

The Ixonia, Wisconsin based Equitate LLC is situated on 67 acres, just north of downtown Oconomowoc. Sheri Brandl and Mark Bodnar are at the helm of this training operation.



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# The Excellence of EQUITATE

BY SARA PIZZUTO

Neither Sheri Brandl nor Mark Bodnar pictured themselves forging careers as professional horse trainers. Though they each had a deep passion for the industry, neither set out to become professionals in the Saddlebred and Morgan world. However, their love for all things equine never dulled and both Brandl and Bodnar couldn't resist the urge to become involved in the industry. Their paths soon crossed professionally, and personally, as this husband and wife power couple have since joined forces with their Equitate LLC—a thriving and accomplished training facility.

Both Sheri Brandl and Mark Bodnar's introduction to the equine world came through influences from their families. Brandl's earliest childhood memories with horses were on her family's Wisconsin based dairy farm, where their horses coexisted in the same pasture alongside their cows.

"My mom, Doris and sister, Karen loved horses so I had great support from my mom and also big sister to lead the way to riding and showing," Brandl said.

Sheri Brandl began riding lessons aboard speed ponies and Quarter Horses, but quickly

switched to Saddlebreds with help from Marlene LaFleur and her family. She next had horses and worked for Kenny Guell, who ignited Brandl's passion for teaching at the mere age of 16.

"Kenny taught me so much about how to really ride and dig in and work hard at every aspect of the horse business," Brandl said. "I remember when he first went to a horse show and I stayed home and taught my first official riding lesson by myself. I'm pretty sure that is where my love for teaching riders started."

Brandl additionally had the opportunity to work for Bonnie Byrne during her college career at William Woods University.

"Bonnie taught me how important it is to be detailed about every horse, from its grooming to how it's presented in the show ring," Brandl said.

While working for Bonnie Byrne, Brandl was simultaneously involved in the corporate world, employed at Rockwell Automation for 16 years. However, her passion for horses would eventually trump her corporate career.

Brandl honed her skills alongside Andy and Lynda Freseth. She additionally feels fortunate to have wonderful friends in the horse industry to collaborate with.

"Todd Miles and Cindy Zubrod Boel have been great along with many others who have shared their expertise and advise with me," Brandl said. "I am one of the people who didn't set out to be a horse trainer initially in life," Brandl said. "I absolutely love working horses and teaching riders but as my sister always said to me, 'There is nothing harder than the horse business,' so maybe it's the challenge of trying to make it all work that made me continue to gravitate to doing this as a career. I like to say I feel like I'm running a multi-million dollar business, unfortunately just without the multi-millions. Some days are a test to your patience and persistence, but it's all worth it."

This pull towards the equine industry led Brandl to make the decision to follow her passion in the Saddlebred community. She searched for the perfect facility for her own business for five years, eventually settling into the 67 acres of land in Ixonia, Wisconsin that is now Equitate. After purchasing the property, Brandl then moved her existing Equitate business to this farm just north of downtown Oconomowoc in the fall of 2009.

Under Brandl's direction, Equitate LLC developed a reputation for greatness in the equine world. Its prominence in the horse industry has



The husband and wife duo of Sheri Brandl and Mark Bodnar are responsible for the success of the many world's and national champions that make their home at Equitate. Under the direction of Brandl and Bodnar, Michael Arquilla earned two jewels of the prestigious saddle seat equitation triple crown as the 2019 UPHA Senior Challenge Cup National Champion and USEF Saddle Seat Medal Finals National Champion.

only been heightened since Mark Bodnar was welcomed on board. Bodnar, a famed Morgan trainer at his family's Merriehill Farm, crossed paths with Brandl and joined her in business after their 2016 marriage.

Mark Bodnar was born into the horse industry, growing up on his parents, Stan and Paulette's Illinois based Merriehill Farm.

"My parents made sure from day one that I worked for all the opportunities I was given," Bodnar said. "Looking back I wouldn't change any of it. I have many great memories of showing as a youth. Many of which were at the New England

show when we would take horses out there and show in deep classes."

Like Brandl, Bodnar had a brief stint in the corporate world. He moved to California in 1998 and worked in sales immediately following his graduation from college. In 2005 he helped launch the company, Corcel, and worked there for four years. However, he couldn't resist his urge to return to the Morgan community.

"For a long time I tried to find a different path, but the horses kept calling me back," he said. "In 2009 I finally decided this is what I was going to do. I was lucky to have a family business to fall into."

Bodnar's success as a professional horse trainer at Merriehill Farm included the development of a myriad of world champion Morgan Horses. He had additional guidance from Robert Hughes and Rock Walker as well as Rich and Maureen Campbell and eventually brought his talents to Wisconsin to work at Equitate alongside his wife, Sheri Brandl.

"Mark has so many strengths and I'm lucky to have him by my side," Brandl said. "He really does it all and is exceptional at maintaining horses' health and soundness. He recognizes what each horse needs and works with our vets and farriers and caretakers to be sure our horses are performing at their best. I do not think I have met anyone who works harder than he does."

Under the direction of Bodnar and Brandl, many of the nation's finest horses and riders make their home at Equitate LLC. Equitate's teams excel in a myriad of divisions, yet they have enjoyed great success in the equitation ranks. They most recently celebrated the success of Michael Arquilla who earned two jewels of the prestigious saddle seat equitation triple crown as the 2019 UPHA Senior Challenge Cup National Champion and USEF Saddle Seat Medal Finals National Champion. Shaye Jensen also represented Equitate as the 2020 UPHA Walk/Trot Challenge Cup 10 and Under National Champion. Brandl explained that she loves equitation because the skills that her riders learn can carry over to the performance division.

"Good basic skills and looking good on a horse can help a rider in any division," she said. "We work on a ton of patterns with all of our riders, even if they do not show in equitation."

Brandl explained that she tries to broaden her riders' skill set by having a variety of lesson horses to work with. She additionally spends time with her equitation students watching videos, looking at photos and helping them gain



Mark Bodnar joined Sheri Brandl in business at Equitate after their 2016 marriage. Bodnar's professional career training horses began with Morgans at his family's Merriehill Farm. He trained such notables as the 2011 and 2012 World Champion Stallion, Mastroianni.



Sheri Brandl's mother and sister kickstarted her passion for horses that eventually led to a career as a horse trainer and the opening of Equitate. Brandl has piloted a myriad of American Saddlebreds down victory lane including three-gaited park horse and former fine harness world's champion, She's Epic.



From young horses, to young riders, to open performers, Equitate puts their stamp on all facets of the industry. Sheri Brandl most recently piloted Top Country Girl down victory lane in the open three-gaited park ranks.



Michael Eifert is enjoying a successful debut season aboard Jay Gatsby this year under the Equitate banner. He celebrated a win from Des Moines Springfest with Hadley Novak.

skills so they can make their own decisions in the show ring.

“While our sport is fortunate to allow coaching, I am the proudest when a rider makes a decision in the show ring and that decision is the very same thing I would have told them to do,” Brandl said. “We always want our riders to have the confidence to follow through with what they learn in lessons.”

Many of the world’s and national titled equitation riders that Equitate produces emerged from their lesson program. Bridget Ward is in charge of Equitate’s academy and lesson program, with over 80 riders enrolled in riding lessons. A strong focus of Equitate’s lesson program is to introduce people to the horse business to eventually continue on to become show horse owners. The program prides itself on transitioning riders and drivers into the show horse industry and has done so with 10 clients in just the last two years.

“Bridget Ward has been an instrumental part of our lesson program here for many years,” Brandl said “She is great at so many different things – she handles a lot of the administration of it but also teaches a lot too. I couldn’t do it without her and also Stacy Stackhouse.”

The team at Equitate is also responsible for the success of its top performance show horses. Bodnar explained that both he and Brandl work the horses jointly, with Brandl handling the training under saddle and Bodnar predominantly long lining and jogging each horse. He was also quick to mention Brenna McCracken, who joined Equitate this year as an assistant trainer.

“There are a few horses that we each may do more with more than the other but overall it’s very much a combined approach,” he said. “It allows each of us to communicate what we are seeing and feeling with the horse.”

Equitate has risen to the forefront of the industry known for excelling with riders and horses of all ages across a myriad of disciplines. From multi-titled open park horse She’s Epic, to young Michael Eifert in his first year in walk/trot, Equitate has put their stamp on all facets of the industry.

“I think one of the keys of having a successful horse and rider combination is making sure both the horse and rider ‘know the basics but yet practice the details,’” Brandl said. “And this holds true regardless what division they show in. We spend a lot of time practicing all different scenarios and really try to teach our riders and drivers how to ride or drive their own horse well, but also how to handle other horse and show ring situations that always seem to come up at shows. I enjoy having horses in many different divisions, otherwise I think I would get bored.”

Mark Bodnar has been known to achieve great success in one particular division, the in-hand ranks. He led I’m First Born to be named the 2010 ASR Futurity Of Kentucky Yearlings World’s Champion and famously guided Morgan horse Mastroianni to the prestigious World Champion Stallion honors in 2011 and 2012. His talents both with young horses as well as seasoned world champions continue under the Equitate banner.

“I love the in-hand division because it is so detail based,” he said. “Standing them up a certain way can enhance or take away from their conformational strengths or weaknesses. Most of what I’ve done over the years was with ones that haven’t done it before and were yearlings or weanlings so you are the one teaching the horse the basics and their first training lessons and are creating the foundation for that horse’s training life.”

Both Mark Bodnar and Sheri Brandl are now passing down their knowledge of training and passion for the industry to Brandl’s daughter Hadley Novak. The 15-year-old is already a world’s champion of champions and national

champion in the show ring and is continuing to blaze a trail of success in her first year in the 14-17 age division. She is teamed this year with Holy Tequila, the reigning Adult Country Pleasure World's Champion of Champions. Brandl and Bodnar have guided this new team to an undefeated season thus far in 2021. Brandl said that it brings her great joy to have her daughter by her side in the horse industry.

"Hadley has always loved the horses but she has also loved the overall part of watching horses work, the horse show life and the process of it all," Brandl said. "So I always think how lucky we are for that. As she is growing up, she is now taking on a role here of helping riders, warming up horses, helping with our barn's social media and advertising and so much more. Whatever she chooses to do in life, it makes us happy that she is learning so much about life skills through the horses and our business. My mom, Doris Brandl, was always so proud of Hadley and loved watching her ride, so to me, Hadley is carrying on the legacy of my mom loving horses and horse showing."

Both Brandl and Bodnar's deep rooted family ties in the horse industry have enabled them to excel in their careers as horse trainers at Equitate. However, Bodnar is quick to mention the entire team behind that keeps their training operation running smoothly. In addition to Bridget Ward and Brenna McCracken, both Brandl and Bodnar acknowledged Steve Punsel who has worked for Brandl for nearly 18 years ensuring all equipment is working properly and handling all farm maintenance.

"Any business is only as good as its people and we are blessed to have many good people full or part time at Equitate," Bodnar said.

It is Equitate's dedicated team of professionals, devoted clients, and accomplished show string that is helping this training facility separate itself as one of the leading barns in the industry. The combination of Sheri Brandl alongside Mark Bodnar has led to tremendous results, making a positive impact amongst the Saddlebred and Morgan communities.



Sheri Brandl's daughter, Hadley Novak, is following in the footsteps of her family as an accomplished exhibitor. She is teamed up this year with the world's titled country pleasure entry, Holy Tequila.



Mark Bodnar (far left) and Sheri Brandl (far right) directed Shaye Jensen to the 2020 UPHA Walk/Trot Challenge Cup National Championship. She was joined after the class by her proud parents, Jeremy and Robin Jensen and sister Averie.