

Shelley Fisher

She Succeeds Doing It 'Her Way'

BY ANN BULLARD

If ever a song could describe the unwritten mantra of one in the Saddle Horse business, it would be Frank Sinatra's classic *My Way* and Shelley Fisher. For while there is a conventional 'road to success,' in few ways is it one the owner and trainer of Ohio's Sugar Knoll Farm has followed.

Jinx Fisher, Shelley's mother, "had a real fascination for horses, but never did anything with it. From time to time, I would sit on one."

That fascination certainly captured her older daughter. Shelley, like many young ladies growing up in the metropolitan Dayton area, took dance lessons and gymnastics. Unlike many, she didn't stick with it.

"Horses were one thing my parents thought I might enjoy. We tried it and ... oops," Shelley said.

"Her father answered a riding lessons ad in the newspaper," Jinx continued, explaining that Holly Hastings (Gustafson), the instructor, was only a few years older than Shelley. "Holly's mother was Shelley's school bus driver. Mr. Hastings contacted my husband about the property values on their farm. He told them his wife was crazy about horses and she said to bring the family over."

"We all sat at the kitchen table. Holly had ridden with B.J. Taylor and had Saddlebred photos on the wall. Shelley said, 'Oh, I want to do that.'"

Holly spoke about those early days. "We had a farm and turned it into an 18-horse stable. Mom originally boarded

horses and had one Saddlebred that was there to rest for the winter."

Holly took lessons and, in time, her family purchased several Saddlebreds. Teaching lessons followed.

Although Holly was but five-years older than Shelley, she was the right choice. It wasn't long before the Fishers purchased a hackney pony for Shelley to ride.

"He had been a road pony but they sold him because he wasn't fast enough," she said. "Occasionally, he'd rear up and throw me right before or during a class. Sometimes we would win and sometimes we wouldn't get in the ring at all. When he threw me, I'd cry and Holly would make

me get back on. She taught me how to push through. She made me a tougher rider and person. We became close family friends."

The Fishers realized their younger daughter wanted to ride as well. They purchased a Shetland pony for Kendra. It soon became apparent that Kendra wanted to follow in her sister's footsteps.

"The Siemons had a beautiful walk-trot horse, Ann's Wild Rose," Holly said. "She was a beautiful reddish-brown color with four white socks. She was a huge upgrade. We shined her up and got her all sparkly. She would knock it out of the park at the smaller shows and was competitive at big shows. Next we bought C C's Star Time, a tall, lean, liver-chestnut horse without a lot of action but a beautiful presence. Shelley showed him in 10 and Under Walk and Trot and I showed him in three-gaited. She did very well with him."

While Shelley was taking lessons, Kendra "would sit on the water tank and watch. She could only do pony rides at the time. When it was time for her to start lessons, Kendra just gets on the horse and rides, like she was programmed to do it by watching," Holly said.

"What I remember most is that Shelley was (and is) one tough cookie; she muscled through everything," her former trainer continued. "As a child, she kept her emotions very guarded; I couldn't tell if she was super happy or upset. She'd have a good ride and process it,



Sugar Knoll had a successful show at River Ridge in April. Shelley congratulates Reagan Webb after she won the 10 and Under Walk & Trot Equitation title aboard Our Fleur De Lis.



Jinx Fisher helped Shelley and Kendra ride their first pony, Marshmallow.



Shelley rode Marshmallow in parade and costume classes in their yards with the neighborhood children.

then say 'should-a, could-a, would-a.' I never saw her flinch; she was as emotionally stable as any adult, even as a little child."

Shelley wasn't content with simply taking lessons. She came home from the barn and taught Kendra the things she had learned that day.

"Horses were something we thought we could share," Kendra said. "When she started lessons, I'd tag along. I wanted to get on and ride. Early on, it was the 'me, too syndrome.' I developed a passion for it. When I was older, it was something we could do together. We were fortunate to have parents who were so supportive, although they never rode. Shelley was my coach and my trainer. I tried to please her and do better for my sister. She was a good motivator."

"We were best friends growing up. We'd go home from school, go to the barn, work horses, clean stalls: that was our evening. We played with Breyer horses and would design shows with them. We dreamed of having elaborate curtains and going to Louisville."

When Shelley was 11, she joined Joe Cloud and Barb Arenz at their Yankee Stables in Springboro, Ohio. Her next stop: with Chris and Chad Reiser, where Suzanne Hubbard (Crabtree) was instructor.

"Shelley never had formal equitation instruction in her teenage years except with Suzanne," Jinx said. "But she grew up believing that things need to be explained and demonstrated for the riders. Even today, she stays away from the trainer's jargon until the riders understand."

Suzanne says she's "not at all surprised at Shelley's success. She always was very hard-working, very precise on her workouts and stuff. That's carried on to her teaching and training."

After Shelley's 16-year-old season, the Fishers elected to bring their two training horses home and "enjoy them there," Shelley recalled. She smiled as she described her mother's role as "animal caretaker and early-on stall picker and feeder, etc."



Shelley's first 'show horse' was a tough Hackney pony named Knight.



Holly Gustafson headed Shelley after one of her wins aboard Knight.

Perhaps those early shared responsibilities are one reason mother and daughter remain close today. Certainly Jinx tries to lead the Sugar Knoll support section at home and on the road.

Thus began the days of what many call 'the sister act.' It might also be termed Shelley and Kendra against all odds. Of course, it was more than Shelley and Kendra; it more correctly might be the 'Fisher Family is on the way.' That was literally and figuratively, as Ron drove the motor home to shows; Jinx helped get everyone ready and the girls did the showing.

"Shelley always had the mindset: work as hard as you need to in order to accomplish what you need," Kendra said. "When we first started going to the bigger shows and the equitation finals I remember going on a horse shopping trip. Our dad was real leery about investing that kind of money on a horse. She worked him over to convince him it was worth the investment, that it was what we needed to go to the next level. She's really good at figuring out ways to help people get to the next level."

"We taught ourselves a lot. She did a lot of experimenting with me as the guinea pig. That's one of the ways she developed the ways she teaches today. She did work with Joe Cloud and the Reisers, but mostly is self-taught."

Whatever, it worked. Shelley won a silver medal in the Pleasure Olympics and a third in the UPHA Senior Pleasure Finals with Will's Deadline. She and Cabochon Sultan had much success in Junior Exhibitor Three-Gaited and Adult Show Pleasure. Later, Shelley equitated 'Taz,' as he was called at home, for Kendra's pleasure equitation mount. During his career at Sugar Knoll, Taz showed in equitation, pleasure, costume, academy and musical freestyle.

Meanwhile, Shelley had attempted to



Ann's Wild Rose was Shelley's first 'real' equitation horse.



Cabochon Sultan was a winner with every Sugar Knoll rider. Piper Granger, Sarah Lawson and Taylor Newton gave him big kisses after each won a class with him at Louisville.



Shelley and one of her first clients, Jessica Levy, showed Sky Lord in costume competition.



Shelley showed equitation aboard Callaway's Hit Tune in her 16-year-old season.



CH Bi Mi Add Lib carried both sisters to numerous championships. Kendra won the Three-Gaited Country Pleasure Adult World's Grand Championship in 2003 in a class of 22 riders.



Shelley congratulated Kendra after she won the Pleasure Equitation Medallion at Lexington in 1998 aboard 'Taz'.

pursue what some might call a 'normal life,' college. She spent three-and-a-half years studying psychology at Wright State University, about 15 minutes from her home.

"In 1999, the Levy family we knew from our time at Yankee Stables called and asked me to take on their three children. Elizabeth, Jessica and Adrienne became our first clients," Shelley said. "I tried to go to school and train, but couldn't do both. I wasn't prepared to give up my amateur status and go into training, but my family encouraged me to do it. I jumped into training and soon was fully immersed in the horse show stuff; the business grew from there."

The Fishers jumped in as well. They started with eight stalls for the first year in business. Since then, the Fishers have added 18 stalls and an indoor arena. To say the business has succeeded would be an understatement.

They decided on the name Sugar Knoll Farm, which carried out the SKF theme appearing on the girls' first tack box when they were small. That there are sugar maples by the barn helped solidify the idea.

"I was little sister wanting to follow big sister. I remember when I was riding equitation, Shelley never was scared to put me out there and test me. I remember doing lunge lessons on ex-show horses; she would tell me to do it anyway. She pushed and challenged me," Kendra said.

"I loved everything from drilling on equitation patterns at home late at night to watching her do the Pleasure Olympics. When she won in Wisconsin, they announced me as her trainer; I ran out into the ring. My first Louisville win was on a horse we both bonded with, CH Bi Mi Add Lib. It was neat to have her there with me.



The first of Shelley's world's champion equitation riders, Kelsey McDonald won the 2004 Walk and Trot Saddle Seat Equitation 10-Year-Old title.



Piper Granger Bordegon and CH Undulata's Fashion Plate had a fantastic season in 2014.

"Our whole family was involved. In high school, I started being more social with friends. It was a little more difficult to get out there and ride. Although I didn't want to put as much time in, Shelley pushed me to continue working hard my last juvenile year. I'm so glad I did. Now that I'm older, I have a career outside of horses," Kendra said, explaining she is a pharmaceutical rep, "but I still love to show."

Piper Bordegon and her mother, Maribelle Granger, are among Shelley's longest-term clients. Piper says "We had known Shelley and Kendra since I was nine as we rode in the same barn as young girls. Shelley was just 21 when we moved horses over there. We had seen what Shelley did with horses; Mom was impressed. We just trusted them."

She learned well. In 2003, Piper went to South Africa, along with two of Shelley's other riders, as a member of the U.S. Saddle Seat Invitational Team.

In 2004, Maribelle and Shelley selected the well-seasoned CH Uncle Abe as Piper's first national level show horse and who earned Piper her first World's Championship. Teamed with CH Undulata's Fashion Plate ncle abe as Piper's first 'big tie' show horse for the 2011-2013 seasons, she earned another World's Championship, three wins from Lexington, and one from the UPHA American Royal.

Today Piper has a husband, two children and lives in Kansas. With those commitments, she says "it's not as easy to travel and do horses as it used to be."

Still, Piper manages to get there – to ride and ride well. Most recently,



Shelley escorted Taylor Newton and CH-EQ A Sweet Sensation from the Red Mile after one of their Lexington wins.



Alayna Applegate won the UPHA Walk/Trot Challenge Cup National Championship at the 2014 American Royal.



Tammy Ross and CH Talladega Red debuted in Show Pleasure and Park Pleasure in 2014. The popular gelding earned his final points to achieve his CH status with Tammy and under Shelley's direction.

she showed Expensively Designed to the blue in River Ridge's UPHA Three-Year-Old Three-Gaited Classic.

Kelsey McDonald was the first of Shelley's young equitation stars.

"She did one show in Academy and the next year began showing a horse of mine," the trainer said. "She had a lot of drive and ambition, and was hard on herself. The people who owned CH Preferred Prince offered him to her to show."

They won the 2004 Walk and Trot Saddle Seat Equitation 10-Year-Old world's title and the 9 & 10-Year-Old World's Championship. That was the first, but far from the last, time Shelley would head the winner of that world's championship.

"I started riding there the winter of 2004," Taylor said. The year 2005 was my first season with Shelley."

She couldn't have asked for a much better year. In April of that year, Dara Newton purchased CH-EQ A Sweet Sensation, or Chema. After placing third in River Ridge's 10 & Under Walk and Trot qualifier, she was undefeated the rest of the season, including winning her championships at Lexington and Louisville and the UPHA Walk & Trot Finals at the Kentucky Fall Classic. About this time, the Newton family brought Taylor to Sugar Knoll. She would be Shelley's next star.

Taylor bloomed, got taller and changed as a rider. As she put it, "Shelley brought me out of my shell as a person and a rider. We created a bond through hours of lessons; I spent weekends with her and weeks during the summer. I didn't only spend time at the barn but at the house and with her parents. I was kind of raised over there in a way."

One thing Taylor never will forget is her lunge lessons. She says "they were

intense. I wanted to put the time in – and Shelley wanted to put the time in. We'd motivate and feed off each other."

In her last year, Taylor and Chema had an unbelievable season. They won Lexington's Pleasure Equitation 14-17 Championship; Louisville's 17-Year-Old qualifier, the UPHA Pleasure Challenge Cup Finals at Indy, the Pleasure Equitation Medallion Finals at St. Louis, the Pleasure Olympics Finals and the American Royal Equitation Championship.

"It wrapped everything up so nicely," she said. "We accomplished what all of us had wanted to."

Taylor will graduate from college in May. She will embark on two careers: radiologist and wife. And she promises the saddle horse world that she will be back.

Alayna Applegate is the latest of Shelley's walk and trot stars. Last year, she won Lexington's Walk & Trot Saddle Seat Equitation 9 & 10-Year-Old Championship,



Sugar Knoll Farm made their first trip to the Morgan Grand National and World's Championship Horse Show in 2014. Reagan Webb won the Grand National Walk/Trot Saddle Seat Classic Equitation title and a reserve in the 11 and Under Championship.

Louisville's 9 Year Old and 9 & 10-Year-Old Championship, both classes at St. Louis and the UPHA Walk & Trot Challenge Cup 10 and Under National Championship at Kansas City. This year, she is once again teamed with Blue Over You. They won the 13 & Under title at River Ridge in her first cantering class.

Several years ago, Shelley decided to step into a 'bigger pond' and accepted a position as instructor at one of the sport's leading show barns. She was in her 20s, and had "a yearning to go out into the big world. I was a little naïve when I went out there but had to go try it."

However, she discovered she missed the intimacy found in having her own operation and returned to Sugar Knoll. Most of the riders who went with her returned with her.

"When I came back home I had even more drive, passion and enthusiasm. I've never looked back. It's given me a greater perspective of who I am as a person and trainer and what I want to accomplish."

Shelley is "very content. I'm happy with my life and those who are in it. I feel like I have the best animals, family, and customers I could ask for. I have a job that allows me to express my creativity. It challenges me, keeps me sharp and uses my mind. It energizes me to get up each day and see what kind of difference I can make, whether with a horse or a rider or with one of the dogs I train for agility. I like living in my own little bubble."

Today, one might argue that Shelley's bubble isn't that 'little.' But whatever size the bubble, the lady living there is a shining example of how hard work, talent and love can lead to success.

And she's doing it 'her way.'