



Jim Koller

The Man, The Myth, THE LEGEND

“You can't be good or average in life. Good is too close to average and average is unacceptable.”

BY BOB FUNKHOUSER



▲ More so than winning world's championships, being inducted into the World's Championship Horse Show Hall of Fame meant the world to the esteemed horseman. Scarlett Mattson and the late Bill Munford presented the honor in 2006. His sons, Stephen and Ken were also part of the ceremony. (photo by Howie Schatzberg)

▲ As a professional trainer, Jim Koller had a persona that exuded confidence and intelligence with a touch of mystery. (photo by Avis)

The Man was quite complex. The Myth was a result of his persona and bad boy reputation early on. The Legend was the man Jim Koller grew to be with his amazing connection to his horses.

“He was true to his horses and true to himself. That was our Jim,” said close family friend Barbara Bacon of the Hall of Fame horseman who passed away July 5th at the age of 80.

Jim Koller looked more like he should be riding broncs in the rodeo rather than racking some of the best American Saddlebreds of his era. Maybe it's because one of his early experiences was taming wild Mustangs in Colorado when he left home at the age of 16. Home was Northfield, Illinois, where he was born March 25, 1943. His equine passion began as an early teen, cleaning stalls at a local stable for the opportunity to ride.

The only time in his life when he wasn't involved with horses he was serving his country in the U.S. Navy.

His path to becoming a legendary trainer of world's champions began with a couple of legends. Before he went into the service, Koller became friends with Marty Mueller. When he returned, he asked Mueller whom he should go to work for and Mueller told him without a doubt, Garland Bradshaw. Koller was indeed fortunate to receive a PhD in horsemanship from the famed Garland Bradshaw, one of several Bradshaw boys to achieve that doctorate. While there, among the stars he was associated with were the greats, CH Broadland's Patrician Lady and CH You Are Love.

“Jim told me he took great pride in Mr. Bradshaw asking him to come back to work for him after he moved on to his next job. He took that as the ultimate compliment,” said Glenn T. Werry. “He also told me the story about how he would smoke when working horses at Mr. Bradshaw's and one day he pulled Jim aside and told him, ‘You can't do two things well at one time. If you're going to smoke go outside and smoke your cigarette properly and when you come back in you can work my horses properly.’ He said Mr. Bradshaw gave him the freedom to try things his own way and when he made a mistake Mr. Bradshaw would ask him, ‘What did you learn from that?’”

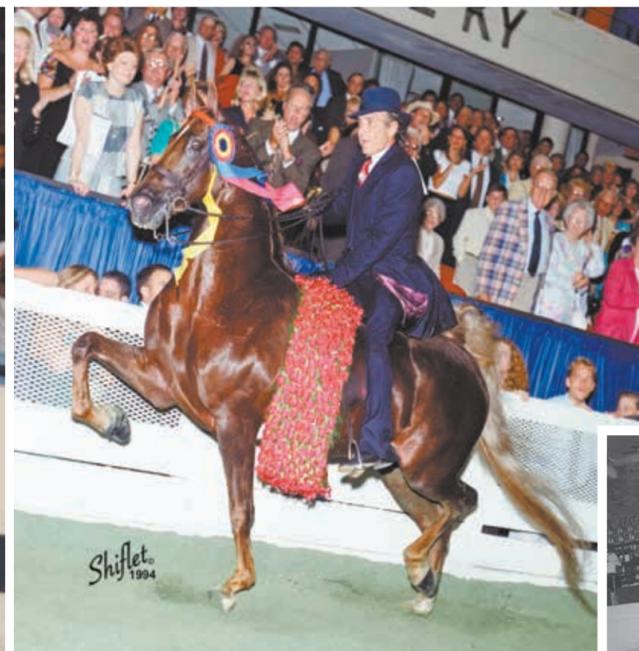
While in Danville, Kentucky, he also spent time working with another legend, George Gwinn, who probably sold as many horses as anyone ever has. It was Gwinn who Koller credits with teaching him the business side of the show horse industry. Not only did it serve him well while being a professional



Blessed with so many top gaited horses throughout his career, Koller had the opportunity to pilot the multi-titled world's champion of champions, CH Blue Chipper, to Lexington Junior League's Five-Gaited Gelding Stake in 1995.



Jamie Donaldson



Shiflet 1994



Mike Bowling @ 194



Medina



Known as a master horseman, especially with gaited horses, Koller trained, fixed and showed some of the greats, including the 1994 Five-Gaited World's Grand Champion, CH Onion.

Beginning with his days with Garland Bradshaw and Broadland's Patrician Lady, Koller had several noted harness horses throughout his career. Vintage Lace (pictured) was an Attaché daughter he won with at Lexington and then was Reserve World's Champion Fine Harness Mare. She had a great career for Dr. Larry Gould, including three more reserve world's championships.

After winning the mare stake and Five-Gaited Grand Championship at Midwest Charity in 2001 (pictured) Koller and CH My Chanel went on to garner the World's Champion Five-Gaited Mare title that year.

trainer, Koller also became a savvy businessman/investor in his retired years. With so many horsemen from that era finishing their careers broke or with nearly nothing to show for their years of hard work, Koller was quite brilliant in the field of making money, among other things. He was super shrewd, super smart.

"He said Mr. Gwinn talked business a lot," added Glenn T. Werry. "He taught Jim that it's hard to make it work in this business unless you're selling horses. He stressed the importance of selling the good ones. He told Jim, 'You can't take blue ribbons to the grocery store.'"

As did many trainers of that era, Koller moved across the country to different private jobs. He went to California and worked for Mrs. Roth's Why Worry Farm, to Texas working for Jim Brae, and Indiana working for the Cloud family's Blue and White Stables. Also along the way, he spent some time working with the famed Ben Segalla in Illinois.

During his stints in Illinois, he became great friends with Dick Obenauf. Those two shared many adventures. Some of which added to the "Myth."

"Jim was the type of friend that time could go by without being in touch and then when we would chat it was like no time had lapsed at all," said Obenauf. Koller's dream of opening his own facility first came true in Barrington, Illinois, and later in Simpsonville, Kentucky. Throughout his career he was known as a Horseman's Horseman. He was both an artist and an engineer, wanting to fix everything. In addition to his own horses, he quietly fixed many others for his peers. That was a very important aspect for Koller – the acceptance of his peers. When he was inducted into the 2006 World's Championship Horse Show Hall of Fame, he was as proud of that as any tricolor ribbon he ever won and he won plenty of those.

His list of gaited horses alone is astounding. In addition to world's grand champion CH Onion, at one time or another he had CH Blue Chipper, CH Boucheron, CH Callaway's Forecaster, CH Garland's Dream, CH Trink To Me Only, CH See The Sights, Arthur B. Campbell and Battersea, among others. His all-star harness horses included CH Buck Rogers, CH Kalarama's New Sensation, Revival, CH The Homecoming Queen, Rhythm's Jewel, and CH Vintage Lace. CH Freedom Hall, CH Sea Of Wonders, CH Hot Fudge and CH Attache's Three Of A Kind were among his walk-trot standouts.

Many owners and trainers were in awe of what Koller could do with a horse, especially a horse that the average horseman wouldn't succeed with. In an earlier Year In Review interview with Carl T. Fischer, he had this to say about CH Onion and his trainer, Jim Koller.

"He's a horse that any trainer with less patience than Jim Koller would have ruined. The first time Jim rode him as a three-year-old, he thought he was a star if he could just make him shine. The horse always had a lot of ability, it was just a matter of putting it all in the right place," said Fischer.

"Dad said Jim was probably the smartest horsemen he ever knew. He knew how to do the best for each individual horse," said Kate Raun of her late father, Doc Raun. "Dad said Jim was a great trainer because of what he did with gaited horses; that is the ultimate. His horses didn't pace.

"Dad was a student of the industry and those two hit it off well. They didn't dwell in the past, instead, thinking of today and the future. Even as late into their lives as Glenn T. Werry's wedding, Dad went to Jim and Beth's [Koller] room and they talked different trainers and horses. They were looking at where this industry is going."



Jamie Donaldson



One of his favorite training horses ever, Completely Elegant was the 1993 World's Champion Three-Year-Old Five-Gaited Mare with Koller. She went on to be the dam of CH-EQ Completely Caveat, among others.



Howard Schaffner

Koller drove the then future world's champion of champions and world's champion sire, Revival to the 1994 Three-Year-Old Fine Harness Stallion/Gelding Reserve World's Champion honors. They went into Louisville having won at Indy Charity, Lexington and Dayton.

Kalarama's New Sensation was among the harness stars in Koller's care. They won the 2000 World's Champion Junior Fine Harness Mare honors as well as the junior reserve world's champion of champions title that year.

Jim and Beth Koller had many conversations with Dr. Alan Raun (l) over the show horse industry.

"He has been the most influential male figure in my life," added his step-son, Glenn T. Werry. "The biggest lessons have been well beyond horsemanship. His last two decades with my mom were pretty peaceful.

"One thing I'll never forget is he said, 'You can't be afraid to make a mistake. The greatest lessons in life come from the biggest mistakes you make.'

"He taught us to think things through, to look up and question everything. He stressed learning as much as possible about everything we can and document it, go back and revisit it. He was worried about us going into the family business. When I graduated he said, 'I don't give a damn what you choose to do but you can't be good or average in life. Good is too close to average and average is unacceptable.'

"I did want to work for someone after I graduated so when I asked Jim who I should work for he said without a doubt, Dr. Raun. He said the reason was I would learn more about life than training horses and those were much more valuable lessons."

Also a student of the show horse industry, Werry soaked up everything his stepfather shared with him over the years.

"Jim was a horseman from a different era," said Werry. "He created a lot of excitement with his horses. Unlike today with social media where everyone knows what everybody else has and is doing, Jim rarely shared what he was working. No one knew what he had until they saw it in the ring."

"He was also hyper-analytical, something he learned from Donna [Moore]. When he got a new horse in he wouldn't work it for a few days, opting instead to watch it move, see how it thought and reacted to different situations. That gave him the knowledge to know how to begin to work that new horse.

"He told me he thought the ultimate contribution to the industry was to make horses that go on, win and last for others and he certainly did that."

As stated by many, Koller was a brilliant man who could read the industry perfectly. Once, when honored by the UPHA as the Trainer of the Year he put it all in perspective.

"The owners are the most important people in the business," said Koller. "It's a wonderful honor and I'll treasure it the rest of my life. It's an honor not just to win, but to be able to show against other trainers – to be able to show a horse and be competitive."

The mystique of Jim Koller stayed with him throughout his training career and on into retirement. Even some of his closest friends never quite figured out what made Jim, Jim.

"I thought a lot of him and I've tried to figure out what made him the horseman that he was for a long time," chuckled Nelson Green. "He had an uncanny sense with a horse, in fact, a lot of different horses. If he took an interest in a horse and put his mind to it, watch out!

"We had a lot of fun together; spent a lot of time hunting and fishing."

Another great horseman from that era is gone. With him went a world of history for the American Saddlebred show horse as well as a world of pride for the horses, horsemen and owners that make up this industry. When listening to the many glowing statements from his friends and family, perhaps he wasn't as mysterious as the Myth that was built around him.

He understood that there isn't an industry without the owners and their desire for blue ribbons, however, for the professional horseman, it is much more about their peers and the ability to compete alongside the best of the best. That's what drove Jim Koller to hit the ring with yet another surprise and hear the crowd go crazy over something he had been tinkering with, something he had developed or fixed.