbara's Cup Of Sugar, Marty McFly, WC Kalarama's Pit Boss, WC Starmaker's Southern Star, and WC Heartland's Queen Of The Road. Snyder also said that WC Starmaker's Southern Star has been her favorite horse over the years and that she carries those memories with her everywhere.

One of Hylton's favorite memories was when Susan Olcott captured the World's Grand Championship win in the Amateur Harness Pony Championship in 2013 with Heartland Queen Of The Road who is affectionately known as "Jelly Bean." This was Olcott's first championship win at Louisville.

Many of the horses that Hylton has worked with went on to be sold early in their show careers, so he has also had the opportunity to watch from afar as those horses developed, changed hands, and changed divisions over the years.



Andre, Susan Olcott, Kathy, and Mike were all smiles after Diamond District captured his first Kentucky State Fair win in the Three Year Old Fine Harness Stallions/Geldings class in 2015. Andre and Diamond District have now gone on to win two additional times at Louisville, including capturing the Junior Fine Harness Championship in 2016.

"Naturally when they go and win, I'm just happy for them," he said. "Knowing that I picked or started them, I'm always happy for who ends up with them. You'd like to still own them at the time when you see them win, but with my personal horses, I do mainly try to sell them."

He later noted that Starmaker's Southern Star was one of those great horses that he would have sold had he been the owner, but Snyder was enamored and thus, Southern Star found a forever home.

van Schalkwyk got his start with horses when he was six or seven on his grandfather's farm in the Western Cape of South Africa. The horses he worked with when he was younger were farm work horses, but when he ventured to the United States following his high school graduation, he started working at Kalarama Farm as a groom.

"I saw my first Saddlebred in 2002 when I started working at Kalarama," van Schalkwyk recalled. "I remember thinking that they were just so beautiful and had a lot of personality."

After learning the ropes and quickly expanding his skills, he went on to work for a few other barns in Kentucky. van Schalkwyk has now been working with Kathy and partnered with Mike for the past nine years.

When asked why he chose to move all the way across the Atlantic Ocean, van Schalkwyk explained, "I wanted to work with horses, and I heard that the horse capitol of the world was Kentucky, so I said, 'That's where I'm going!'"

"He was very good at what he did before he ever worked here," Hylton said of van Schalkwyk. "I saw a lot of potential in him. We offered him the job when we thought he was ready to make the move and he accepted. He's a very athletic guy, which gave me the chance to become the grounds person when it comes to training, and it's worked out great so far.

"It's been a great fit for us. I always say 'You're never too old to learn something,' and I've learned things from Andre. You just have to keep your eyes open to learn something new. I hope that he has learned something from me, too."

Hylton need not lose sleep over wondering if van Schalkwyk has learned anything or not. He says that he knew Mike had a knack for seeing the potential in a young horse and being able to speculate on its ability well. van Schalkwyk says that this is something he is still working on developing and that Mike has been someone that he could learn from in that endeavor. Additionally, van Schalkwyk hopes to continue to develop his customer relation skills.

When asked which World's Grand Championship he would most like to win, there was little hesitation in his answer: "The Fine Harness Championship."

Beyond his personal accomplishments in the show ring, Hylton says that two of his other favorite memories while at Ventura Farm have been seeing van Schalkwyk win his first performance World Championship with I Shot The Sheriff in 2010 in the Two Year Old Fine Harness Stallion/Gelding.

van Schalkwyk said that some of his favorite horses over the recent years have been Diamond District, CC Commotion, Crackin Up, and She's My Sugarland. He can remember specific photos from each show that he believes captures that horse's ability the best. Whether it was a shot taken by a publication or an over the rail shot from a professional photographer's assistant, van Schalkwyk has a keen memory and can tell anyone who captured the highlight moment of a class.

"My goal is to consistently develop young horses and always make sure that they step up when it's time for them to step up," van Schalkwyk said.

To set the scene in 2017, one has to take a trip to Shelbyville, Kentucky. Snyder made the move back to Kentucky on Derby Day in 2001 so that she could be closer to her family. She also acknowledges that it is easier to do business in that state for a variety of reasons. "I really enjoy and appreciate my home state after 20 years away," Snyder said. "I chose this property because of its location — right off of I-64 between Louisville and Lexington."

Hylton and van Schalkwyk train about 25 American Saddlebreds and Hackney Ponies, currently stand two Saddlebred stallions, and they travel to about eight shows per year. They stay primarily in the Kentucky and Midwest for shows and of course make their annual trips to the green shavings in Freedom Hall and out to Kansas City for the UPHA American Royal where they regularly make victory passes.

Ventura is also sure to take advantage of the local county fairs, such as the Shelby County Fair, and bring their stock there, as well. van Schalkwyk said that the Midwest Charity is his favorite show and that he loves the instantly recognizable red brick barns where the horses are stabled.

Snyder says that beyond seeing the horses and riders of Ventura succeed, her goals have stayed consistent over the years. "I want to see everyone at Ventura succeed in reaching their goals," Snyder said. "I want a happy, positive environment where people are treated fairly and the care of the horses is paramount in achieving that success."

Ventura Farm accommodates its schedule whenever a customer is able to come by and practice with their horses. The day-to-day routine starts as most others do with basic chores and stall cleaning in the morning, then moving to working the horses based on what their individual needs dictate on any particular day. Most of the clients come to visit on Fridays and Saturdays, but Susan Olcott is known to stay at the farm for weeks at a time, a visit that the Ventura trio always looks forward to.

Just recently, the team at Ventura captured multiple championship wins at the Midwest Charity. Each time van Schalkwyk showed, he either won the class or finished in second place. He returned to the show ring with Diamond District, a star in the junior fine harness division who earned the World's Grand Champion Junior Fine Harness roses in 2016 and the World Champion Three Year Old Fine Harness Stallion/Gelding in 2015.

They came back for the big championship and did not disappoint as they won the Fine Harness Championship for owner Susan Olcott. Another familiar face that van Schalkwyk showed as a junior horse was She's My Sugarland, who topped the Limit Three-Gaited Park class and went on to win the Three-Gaited Park Championship, again for owner Susan Olcott.

van Schalkwyk demonstrated his skills with the Hackney pony breed by winning the UPHA Harness Pony Classic for the second year in a row



One of Andre's favorite horses that he's worked in recent years was Crackin Up. In 2014, they captured the Two Year Old Three-Gaited Division 1 blue at Louisville for the Tri Color Saddlebreds.

with Hawkeye's Legacy, another entry owned by Susan Olcott. Heartland Queen Of The Road, or "Jelly Bean" to her friends, finished in the reserve grand champion position in the Harness Pony Championship and was treated to some celebratory ice cream following her class.

The team at Ventura is a small, tight-knit group. They train a moderately-sized lineup of horses and they keep their show schedule just busy enough to walk the line between "keeping busy" and "a marathon."

The distinguishing features in what Ventura does is in the details. Hylton and van Schalkwyk are known for not being huge talkers, but that certainly does not mean that they have nothing to say. They are the type to quietly observe and work hard on their string of horses without trying to stir up a lot of commotion.

Both Hylton and van Schalkwyk can speak at great depth and length about the horses that they work and about the horses and trainers that came before them and influenced how they approach their work today. They are critically aware of the forces surrounding them and acknowledge that

they need to continue to develop their own skill sets to keep up in the busy world of show horses.

Snyder could see the value in the work that each man produced and knew that that was the kind of team she wanted for her Ventura Farm. That quiet dedication and great attention to detail was what was going to help her achieve her vision for Ventura.

The proof that Snyder, Hylton, and van Schalkwyk are all achieving their goals can be seen in the horses' performances, the exhibitors' smiles when they show their horses, and the loyalty that those at Ventura have for their barn. As much buzz and applauding that is received by the Ventura team in the show ring, there is an equal, if not greater, amount of positive energy back at the stables. From Heartland Queen Of The Road enjoying herself a celebratory ice cream cone, to Diamond District lapping up beer out of someone's hands, the people and horses of Ventura are surely happy to be a part of this team.

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