

# Prized Partnership Sets Eyes on Santa Barbara Just in time for *100th birthday!*

By Sadie Fowler



Show managers Scott Hickey (l) and Lance Bennett will manage 28 shows for several different breeds in 2019.



The unique awards presented at horse shows and awards celebrations have become a hallmark of Bennett-Hickey managed horse shows.

Lance Bennett and Scott Hickey have a unique management style that makes them the perfect choice for leading the efforts of some of the country's most prized equestrian events spanning several breeds. This year — just in time for its 100th birthday — the Santa Barbara National is one of the very lucky events to fall under the expert guidance of this one-of-a-kind powerhouse pair of managers.

The 100th anniversary of this prestigious event is set to take July 4th through 7th, and Bennett and Hickey are geared up to ensure it's one of the best editions that fans of Santa Barbara will ever experience.

It's their first turn in the driver's seat of this show, which has long been considered one of the

best in terms of pageantry, historical significance and spirited competition.

Going back to the beginning, it comes to no surprise that Bennett and Hickey's management

*“One lesson on a Saddlebred and I was hooked.”*

- Lance Bennett, of his introduction to the breed.

style is unique — their multi-dimensional partnership is also one that's considered a rare gem.

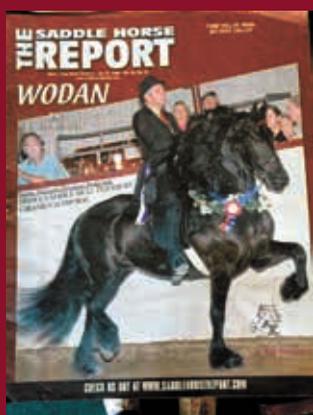
“Through my passion and lifelong commitment to horses we created a career opportunity out of tragedy,” said Bennett, sharing the great story of how their careers in horse show management got started. “When we met, I was a tack shop owner preparing to move my location.”

Bennett and Hickey had been invited to move the tack shop onto an equestrian facility that offered boarding and training in addition to serving as a horse show venue. It was, to say the least, a great location for an aspiring retail store.

“We took over a rundown clubhouse to house our store,” he said. “Once we chased the rats, possums and skunks out we were ready to begin a building makeover.” Together, they transformed a dilapidated space into an inviting retail store.

“No one on the property could believe the changes,” Bennett said. “We opened in time for the spring horse show season. The cash register started ringing and life was back on track.” Meanwhile, the partnership of the facility was in an uproar and soon enough threatened to close the center.

“We basically had spent our last dollar on tenant improvements only to find the facility was probably going to shut down or declare bankruptcy,” he said. The partner who owned the horse show part of the equestrian facility had left and when he did, the horse shows that used the facility as a venue went with him. The remaining partner of the equestrian center had not previously been in charge of operations and as a result of this, most trainers boarding at the facility also left due to the upheaval.



*Wodan was one of two Friesians that led to the creation of Joan and Joe Fernandez' Friesian Focus with Lance Bennett as manager and trainer. Wodan graced our front cover in 2006.*

“So, here we were with a brand new store, no horse shows and no permanent horses left to speak of,” said Bennett, explaining the turmoil the situation had brought to him and his own partner.

Quick to brainstorm and think creatively, Bennett and Hickey soon met with the remaining partner to discuss options. After meeting with him, they had a thought and pitched out an idea. What if they revived the horse show business and offered a new circuit that could function alongside the equestrian facility, which in turn could continue to house the tack shop. How hard could it be?

In 1997, the Southern California Horseman's Council was born and thereby a new circuit created. It included 10 hunter jumper shows along



*Scott and Lance's retail store has a little bit of everything including apparel and gifts.*



*Scott Hickey rarely shows but he is pictured here with Doeke winning the Del Mar Charity Fair Open Pleasure Driving class in 2014.*



Scott's parents Dianne and Jim Hickey have been involved since the beginning and often helped at shows behind the scenes. They are pictured here accepting the award as the SCHC Volunteers Of The Year.

with a pair of shows that featured both American Saddlebreds and Morgans.

As a longtime horse show exhibitor and retail entrepreneur, Bennett said the primary goal, from his perspective, was to create a series of shows that were exhibitor friendly and extraordinary in terms of hospitality. The formula worked, and the shows began to grow to sold out stature.

"We were filling all the show stalls and adding portables to keep up with the demand," he said. "The cash register once again was ringing like a musical instrument. The Saturday night barbecues became a signature staple to our events."

Next, Bennett said they wanted to address another issue that they knew would add to the appeal of their shows—handing out unique and sought-after prizes. "We are now known for our tack shop prizes instead of the traditional silver cup awards," he laughed.

Instead of the usual awards, winning riders now could bring their ribbons to the office and select from a nice array of quality choices from the tack shop, ranging from sportswear and

jewelry to saddle pads or horse treats.

"Over 20 years later, we still follow our guidelines to make the show all about the exhibitor and not squeezing out every last dollar for

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profit," Bennett said. "Parties and lavish prizes are an out-of-pocket expense, but we feel are worth the return."



Snoepja, owned by Friejan Focus, and Lance were the IFSHA Friesian Saddle Seat Pleasure Junior Horse National Champions at Del Mar, [California] Fairgrounds in 2010.



Lance and Scott enjoy making the trip to Louisville to visit with friends including Marilyn Macfarlane.

Each year, the circuit of shows they started out of near desperation culminate with a Banquet of Champions to celebrate the year as well as year-end award winners.

Their strategy has indeed worked. In 2019, Bennett and Hickey plan to manage and produce 28 shows for several different breeds, including four Saddlebred and Morgan shows, one for each season.

"We are proud of our contribution to the Saddlebred/Morgan communities with our schedule of shows," he said. This year, their spring show will be the Diamond Jubilee (April 4-7), their summer show will be Santa Barbara National (July 4-7), the fall show is Labor Day



*The pair go to great lengths to make their barn set up at horse shows warm and welcoming for clients and guests.*

Classic (Sept. 14 and 15), and the Jingle Bell will wrap up the season from Dec. 5-8.

Part of Bennett's pride as it relates to hosting the Morgan and Saddlebred shows roots back to his youth. His love for Saddlebreds started as a young adult in New England after a junior career of showing hunters.

"One lesson on a Saddlebred and I was hooked," he said, adding that 90 days after that first lesson he sold his hunter and bought his first Saddlebred. "I began showing on the New England circuit until I took a vacation to San Diego. Six months after that trip, I packed my things and moved to a city where the sun shines and snow is only on postcards."

After a brief stint with a rescue horse from the track, Bennett once again purchased a Saddlebred and began showing. Slowly trading up to a better horse each time, he finally landed "The One" when he purchased a three-gaited horse from Barbara Beamer of Seaview Farm.

"Under Barbara's guidance I finally had a show horse that was not a would be, could be, should be, or a may be," he said. "This horse was

the real deal. I remember the incredible thrill of showing a really good one."

Bennett says he and his A-plus equine partner made such a splash after their first show that a gentleman followed them back to the barn in an attempt to purchase the horse with an open check. "I was told to fill in the amount," he said. "I refused."

Two weeks later, Bennett's horse was rushed to the hospital for colic surgery. Ten days into post-operative care, he died from complications of the surgery.

"Words cannot express how devastated I was," Bennett said. "I decided I was done showing. There would be no way to afford another horse of this caliber. At this point, I didn't want another horse anyway."

Back on the work front, as the store was going through its rebirth, the same thing was about to happen with the horses.

"At a dinner party one night, I noticed a Saddlebred in my friend's back yard," Bennett said. "This was a great big impressive gelding, whom my friend said was burned out and her rehab project when she could find the time."

In spite of his friend's description, Bennett said he really liked the horse. At dinner, his friend asked him if he would like to take him and give bringing him back to the show ring a shot. "This horse ended up keeping me in the sport," he said. "A year later and many agonizing hours spent working with him, the horse returned to the show ring and the winner's circle."

Because of this horse, Rancho Vista Show Horses opened its doors and today Bennett and Hickey split their energy between the tack store, their show circuit business and now a training and lesson barn. Within the first year they grew from that one horse to filling a 10-stall barn with Saddlebreds, Morgans and Hackney ponies.

The barn took a dramatic turn toward the positive side when client Joan Fernandez became determined that she wanted a Friesian. "After being told 'no' on multiple occasions to shopping for 'hairy draft horses', we finally relented," he laughed. "Our travels took us to Holland and purchasing our first Friesians. I went with the idea of finding a Saddlebred in black. Scott would keep notes on each horse as I rode them."

Bennett said the fact that the horses were all black with no distinguishing markings presented challenges in terms of keeping them straight and tracking the good from the bad.

"Trying to find an amateur ladies horse in a foreign country, on a breed I had never ridden, with a language barrier and code of conduct completely different from ours made this incredibly challenging and stressful," he said. It was Bennett's absolute goal to find a safe, well-mannered ladies horse, yet one with a show horse attitude. After looking at more than 100 horses they finally settled on two.

"Scott and I found them in a converted cow barn standing in straight stalls like milking cows," he said. "One was not broke to ride and the other one, upon trial, ran off with me." Still, Bennett says there was so much x-factor and character in these two horses that he could not stop thinking about them.

"Neither were suitable for Joan in their present condition, and I didn't know if they ever would be," he said. "As we were having dinner that night in a Dutch restaurant called the White House, Joan announced she was enthralled with the breed, and would like to open a small discriminate sale barn of Friesians."

This opportunity allowed Bennett and Hickey to go back and purchase the two special horses they had found. Years to follow would prove these two horses, multi-world champions Wodon and Otto, would be the flagship of Joan's Friesian Focus, LLC.

"Scott and I have been working, showing and selling Friesians for over a decade now, and none have proven to be as special or charismatic as these two," he said. "They truly have earned their place in horse show history."

In speaking more specifically about Hickey's start and involvement with show horses, Bennett explained Hickey's connection with horses didn't begin until the two of them met in 1996. Between the retail store, hanging out in the barn and going to shows, Bennett says Hickey basically learned it all through osmosis.

"Scott's keen eye on a sound horse versus a lame one, a good one versus a bad one, has made him a vital asset on the ground," Bennett said. "Although his riding career is limited, Scott has been seen in the show ring driving saddle horses, ponies and Friesians."

To demonstrate the importance of Hickey's role in their horse partnership, Bennett again points to the trip to Holland, where Hickey's keen eye proved to be invaluable.

"While I am sitting on these horses trying to decide if they have the talent, Scott is on the ground shaking his head yes or no," he said. Whether Hickey was communicating that Bennett should give it up, quit trying to fix it, or get off, Bennett says he was right in almost every instance.

To date, Bennett and Hickey still have horses in the barn from their original trips to The Netherlands that are showing and winning for their amateur owners.

*"We are in the hospitality business, whether it comes to running a horse show or our training barn. We are truly grateful to our loyal clients and customers inside the show ring and out."*

"I think Scott's best role is as the conductor of our organization," he said. "He keeps myself, the exhibitors and our barn clients on track. His design skills are unmatched ... Whether it is an awards banquet, a horse show party or a tack room setup, no one does a better job implementing and expediting the task at hand than Scott Hickey."

If there's one thing that's for sure it's that these two men's business model has stood the test of time based on two things: Its commitment to exhibitors and its wonderful staff. Also, the quality of the production has always been a driving factor.

"We are in the hospitality business, whether it comes to running a horse show or our training barn," Bennett said. "We are truly grateful to our loyal clients and customers inside the show ring and out."

Bennett and Hickey are very much looking forward to continuing their tradition of excellence, with the next stop for this dynamic duo being Diamond Jubilee in April, followed by the highly-anticipated Santa Barbara National, which ushers in the July 4th holiday. They promise to deliver on their unmatched management skills and can assure exhibitors they'll be glad they came.



*Dick Martin was a client for years with his late wife Hattie, who introduced him to Lance and Scott.*



*Jingle Bell Horse Show always has a festive holiday spirit and has been a favorite season-ending show for exhibitors since Lance and Scott started it in 2006.*