

New Beginnings

For Mike and Amanda APONTE



Mike and Amanda in front of the barn at Simmons Stables in Mexico, Missouri.

By Erica Faulkner

The original barn of Simmons Stables was built in 1887 in Mexico, Missouri, with the reputation as “America’s No. 1 sales barn,” for American Saddlebreds at the time. Art Simmons brought life to the training operation, putting one world’s champion into the ring after another. The stable is the oldest known building in the United States that was continuously devoted to boarding and training American Saddlebred horses. In 2001, the stable closed its doors and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Today, Simmons Stable is located down the road from the original location, and is owned by Art’s son, Jimmy. In 2017, Jimmy decided it was time to expand and add on to the existing barn, beginning a new chapter in what is a long history book of Simmons Stables. Doubling the size of the existing operation, Jimmy knew he needed more help and hired two new trainers to work with him on his new vision for the farm. Mike and Amanda Tucker-Aponte graciously accepted the training position as soon as it became available.

Where It All Began

Mike was born November of 1986 in Hawaii, although he only lived there for a short time. When he was just six months old he moved with his parents, Barbara and Michael Aponte, Jr., to a small town just outside St. Augustine, Florida. He grew up around horses. His father dabbled in fox hunting; his mother owned and showed Arabian horses. Mike credits his mother with giving him his first riding lesson.



Mike and Amanda were married on February 3rd, 2018 in St. Charles, Missouri, not long after accepting the trainer’s position at Simmons Stables.

at SIMMONS STABLES

“My mother is a good horsewoman,” he said. “She gave me my first riding lesson when I was old enough to walk.”

“We didn’t have much money,” Barbara said. “Mike spent a lot of time watching the midnight training sessions and apprenticing and shadowing trainers that we admired. He was 15 when he first left home to work at a stable.”

“She sacrificed a lot so that I could have horses and show,” Mike said.

Horses have been a part of both their lives, then and now.

“My mom still has a half-Arabian western horse she shows locally in Florida and has a miniature horse as well. She goes to every horse show she can, working the out-gate or as the ringmaster.”

After Barbara gave Mike his start, he then went to Joyce Hamblin who taught him to ride saddle seat. Hamblin was the first to introduce him to the American Saddlebred. Mike recalls that first ride.

“I just remember that horse being so big and powerful. Riding a Saddlebred was so much fun!”

Mike gained experience riding and his natural ability began to shine through. Possessing the skills needed to present any horse of any kind helped him stand out from his peers. It was not long before he was a sought-after catch rider. Those catch rides led to him making farm visits to better learn to ride the horses he was asked to show. First it was just on weekends, then Christmas school breaks, then spring breaks, and eventually for whole summers. Saddle seat, western, or hunt seat, it did not matter. Mike knew he could learn something from every trainer, every discipline.

Mike went to ride with John McBride, primarily a western and hunter trainer, in Ocala, Florida, before going to work for David and Lorrie Mikosz’s farm, LJR Elite Show Horses, in Jupiter, Florida.

“They taught me so much about horses with their Arabians and half-Arabians.”

It was during this time with the Mikosz family that he learned the importance of paying attention to detail, a quality that he utilizes to this day.

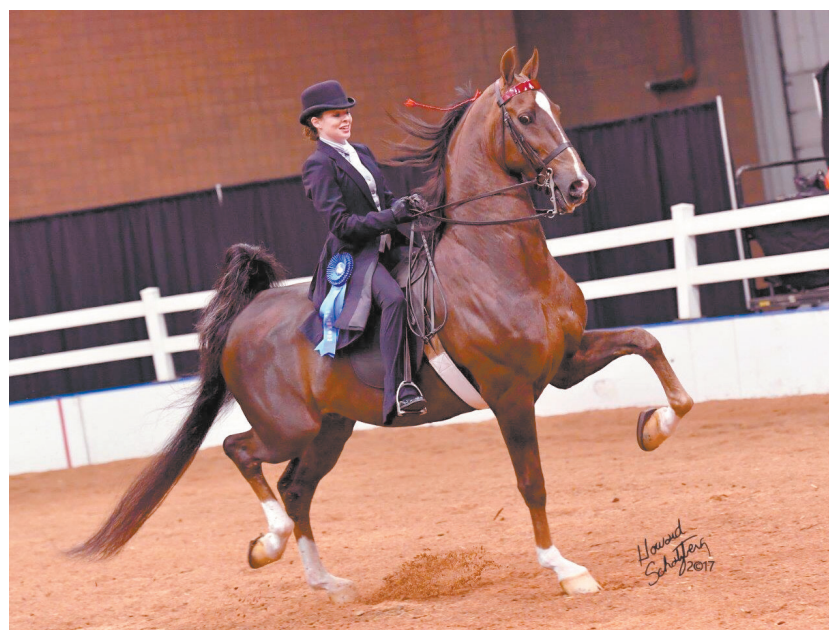
While attending high school Mike noticed that all he could think about was being at the barn. He made the decision right then that he was going to be a horse trainer, no matter what.

“I was home-schooled for my sophomore grade by Lorrie,” he said. “They (David and Lorrie) took care of me. I did as little schooling as I could and spent most of my time at the barn and going to the shows.”

David and Lorrie started working for Tailormade Farm, owned by Jim Taylor, in 2002, and it only seemed fitting that Mike go with them. Mike grew close with the Taylors, and is “eternally grateful to the Jim Taylor family for all they did for me.” That included sending him to the prestigious private Heritage Academy on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.



Mike showed Callaway's Most Wanted to an undefeated career on the West Coast in the three-gaited division.



Amanda and the first horse that she owned, Callaway's Nuts To You, winning the Amateur Three-Gaited Park class at UPHA Chapter 5 in 2017. She still owns him to this day.



Mike grew up riding and showing Arabians until he stepped up on an American Saddlebred. He knew right away that the American Saddlebred was his breed of choice.

There happened to be a horse farm not far from the school, and not just any horse farm. It was Tom Galbreth's legendary Castle Hill Farms (when it was located at Lawton Stables). Galbreth kept his Saddlebred broodmares at the farm, as well as ran a successful trail riding business. Mike worked part-time for Galbreth while he was in school.

"I got to trail ride Sir William Robert's dam, Rebel Empress. While working for Tom I learned more about Saddlebreds and the industry as a whole."

As his high school education was nearing its end, Mike was already planning his next step; to find a barn and secure his first assistant trainer position. At the same time, Gene Lacroix, a world-renown Arabian trainer, was looking for his next assistant. Mike wasted no time.

"Gene is one of the best in the world," Mike said. "I called him and convinced him he needed to hire me. He asked me how much money I wanted, I said it didn't matter. I wanted the experience not the money."

He started working for Lacroix in January of 2005 and for the next three years he trained horses and tended to the daily upkeep of the farm. He fed the horses, cleaned stalls, groomed, cleaned the barn, as well as all of the other jobs that come with running a successful stable. There isn't anything Mike won't do when it comes to the barn; he is not afraid of hard work.

Lacroix taught Mike how to train without gimmicks or short cuts. The horses were happy, and so Mike learned, happy horses make good show horses.

"That time was priceless," he said. "The knowledge I gained helps me in every aspect of the horse business. More so now than ever."

From there he went on to work with Arabian trainer Jim Lowe, just outside of Los Angeles.

Mike enjoyed his work at these places, yet he still felt like he hadn't found his niche'. All along, his interest in Saddlebreds was growing, and it was time for him to do something about it.

"I called him and convinced him he needed to hire me. He asked me how much money I wanted, I said it didn't matter. I wanted the experience not the money."

While in Topanga he worked alongside Derek Repp, whom he says taught him the ins and outs of working a gaited horse. Mike was living the dream; working horses on a gorgeous 70-acre horse farm in the middle of Malibu and Santa Monica.

"I surfed every chance I got while I was there," he said. "I tried my hand at polo, gave lessons to celebrities and their children. It really was a wonderful time."

Mike campaigned many champions during his eight years with the Brittans. One of them was the three-gaited gelding, Callaway's Most Wanted. This celebrated champion's career was an undefeated one on the West Coast. Mike thought a horse of his caliber deserved a chance to go for it all on the green shavings, and so that's exactly what they did.

In 2012, Callaway's Most Wanted stepped aboard his first flight; destination Freedom Hall. In an extremely competitive junior three-gaited class, they left with the white ribbon and a sense of accomplishment. The exhilaration of Freedom Hall that night grabbed ahold of Mike and never let go.

"I dreamed of winning at the World's Championships. And as much as I loved where I was living and working, I knew that to give myself the best chance, I had to get closer to Kentucky," he said.



Mike won the UPHA Park Pleasure Classic Grand Championship at Kansas City in 2018 aboard Ridgewood's Gypsy Heir. This was the second year in a row that Mike won this class.



Jimmy Simmons and Amanda greeted Mike and So Heavenly back at the stalls after one of their winning rides. Mike showed this horse to the 2017 UPHA Park Pleasure Classic Grand Championship win at Kansas City as well.

Making The Move

It was 2015 when Mike moved halfway across the country to work with Mike Roberts in Columbia, Missouri. He says Roberts was the one who helped him secure a place in the industry, as well as helped him make some invaluable connections.

"I got to spend time with Gayle Lampe, which was really cool," said Mike. He was honored with the task of putting her in the ring, and grateful for the opportunities she gave him, which included training and showing the mare Wildbrier's Poetry In Motion. In 2016, he showed her to the Reserve World's Champions Three-Year-Old Five-Gaited Mare title.

It was not long after his move to Missouri that Mike reached his dream of winning at Louisville. Not only did he accomplish his dream, he did it with a horse that he trained and developed from day one, Midd's Ponce (now known as My Gifted Lady), who was owned Tim and Marty Shea at the time.

"I knew she was special from the moment I saw her at her mother's side," Mike said. "When she came in the barn I was the first one to start working with her. I broke her to lead."

She simply stood out from all the others. With exceptional quality and loads of talent, he knew she was going to be one to remember.

"We decided to take her to Louisville and I rode in the trailer with her the whole way. I just wanted to make sure she was safe. I knew she would be one of the most talked about horses at the show."

And she did not disappoint. Together, she and Mike put in a grand performance to win the Two-Year-Old Three-Gaited Division I class at the 2017 World's Championship Horse Show, and they did it in unanimous fashion.

"Many people have said to me that she was best two-year-old they had ever seen. I knew she was going to be a very special once-in-a-lifetime horse."

Moving to Missouri brought Mike his first Louisville win, as well as the love of his life, Amanda Tucker-Aponte.

"I dreamed
of winning at
the World's
Championships."

William Woods Makes Another Trainer

Amanda Tucker-Aponte grew up in St. Louis, Missouri. Her family had no real involvement with horses, but that did not stop her from begging for the chance to ride.

"I always told my mom I wanted to ride horses and after crying on stage at a dance recital she finally caved," said Amanda. "My first riding lesson was with Maggie Montgomery of Wild Venture Farm when I was just five-years-old."

Amanda loved being in the barn as a young girl, and as she grew, so did her love for all things horses. She knew all along that she wanted to be a horse trainer someday, jumping at every chance she had to ride and show and improve her skills. She would spend her days with Montgomery, helping feed and tend to the horses, in exchange for riding lessons. She rode and showed Montgomery's horses for many years until her passing in 2009.

"I rode with her right up until she passed away," said Amanda. "She knew how badly I wanted to be a horse trainer, and she supported me every step of the way."

Her next move brought her a little closer to achieving her dream. During the summer of 2012, she accepted a job working at horse shows for Mark Hulse. That summer sealed the deal for Amanda; she knew her life was going to revolve around horses. She enrolled at William Woods University for her college education, in hopes that it would properly prepare her for a career in the industry; and it did.

"Amanda came to William Woods in the Fall of 2012 and was a barn rat right from the beginning," said Sarah Track, Associate Professor and Saddle Seat Instructor at William Woods. "She could always be found in the barn, riding the new horses and of course wanted to go to all the shows she could."

Track points out that Amanda had a knack for understanding a horse right from the start. "She showed many horses while

she was at William Woods and really not one of them she didn't get along with."

It was because of her natural ability that Track suggested Amanda take on the challenge that was Ro & Me's Kiss and Tell. The mare had a reputation at school as one of the more difficult ones to ride, but Track had faith in Amanda and knew she would rise to the occasion.

In 2015, her junior year, Amanda showed the mare at Longview Charity and came



Amanda stands with Gypsies Tramps And Thieves after they won the Missouri/Kansas Amateur/Junior Exhibitor Five-Gaited class at Kansas City in 2015. They came back later in the week to win the championship as well.



Mike and his favorite mare, Mids Ponce, thrilled the crowds of Freedom Hall with their performance in the Two-Year-Old Three-Gaited Division I class. This mare earned Mike his first Louisville win.

away with wins from the Junior/Novice Three-Gaited Park class, as well as the Amateur/Junior Exhibitor Three-Gaited Park class. Their debut had been a success. From there, they went on to take home blue ribbons from Central States Fall Classic and Missouri State Fair, and had good rides at St. Louis National Charity.



Mike was aboard the big moving Right And Ready, who was bred by Jimmy Simmons.

By this time, Mike and Amanda had already met via a mutual friend, and had been dating for a few months. Amanda recalls the first time she got to see Mike show.

"It was at the Missouri State Fair in 2015 and I watched Mike win the Open Park class with Gimme' Sugar." It would also be the first time they showed against one another, a true test for any relationship.

"We competed against one another in the championship at that show. Mike won and I was second," she said.

It didn't take long for the young couple to realize that they shared the same passion; horses. Amanda graduated from William Woods with a Bachelor's degree in Equestrian Science, and then made the move to be with Mike in Missouri. The couple tied the knot February 3rd, 2018 in St. Charles, Missouri, not long after accepting the trainer's position at Simmons Stables.

The Right Fit

Jimmy Simmons first met Mike when he was working at Fair Hills Farms. He visited Simmons Stables looking for a gaited horse for one of his customers at the time. Simmons saw a lot of potential in the young trainer. Years later, when the decision was made to expand the farm, Simmons knew he wanted Mike and Amanda to join the team. On December 1st, 2017, the aspiring trainers accepted the job at Simmons Stables in Mexico, Missouri. With them they brought Mike's Arabian broodmare, Hollywood Miss and Amanda's first horse, Callaway's Nuts To You.

"We simply couldn't pass up such a great opportunity," Mike said. "Working at Simmons Stables has allowed us to be part of the great Simmons family name, as well as made it possible for me and Amanda to work together on a daily basis, which was a dream come true for us."

Simmons Stables, has been home to some industry greats, such as the stallions, Colonel Boyle, Center Ring, and Red Oak's Imagination, as well as the show horses, Spirit of '76, Blarney Stone, Tashi Ling, Sherry My Sherry, I've Awakened, Edna's Courageous Queen, Smoky The Bear and others. It was now up to the new trainers to put their touch on the horses that came through the barn, carrying on the success that has made Simmons Stables such an iconic part of the show horse industry.

Since the Apontes arrival to the farm an additional 19 stalls have been added to the 17 that already existed, as well as a square bull pen and a tack room. The barn is 172 feet long, with a center aisle suitable for working horses in. The facility sits on 200 acres, much of which they use to grow their own hay. Future plans for a large outdoor ring are in the works as well.

In their first year at the farm, Mike and Amanda put some good amateur teams into the ring, as well as top young stock. Ridgewood's Gypsy Heir, owned by Michelle Beyer, is just one of the young horses at the farm that has helped put Mike's name on the map. Their debut show was in 2018 at UPHA Chapter 5, where they were named the champions in the Three-Gaited Park Pleasure Classic. Then, at the American Royal, they bested a field of 17 to win the UPHA Park Pleasure Classic Grand Championship.

"This was special to me because it was the second year in a row that I won the class. The first time was with So Heavenly in 2017," said Mike. He also says that much of this horse's success is due to the fact that his owner exhibited patience during the training process. Never was Mike under pressure to rush the horse to get him into the ring, and Mike appreciated that. Since then, Mike has taught him to rack, and says that he is starting to settle into his new division quite nicely.

So Heavenly is a young gelding by Undulata's Nutcracker and out of seven-time world champion mare Heavenly Thunder. After being named the ASR Sweepstakes Three-Year-Old Park Pleasure Champion at the All-American Horse Classic in 2017, with Mike aboard, he continued his winning ways into the next season. It was 2018 and So Heavenly was in the winner's circle again at Bridlespur and Central States Benefit with Mike, and has since been successfully shown by junior exhibitors Alexis Kiesner and Dawson Archibald.



Mike has a knack when it comes to training and presenting young horses. Here, he takes his victory pass aboard Whassup, after winning the Junior Three-Gaited Park class at UPHA Chapter 5 in 2018.

Whassup, Undulata's Bold and Brave, Top Country Girl, New York City Girl, Certainly Shoes and Nitty Gritty Blues are just a few of the champions Mike and Amanda have brought along since their move to Missouri. Most recently at the Rock Creek Horse Show this year, Mike presented the stallion, Master Planner, to a good ribbon in the Junior Five-Gaited class. It was the colt's first time off the farm, so naturally there were a few mistakes during his show ring performance, nothing that a little experience won't fix. This horse created quite a stir amongst Mike's peers as everyone was talking and inquiring about "the gaited horse that Mike showed."

"He is very athletic," Mike said. "Just a four-year-old, Rock Creek was his first time off the farm. We got him last October and just really started racking him in December. He took to it right away."

Owned and bred by James and Janelle Hesson, (who are brother and sister), the colt was born in Nebraska and learned the basics from his owners. Mike credits them with giving the stud a good foundation for Mike to build on. By Undulata's Nutcracker and out of Revival's Saving Grace, Mike feels strongly that this colt is going to be one to watch. Letting the game gelding come along at his own pace, is something Mike feels strongly about, and so far, it seems to be working.

"A horse needs to be happy with its job," he said. "We want to deal with good horses, happy horses, horses that people can buy. Life's too short not to have horses that are sound of mind."

Coming Together Toward A Common Goal

At home on the farm, Mike handles a lot of the horses' training, but not without the help of Amanda. She too, plays an integral role in bringing along their stock. However, her role goes beyond horse training, she also works hard behind the scenes.

"Amanda is so good at organizing what needs to be done. She handles all the books, the show entries, and all the other paperwork that comes along with running a business. She really is the glue that keeps this place together," Mike said.



The junior gaited stallion, Master Planner is one of the up and coming stars on Mike and Amanda's current string. He is pictured here making his show ring debut at Rock Creek. photo by Laura Stanton

She also is a key player in the decision making at the farm. Always looking for ways to improve the current day to day operations, or helping Mike make decisions with the show horses, Amanda is a key player in every aspect of Simmons Stables.

As a team, Mike and Amanda work hard to create an atmosphere for their clients that is both fun and competitive. It is important to both of them that they

treat everyone with honesty and integrity, whether a customer at the barn or someone viewing a potential prospect for sale, everyone gets the whole story. There are no corners cut, and no fairytales told at Simmons Stables, as both Mike and Amanda, as well as Jimmy, agree that honesty is the best policy, for both the horses and the people.

"We want people to know that they can come to our farm to purchase a horse, and they are going to get an honest representation of that animal. We are not looking to sell outlaws. That does not do anyone any good," Mike said.

He also points out that the stud I'm A Lucky Charm helps make this task easy for Mike, as he says "all the ones I have worked that were by I'm A Lucky Charm, were good thinking horses. They all have quality, but even more important is that they are willing to work. They like their jobs, and they make it fun for their riders. I really enjoy working anything by that stud. He is good for our industry."

Mike feels that it is not only important to look out for the horses, but to also think of the people who own these horses. As a trainer, he knows it is important to really understand what the customer wants to accomplish. Keeping their client's best interest in mind, as well as their horses, is a top priority for these new up and coming trainers, and so far, it is working well, spurring them into the winner's circle time and time again.

Looking to the future, Mike would like to continue to ad amateurs to his barn, commenting that, truly, that's how to keep the industry growing. A constant influx of new riders is important to not only the future of Simmons Stables, but the industry as a whole. Yet at the same time, the number of horses in training at Simmons Stables will always be kept to a manageable amount. Mike and Amanda both feel that each horse needs individual attention, and in order to achieve this they plan to keep their operation around 30 or so horses at any given time. Ethically they feel it is unfair to the horses and the owners, when there are so many horses to work that the process becomes rushed. Attention to detail, patience, and the ability to create a truly enjoyable atmosphere at the farm are what will set this young team apart from their peers as their careers continue to blossom.