

Kelly Kraegel

People's Choice Instructor of the Year

BY JENNY GREY

Kelly Kraegel of Cottonwood Creek Ranch in Guthrie, Oklahoma, has earned your well-deserved vote as the People's Choice Instructor of the Year. She also earned significant recognition as the recipient of the AMHA Cecil Brown Memorial Award, selected as a person who exemplifies sportsmanship both in and out of the ring during horse show competition. Kelly's entertaining stories of life at Cottonwood Creek give us insight about why she is so successful. Upbeat and funny, yet at the same time passionately serious about her job, she continues to go from strength to strength with a program that continues to evolve.

Kelly, who was well-known primarily for her extraordinary success in the hunter and western divisions, is now being recognized for her ability to work with saddle horses. "I think that's an important part of staying relevant", said Kelly, who has a large cadre of riders interested in learning the saddle seat discipline. "I'm seeing a lot more of my riders wanting to ride different seats and try different levels of horses. I think it's wonderful for them! It makes them better horsemen all the way around." Kelly's ability to train saddle seat riders has gained national recognition. She is honored to have been chosen as a coach for the USEF Saddle Seat Young Riders traveling team who will be competing in South Africa this year. Kelly is also very proud that a large portion of her riders are 'home-grown'. They started at Cottonwood Creek in the lesson program and bought their first horse from her. "It's cool to see them going from beginning riders all the way to world championships!"



Mary-Kris Revard's expression was priceless as she took a victory pass as the 2013 AMHA Western Seat Gold Medal winner with Kelly Kraegel cheering her on.

A small sample of the Cottonwood Creek riders who had an outstanding 2014 show season are Eleanor and Caroline Rainbolt-Forbes, Chloe Farischon, Rachel Roberts, Paige Crowley, Kinslie Dougherty, Grace Geary and Austin Oplotnik. In 2014, Kelly coached two of her riders to AMHA gold medals – a rare accomplishment. Austin Oplotnik won the AMHA Hunt Seat Equitation Gold Medal and the AMHA Hunt Seat Senior Equitation World Championship and Grace Geary, who has only been showing since 2013, won the AMHA Western Seat Equitation Gold Medal and the Western Seat Senior Equitation Reserve World Championship.

Kelly's descriptions of her riders gives us clues about how she trains and motivates them. "Austin has worked very hard for a long time. He grew so tall, so fast, I think it took him a while to figure out where all his arms and legs ended! His greatest asset has been believing

in himself as much as I believe in him! ...He is always looking to better himself and pays attention to the finest of details. He wants to work harder and be better every day and he is always looking within to improve himself. He has that quiet strength about him to be both extraordinarily still and soft all at the same time."

Kelly coached Grace Geary to the world championship level in just two show seasons. "Grace has always been a ridiculously beautiful rider. She's smart, a hard worker and she never makes excuses. She is always looking to be better, learn more, ride new and harder horses and she does it all with a great attitude...It doesn't hurt that she looks like a porcelain doll on a horse. I think the common denominator with both Austin and Grace is that they take responsibility for themselves. They never take the easy way out by blaming other riders or their horses. They immediately look to themselves and ask 'What can I do better? How do I fix that? How could that have been prevented?' I show them the way but they do it."



The Cottonwood Creek team won the gold last year for a second time when Austin Oplotnik was awarded the AMHA Hunter Seat Gold Medal aboard Graycliff Jack Star. He was joined by his proud mom, Kim Oplotnik and trainer, Kelly Kraegel, after the class.

Joni Geary, Grace's mom, said, "Kelly genuinely cares for her students. Her instruction complements the learning style of each individual rider. She instructs in a positive manner, always balancing correction with encouragement. She stresses sportsmanship and motivates her riders to bring out the best in their horses and themselves. Kelly's unique ability to pair riders with their horses along with her contagious enthusiasm for the sport makes the perfect combination for success!"

Grace, who set a goal to win a medal when she first began as a 14 year-old in 2013, attributes this achievement to "hard work,



Grace Geary, who began showing in 2013, won the AMHA Western Seat Gold Medal last year. She was joined for a celebration photo with trainer, Kelly Kraegel and teammates Rachel Darrow, Kinslie Dougherty and Rachel Roberts.

dedication, sportsmanship, my incredibly versatile mount, Narragansett Bay GCH, the loving support of my family, all of my friends at Cottonwood Creek, and, of course, my amazingly awesome trainer, Kelly Kraegel!"

Laurie Revard noted, "When I think of Kelly the first word that comes to mind is 'trust'. I have complete trust in Kelly as an instructor and trainer. Kelly is a 'match maker' when it comes to finding the right horse. The partnership a person has with their horse is the first step to success and Kelly nails it every time! Kelly is talented and 100% dedicated to her clients. She instructed my daughter, Mary Kris, to win the AMHA Western Seat Gold Medal in 2013 and we are forever grateful!!"

Kim and Austin Oplotnik added, "Congratulations Kelly, Instructor of the Year! Thank you for always being our champion, for never giving up on us and for always insisting that we do our best! Your encouragement, instruction, praise and guidance are only some of the reasons you are our 'Instructor of a Lifetime'!! You are the BEST!"

Kelly, who was honored by the Morgan community as the recipient of the AMHA Cecil Brown Memorial Sportsmanship award, is a wonderful role model for all of the young people in her program. The embodiment of its ideals, she is a positive and sportsmanlike presence, passing along these traits to her students.

"I take great pride in training horses and instructing people to help them reach their goals", said Kelly, "But even more, I hope to be a good sportsmanship leader and teach them how to be good humans! It promotes a great environment that makes it fun for everyone. Teaching people to look within themselves really helps them succeed in the show ring too...Good sportsmanship is as important to improving your riding as it is to improving your life. Without it you are putting a cap on your abilities and handicapping yourself!"

Kelly always has wonderful, new stories to tell about her students. This year's favorite story is about Chloe Farischon. To quote Kelly, it is about a "Never give up in a million years, kids are resilient and my barn kids support each other like a family kinda story...13 year-old Chloe was bucked off during a practice ride at about 5 a.m. at the Morgan Grand National. Scratch that! Chloe Farischon was LAUNCHED like popcorn out of a hot skillet! She landed terribly and I made her stay still on the ground while we called an ambulance. I knew it was bad. She surely had broken her neck and was going to be in a full body cast for the rest of her life! They hauled her off and as updates came in, they were all good. Nothing was broken and Chloe was okay! Several hours later she came waddling in to see if she could ride. What a hard-core kid! Every one of my students at the fairgrounds went to the arena and supported Chloe. She ended up showing that afternoon and won the Junior Hunt Seat Equitation World Championship!! I was so proud of Chloe and so proud of all of my kids. I'm sure I will be 95 years old and



Kelly Kraegel, pictured with Youth English Pleasure World Champions Bellissimo and Claire Armstrong, was thrilled to be selected as the USEF Saddle Seat Young Riders traveling team coach who will compete in South Africa this year.

telling that story from a wheelchair. It was amazing!"

Kelly also derives great pleasure from teaching adults, especially when the proverbial light bulb switches on. Linda Sanders, one of Kelly's amateur riders who just began showing, kept missing lead after lead. "I finally videoed her on my phone so she would believe me when I told her she was leaning to the inside every time she cued her horse", said Kelly. "It was instantly fixed!" Whether Kelly is instructing an adult or a child, she teaches all her riders how to sit properly and communicate with their horse. It is all equitation based. "Adults are much more concerned with what their instructor thinks and how they appear. The main thing I've noticed with adults is that they need a lot more reassurance. The adults usually have the skills; they just lack the confidence."



Kelly Kraegel will often ride tandem to help explain a point of horsemanship to her students. She took it one step further by joining Paige Crowley and UVM Opportunity on a victory pass.

Victoria Sullivan from Kansas City, MO, who has been riding with Kelly for about five years, started showing in 2013. At eight years old, her son, Nathan, is the youngest person in the program. "Kelly is able to interact and adapt her teaching style to any age student as well as any level of rider. For example, when teaching Nathan, Kelly will frequently remind him to keep his 'ice-cream cone' from dipping", said Victoria. Nathan has his own good opinion about riding with Kelly. "She's strict and kind. And she always makes it fun!" Victoria added, "If a student is not grasping her verbal instruction, she will give a physical example as well as jump on the back and ride with you. She not only teaches you how to ride, but also the mechanics behind it."

Kelly has clever methods of problem solving. Caroline and Eleanor Rainbolt-Forbes did not enjoy serpentines. She teased them that by the end of the year they would have Mr. Serpentine on their Christmas card list. They practiced all kinds of serpentines with different shapes and gaits and by the end of the year, she knew they could nail any serpentine thrown at them. The last Kelly heard on the subject was "Although they would be sending Mr. Serpentine a Christmas card, they still weren't likely to get him a present!"

With her rapidly growing program at Cottonwood Creek, Kelly works 14-16 hour days, but she has learned the importance of becoming re-energized. "I love vacationing in the off-season, especially in warm places. Scuba diving, guacamole and 'froofy' adult beverages with little umbrellas on them are my favorite vacation past-times. The best part is that I love coming home! I appreciate the time for myself but it also makes me appreciate my people, horses and home even more." While Kelly does not have vacations planned in the immediate future, she will be in New Orleans this spring to coach the Young Riders' team practice as well as attending the AMHA convention in Minneapolis, followed by a highly anticipated trip to South Africa in September for the USEF Young Rider Team saddle seat competition.

In spite of an incredibly busy schedule, Kelly recognizes that in order to be a good teacher, one has to learn new skills. She earned her commercial driver's license several years ago so that she could drive her own rig, then on Christmas Eve last year she received her private pilot's license. "The AOPA (Airline Owners and Pilots' Association) actually called me to interview me for their flying magazine! Apparently there is a lack of female pilots and they were quite interested in my horses!"

Kelly Kraegel injects her enthusiasm for life into everything she undertakes and she performs everything supremely well. She has been recognized for her extraordinary ability as an instructor as well as for her sportsmanship and professional conduct. She is an excellent choice to represent the Morgan community as the People's Choice Instructor of the Year.



People's Choice Instructor of the Year Kelly Kraegel



By Jenny Grey



Kelly Kraegel's successful season led her to again be named People's Choice Instructor Of The Year. A devoted mom as well as a busy horse trainer, Kelly loves to spend time with her seven-year old daughter, Emmy.

An accomplished and versatile horsewoman, Kelly Kraegel leads by example. Whether riding hunt or western, or mounted on a high stepping saddle seat horse, her polished, elegant style shines through.



Kelly Kraegel of Cottonwood Creek Ranch in Guthrie, Oklahoma had an outstanding year in 2015. An expert trainer and instructor in multiple seats and disciplines, she has earned the People's Choice Instructor of the Year award for the third time. Not content with maintaining the status quo, she continues to build on the success of her program and has added coaching a winning World Cup team to her list of accomplishments. In a year of change bringing a new dimension to Kelly's life, she will be applying her wide range of skills and creative spirit to make Cottonwood Creek even more vibrant and relevant in the coming years.

Late last year, Kurt Hufferd joined the team as Kelly's partner both in business and in life. It was a big decision for both of them when he moved to Oklahoma last year after a very successful 25 year tenure at Indian Creek Farm. "It's been fantastic having Kurt here!" Kelly enthused. "Having an extra set of eyes and experiences to draw from has been very beneficial, and we both enjoy being together. It's nice to be able to be with somebody who truly 'gets' what we do." With a program constantly growing and with 62 stalls full, Kurt's expertise is a big asset to the team. On the personal front, he is enjoying spending time with Kelly's seven year old daughter, Emmy. "Kurt always wanted a girl and Emmy has wrapped him around her little finger. They are so cute together!" said Kelly.

Not only has Kelly been very busy at Cottonwood Creek, she coached the winning saddle seat USA World Cup team competing in South Africa last year. Of this experience Kelly reflected, "I think it absolutely strengthened my beliefs in my program. I strongly believe in the importance of embracing good sportsmanship and supporting one another. I believe to be the best rider you can be you need to learn to ride

and experience different horses and perform under pressure. The World Cup experience truly points out that no matter what country we are from or what breed of horse we ride, we all have much more in common than we have differences."

Kelly believes good instruction can improve everyone's performance saying, "I think it makes a difference every time they go through the gate, no matter their age. I try to insure my riders are very well prepared and can easily handle the traffic and avoid problems before they become problems. I want my riders to understand and know their horses and the training behind them so that they are very naturally able to make good choices throughout their rides. But most importantly, nothing boosts a rider's horsemanship more than confidence. That confidence comes when they feel prepared to handle any situation that may arise."

2015 was an outstanding year in a long series of stellar years. Bellisimo GCH and Claire Armstrong won the English Pleasure Junior Exhibitor 14-17 Reserve World Championship. In their first year of showing out of the lesson program, Brigitte Webb and MEM Thriller were the English Pleasure 13 and Under Reserve World Champions. Eleanor Rainbolt-Forbes was reserve in the AMHA Saddle Seat Gold Medal Finals. UVM Opportunity GCH and Paige Crowley won both the Western Pleasure 14-17 World Championship and the Youth Western Pleasure World Championship. Kinslie Dougherty and Movado GCH won the AHMA Western Seat Gold Medal Reserve Championship. Others from Cottonwood Creek winning a host of national and reserve national championships were Rachel Darrow with Graycliff Miss Liberty GCH; Grace Geary with Narragansett Bay GCH and Knolltop's Bahama Breeze; Rachel Roberts and SSLC On Demand and Chloe Farischon with D Bar J Habakkuk. "Caroline Rainbolt-Forbes, Austin Oplotnik and



Eleanor Rainbolt-Forbes and Kinslie Dougherty both enjoyed a great season in multiple seats and divisions under Kelly's direction in 2015.

Kelly Kraegel started her career specializing in western and has gone on to direct numerous riders to top status in that division. Paige Crowley and Rachel Darrow were two of her winning western riders in 2015.

Nathan Sullivan were all fantastic members of our great team of young people", Kelly summarized with pride.

One of her most poignant memories of 2015 is a touching tribute to her mom who was diagnosed with cancer in September and unable to attend Nationals when she had her first round of chemotherapy. When Austin Oplotnik came to her and asked if it would be okay if he rode with a yellow ribbon in honor of her mom she said, "My heart melted like soft serve ice cream on a toddler's fingers at the county fair!" Coming up with the 'Ann Can, Cancer Can't' slogan. Austin and his mom, Kim, cut and pinned together 300 yellow ribbons, putting a basket full on their tables by the warm up arena for anyone who wanted to show their support as well as decorating the Cottonwood Creek set-up with large, yellow ribbons. "The response was amazing!" Kelly reported. Yellow ribbons were appearing everywhere including in Facebook and later in ads. "They were all such spectacular reminders of the love, support and caring from our horse show family. There was a ying and yang aspect to it as well. They were also such painful and abundant reminders of her not being there; and the war she was fighting against her own body. It was like being carried by your cheering friends – being accidentally kicked at the same time!"

Austin and Kim Oplotnik are some of Kelly's biggest fans. Precisely describing why Kelly is such a great choice as Instructor of the Year Kim told us, "Kelly Kraegel has a passion for horses and most importantly, their people. She treats each rider with respect and considers their personal needs, ultimately creating a custom tailored partnership. Kelly's meticulous attention to detail makes it easy for a rider to learn, to be prepared and have rewarding rides. Kelly has been a first class role model and mentor to my son, Austin, and the biggest cheerleader to her dedicated following of amateur riders. She is the main quotient in her formula that pairs sportsmanship with quality instruction which has made a perfect combination for success."

Kelly described another incredible moment with the return to the show ring of Graycliff Miss Liberty GCH and Rachel Darrow. They had purchased Libby in 2014 with big plans, but an old injury that had not properly healed required surgery and a long recovery period during which the Darrows were incredibly patient. "They completely understood the time, care and emotion we had all invested in making her well. They never said 'no' in giving her all the care she needed and I can't brag about my vets, shoer and staff enough for helping me give her all we could." Rachel's mom, Kristi Darrow remembers the huge ordeal Libby endured with treatments that included stem cell injections to regrow cell tissue, bandage changes, hand walking and stall rest for months. "Kelly was so good with her and the staff were amazing and so kind. It was a lot of work for Kelly but she was always so positive."

Kelly received accolades from both her clients and the essential people supporting Cottonwood Creek. Her farrier, Frank Forgette, told

us "I have never in my life worked for someone so easy. I have never seen her upset or stressed. She stays focused, no matter what's going on, and she's a very nice person. In fact she has this sign over the door that says 'Be nice or go away.' Believe me, if you aren't nice, you will go away!"

Valerie Eshleman, the Cottonwood Creek barn manager, had very similar input saying, "She's a wonderful person to work for – she's honest and fair; the best boss I ever had! She's so on top of everything and I have never seen a barn so involved in the horses' care and well-being."

When Miss Liberty came into the ring at the Morgan Grand National last year, Kelly was on a horse in the warm up ring waiting for the next class, trying to get a glimpse of Libby and Rachel through the in gate. "She looked beautiful", Kelly remembered. "So powerfully elegant! I was so proud that they made it into that arena and were able to compete after all we had been through together." When she heard the announcer call them as Grand National Hunter Pleasure Junior Exhibitor 16 Year Old Champions, Kelly was in shock, thinking, 'No way! ... I might have said a less than ladylike word! I saw my assistant trainer, Melissa Swain, sprint into the arena and Rachel ride into the winner's circle bawling. It was wildly emotional; my eyes started filling up with tears and I was trying hard not to ruin my makeup. It still gives me goosebumps just thinking about it." For Rachel Darrow, who had only ridden Libby three times before nationals in this mare's second class in over two years, just getting that far was a dream come true and winning was affirmation of everything Kelly and the team had done to bring Libby back to good health. "It was a good ending for a very special mare", her mom said with gratitude.

With the spirit of a Renaissance woman, Kelly's interests go above and beyond what is happening at Cottonwood Creek. She has her pilot's license and enjoys flying with Emmy in her Piper Warrior. With her scuba license, she has dived all over the world, including the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. She loves to cook and is planning on getting her judge's card this year (she started the process 18 years ago). She also has her Commercial Driver's License, owning a Peterbilt truck and a 15-horse trailer to haul the Cottonwood Creek horses to the shows. Her diverse life experiences all have a bearing on the positive energy and vitality with which she approaches her chosen profession.

It has been another outstanding year for Kelly Kraegel, both professionally and personally. With a constantly growing program she makes sure that every horse and rider is perfectly trained and prepared to be the best they can be. Her loyal customers sustain her when she faces life's challenges. With her World Cup experience she has gained an international focus, strengthening her beliefs in her program. Being a great trainer is essential to developing a great horse but being a great instructor requires the ability to transmit that knowledge to others while building the total package of horse and rider. In recognition of Kelly's ability to produce great winning teams, she is once again the People's Choice Instructor of the Year.