

A tale of two horse lovers: MEET AUTUMN HILLS

By Sadie Fowler

A love story that begins with two young souls, from many miles apart, developed and deepened when fate brought Tiffany and Steve Wheeler together by way of the Bluegrass State — thanks to a shared desire to pursue their passions centered around the American Saddlebred. Now, the happily married parents to one daughter reap the benefits of sharing a life together, which includes expertly leading Autumn Hills, a farm they own and operate in a place they both could only once imagine living out their dream lives.

Known for their expert pairing of amateur riders as much as their skill with the young horses, Tiffany and Steve have come a long way from their origins in Idaho and Ohio, respectively, and if blue ribbons are any indication, they're both exactly where they deserve to be and belong.

"They are the best of both worlds!" said Lisa Holt, customer and friend. "Steve and Tiff's backgrounds are from different parts of the country — it's like western cowgirl meets midwestern country boy! It's the perfect combo. As young people, Tiff and Steve worked for amazing trainers and those experiences and lessons combined have made for their own extraordinary careers. They work together and singularly to do the best job for horse and rider ... I am blessed to call them colleagues, teachers, trainers and friends!"

Autumn Hills is home to about 60 percent amateur riders and 40 percent young horses. One of the couple's greatest strengths is the fact they know their niche and are laser focused on perfecting it. They're thankful so many talented amateurs and owners have put their trust in Autumn Hills to deliver, and there's no doubt Tiffany and Steve are doing just that.

"We are blessed with some really talented and hard-working amateur riders," said Tiffany, who is originally from North Idaho, where her humble beginning with the horse started with basic trail riding. "Our riders have very competitive attitudes and want to do well, as badly as we want it for them."

Steve agrees, barely able to contain his own competitive nature when he responds to a question about what he enjoys most and what his future goals are regarding team Autumn Hills. Quite simply, he says, "We want to win."

In addition to have the competitive drive to inspire their many clients in pursuit of their own goals, the Wheelers are also well-respected for their demeanor and ability to communicate with kindness and integrity, as explained by Dr. Owen Weaver, client and friend. Weaver's journey with them began 11 years ago, when her mom moved her horses there. When Weaver's longtime trainer Patty Milligan passed away, the Wheelers were a good pick for her during a difficult time.



(top) Steve and Tiffany Wheeler, with their daughter, Finley.

(right) Daughter Finley is enjoying their world.



"Steve and Tiffany were a great pick for me at a time I had to make hard decisions about the training of my horses and myself," she said. "They made communication easy and helped me make good solid business decisions. They still do that for me every day and I cannot express how very invaluable it is to have people to whom I can speak candidly about all aspects of my participation in this business."

"Not only are they good ethical business people, they are terrific trainers and horse caretakers with a patience and skill for the development of competitive young horses who go on to become outstanding aged competition horses for me or whomever might buy them. Not only are they amazing in bringing along home-grown talent, they have guided me in adventures like Courageous Lord and made those adventures successes. They both have an understanding and feel for gearing horses for the amateur to ride and I for one am grateful to have this caliber of trainer to ride behind."

Perhaps most importantly of all, the Wheelers have demonstrated support that Weaver and the many other clients under the Autumn Hills banner appreciate.

"They have allowed me to have a refuge at the barn when I needed it and have just let me get through the things I needed to with their support, quiet humor and friendship behind me," Weaver concluded. "These days I am enjoying my horses more than ever and I look forward to hanging out at AHF indefinitely as long as they will have me."

COWGIRL MEETS COUNTRY BOY

While Tiffany's journey started as a result of her grandmother caving and finally giving her the \$10 it would cost to take a trail ride at a ranch that just so happened to have a few Saddlebreds, Steve's earlier years had a little more structure as it relates to the show horse. A native of Hilliard, Ohio, both of Steve's parents trained Saddlebreds and Morgans and ran a large lesson program.

"Horses were always in my blood," he said. "So I got a lot of experience working with kinds and amateur riders, as well as horses in all different price ranges, at an early age."

Tiffany's desire to be a part of the horse industry only grew with each ride she took on the trails. She settled on going to veterinary school because she couldn't see how else to be around horses, but an ad in Equus magazine promoting William Woods University sealed her fate. She declined a music scholarship she was offered to Washington University and made an appointment to tour William Woods.

"After that I knew this was what I'd been looking for," she said. "This was my ticket to the horse industry. I'd never even sat on a Saddlebred until I went to William Woods."

Turns out, Tiffany had a knack for her chosen career choice and soon enough she worked her way up the ranks and landed herself a job with veteran Kentucky horse trainer John Conatser.



Steve says I'm First was one of his favorites over the years. He got to start this horse as a two-year-old and show him. He taught Steve not to get in a horse's way and to let them be what they want to be.



Both Steve and Tiffany have several horses that have been an important part of their journeys. For Tiffany, Tempt Me was the mare that never had a bad day. An athlete and a pleasure to train, she and Tiffany won the Ladies Fine Harness World's Championship in 2014 and that title was especially satisfying as Tiffany was coming off a broken pelvis injury.



The Wheelers are known for magically pairing their amateur riders with the perfect mount that has resulted in countless top prizes for Autumn Hills.

Meanwhile, Steve had also proven himself worthy of attention and worked under another Saddlebred great, Nelson Green, also in Kentucky. It is while both were hustling to learn all they could and make a name for themselves in the Bluegrass State that Tiffany and Steve crossed paths and sealed their fate as a couple.



World's champion Renaissance Man's Medici was the horse that single-handedly won more titles for Autumn Hills than any other horse. He is pictured here with owner William Shatner driving.

"We met through mutual friends," Tiffany said. "We were both working in Nicholasville, Kentucky. We were great friends before we had a relationship."

It turns out the relationship part worked quite well and now, years later, the Wheelers partner up each day with the goal of making Autumn Hills part of the cream of the crop among the industry elite. It's no easy task but both are quick to say they 100 percent are living their dream.

And their friends and clients notice, and also appreciate Steve and Tiffany's zest for life and great attitudes, which transfers to the great rides their amateurs experience. Carol Hillenbrand is another client who expressed her fondness of the Wheelers.

"I think what makes them so special is their positivity, and how that transfers to our rides," said Carol Hillenbrand. "If they believe I can do it, maybe I can! Their horses are incredibly prepared to do their job whatever division it might be, and the horses seem so incredibly happy to be their best. Finally, both Tiffany and Steve have been so caring towards me. I just feel that my horses and I are in the right place."

A LONG DAY'S WORK

A typical day begins around 5:30 a.m. where they team up for routine business including feeding, cleaning stalls, working horses and keeping up with office work including coordinating show entries, in between other important duties at the farm such as checking broodmares and other projects. Generally, the day at the barn ends around 3 p.m.

"Then, for me, it's Mom duty," she said. "After we're done at the barn it's time to take our daughter Finley to whatever activity I've arranged for her that day. Once we're home from that, it's time to cook an early dinner, put Finley to bed and we go to bed shortly after!"

Looking back to the early days, the Wheelers say the young horses became their "thing" before the amateurs started coming. Thankfully, in time it evolved.

"When we first started our business, young horses were our business," Steve said. "At that time, that's all anyone would send us. We really were able to hone our skills over the years with young horses and still look forward to bringing the new faces into the barn every September."

Eventually, as things progressed, the Wheelers attracted some amateur riders and now, both agree Autumn Hills is comprised of a good balance of amateur riders and youngsters. Also, they're proud of their small breeding program for which they're very hands on and grateful.

Speaking to the amateur aspect of Autumn Hills, Tiffany says one thing she's realized through their experience is that each rider has their strengths and weaknesses. Knowing this is why she and Steve have become so good at pairing horse and rider.

"You have to take this into consideration when buying an individual horse," said Tiffany, sharing their secrets to success in terms of their amateur teams. "We try to go over a game plan for each class, what we'd like to accomplish that particular day. And we really focus on ring navigation as well."

SHORTCUTS DON'T WORK

Transitioning from a barn that focused exclusively on young horses to one that also shined with their amateur teams is the single biggest change the Wheelers have faced in the horse business. Nonetheless, that transition couldn't have come at a more perfect time.



Courageous Lord taught Steve not to be afraid of a challenge. He was different from any other horse Steve had trained, thus Steve learned how to adapt to his ways. He also says the horse taught him to "always listen to Merrill!"



Pictured with the Glasscock/Fitzpatrick family following Steve's 2014 Three-Gaited World's Grand Championship with CH Macadamia, the Wheelers feel fortunate to work with many great clients.



Fox Grape's The Tiger Lily is a horse Steve and Tiffany started together. Steve called her the best of both of them.



Macadamia was Steve's first world's grand champion, and a horse that got better and better with each go.

"Unfortunately, breeding numbers were down for a few years, which meant fewer colts," explained Steve. "So when we added amateurs to our mix, it really added to our program. The Saddlebred business is really geared toward the amateurs these days. Unlike many years ago, when people would rather watch their trainers show their horses."

Now, most owners want to participate, and both agree that has been a wonderful addition to the American Saddlebred world. The more amateurs want to be involved, the better for the future of the breed, they say.

The road to the top has been fun, yet has required hard work, and also patience. In fact, Tiffany's advice to a young trainer trying to make it in the business: "Just be patient. It will all come in time. Hard, consistent work will take you farther than talent. Keep your nose to the grindstone and just keep at it."

Most of all, she says, "There are no shortcuts. Shortcuts will tell on you every time."

Echoing his wife's comments, Steve agrees it takes hard work and patience to succeed, yet he takes in one step further by advising folks getting started to choose their employers wisely.

"I would tell young trainers to go out there and work for the best people you can," he said. "Work for the best and marry the best! The number one thing I learned in previous job experiences, related to horses and in life in general, is to surround yourself with the best horses and people and good things will happen."

He too is quick to point out that there is no such thing as a successful shortcut.

AN EVOLVING WORLD

Both Tiffany and Steve have witnessed a lot of change in the evolving world in which we live, especially the horse world. Change is constant, and, like everything else, the Saddlebred world is filled with many things that are going right and a few things that could be improved.

"We need more lesson programs out there," Steve said. "That's what we can improve. What's right with our industry? Our product! Everyone loves the Saddlebred. One major issue with our business is that we're cutting out the middle market, which should be the biggest percentage of our business."

Steve lives with the philosophy that each day is a new day. It's a lesson he learned from his greatest



Steve and Tiffany enjoy the outdoors and aim to have one vacation each year, although last year proved to be too busy for that to happen. They're hoping to make up for that come the end of horse show season.

mentors, including his parents who taught him how to ride and look good on a horse, as well as Nelson Green, who taught him how to be a horseman and to strive to be better than what you think you are.

Tiffany had her share of mentors as well, perhaps none more so than Conatser, whom she describes as having a work ethic second to none.

"When I first went there everyone told me I wouldn't last a week," she laughed. "Turns out I was there for years and he walked me down the aisle when we got married."

And speaking of married life, it's all good, especially with the addition of Finley, who looks like Steve but acts like Tiffany.

"She's so much fun and has changed our lives," Tiffany said. "It's been a hard road, as we don't have any grandparents close by, but we have wonderful nannies whom we couldn't live without."

Tiffany says they try to take one vacation a year, although that didn't happen last year. Hopefully they'll get away this winter and have some quality family time away from work.

Looking ahead, the Wheelers have plenty of goals, mainly to be the best parents, partners and trainers they can be. Both agree, there is always room for improvement in every aspect of life. Both are always striving to evolve and learn.

"There are no set goals as for horse show goals," Tiffany said. "That's because you're only as good as the current stock you've got. All we can do is prepare them to the best of our ability and make them as good as they can possibly be. Everything else will fall into place."