

Courageous Flaire



Heidi Kunkel and HVK Courageous Flaire had an amazing career together that included two Amateur Park Saddle World Championships and an Amateur Park Harness World Championship. (photo by Howie Schatzberg)

BY BOB FUNKHOUSER

Among the relatively small ratio of great horses from our beloved world champions are an even smaller group, those that reach yet another plateau. These special equine superstars have unmistakable character and the ability to repeat their greatness with different owners and trainers. The Morgan world recently lost a stallion that fit the special category while a handful of individuals who were fortunate enough to be a part of HVK Courageous Flaire's life lost a once-in-a-lifetime horse and a close friend. He was 24.

The first foal of the legendary Park Harness and In Hand World Champion Noble Flaire, HVK Courageous Flaire led a life fit for a movie script all the while providing great enjoyment for the four owners and three trainers who called him theirs.

The story goes that in 1986 Tom Caisse decided that which ever mare came in season first would be the first and only mare bred to Noble Flaire that year for a trial run. That honor went to a Vigilmarc daughter, Val's Christy. The next year a bay stallion was born and he would be named HVK Courageous Flaire. When he was old enough to begin his lessons in the Kohler training barn he was nicknamed Baby Bob after his sire who was named after his breeder Bob [and Judy] Whitney.

Courageous Flaire came out as a four-year-old winning four-year-old park harness titles with Tom Caisse driving the worthy first son for Kohler Stables.



Michelle Raduano won the Open Park Saddle World Championship with HVK Courageous Flaire in 1995.



Tom Caisse drove Noble Flaire's first foal to the Four-Year-Old Park Harness World Championship for the Alan Abt family.

At the same time Alan Abt had decided he wanted a harness horse to drive with which he could win. Abt, along with his then wife, Christina, and UPHA Hall of Fame trainer Harry Embree, had a couple of Oklahoma stars with the likes of SMS Barrymore and Fine Art.

"Alan saw a picture of him in Saddle Horse Report and said, 'that's the kind of horse I want,'" said Christina Abt. "Harry [Embree] and I went to New England to watch him show and see if we thought he was the horse for us. After seeing him we both agreed that if the stallion was manageable enough for our program we would love to have him.

"We called the Monday after New England and asked, 'Tommy [Caisse], can we do this?' He responded with, 'This is the nicest horse I've ever been around. I don't understand why people aren't knocking the door down to buy him? Maybe they think they couldn't afford him?'

"We bought him without trying him. He was that nice. It was a lot of money to us, but it certainly wasn't crazy money. We bought him with the deal that Tommy would show him at Oklahoma in our name."

Caisse and HVK Courageous Flaire captured the Four-Year-Old Park Harness World Championship for the Abt family and the journey to stardom had begun. A few months later the stallion was moved to his new home in New York, where a new family and a new trainer awaited.

"Harry believed in consistency so he started a routine with B-Bob and never varied," said Abt. "We all felt it was a big responsibility. We obviously wanted to do well, but we felt more pressure to do well for the horse."

Their first season out Alan Abt and HVK Courageous Flaire were showing signs of a good winter's work together. They were clicking and marched into Oklahoma and took the Grand National Amateur Park Harness Stallion title. Geared up to take on the best back in the championship, the team left with a yellow ribbon on that night.

"We were third and it was devastating," stated Christina Abt, "not because we lost, but that we let B-Bob down, Tommy down, everyone down.

"It was a long winter. I picked the brains of several horsemen. We all worked at it harder. We learned to get out of his way and let him be himself. Glenn Bouvier was a big part of the team."

Season two with the Abts, B-Bob's six-year-old year, again started with victories, this time with a more seasoned look. In October of 1993, against a ring full of icons of the industry, the magnificent stallion rose to a level that had not been seen before. In a two-horse workout against the legendary Topa's Krystal, Courageous Flaire was crowned the Amateur Park Harness World Champion for the Abt/Embree team.

"That was thrilling and hard all at the same time," said Christina. "We loved Topa's Krystal. We didn't take satisfaction in beating her, but we took satisfaction with how our horse worked."

The fairy tale would soon end, or at least take on a new twist. Alan and Christina's marriage ended and she had the choice of getting the house or the horses. She couldn't part with B-Bob.

"I took the horses," she explained. "I took care of him [Courageous Flaire], worked him, and drove him outside. He was my best friend through a very rough time. The kids were gone, Harry was gone, it was just me and B-Bob."

However, as much as she wanted to it was impossible for Christina to keep Courageous Flaire forever. When Rick Stevens came calling, she felt good about selling, knowing her friend would be in good hands.

Stevens did buy the stallion for the Raduano family and they decided to take on a new challenge: park saddle. The decision proved to be a good one as Stevens put the amateur rider and the relatively inexperienced stallion together and won the highest honor in the Morgan show world, that of World Champion Park Saddle. Michelle Raduano and Courageous Flaire defeated a strong cast of professionals

to win the title, including reserve world champions HVK Flaire Rose with Mike Goebig and third place finishers Nobility and Judy Whitney.

That park saddle title made three World Championships for two different owners, fitting the bill perfectly for each owner. Then came yet another chapter in this remarkable horse's life. The Raduano family had decided to take a break from showing horses so Stevens asked Heidi Kunkel if she would be interested in the three-time world champion.

"I never dreamt that he would be available but Rick told me the Raduanos were getting out and that I should come down and look at him," said Heidi Kunkel. "Rick drove him inside for a few rounds and then he stopped by me and said, 'You want to drive him?' This big smile came over my face and I said, 'Well, yeah!'

"We clicked. I could read him right away. I could feel when we were right. I've had other nice horses, like [Stonecroft] Byzantine that I could never feel when they were just right. With Courageous, I knew right away and that was a great feeling. It was fabulous."

Courageous and Kunkel captured the 1997 Amateur Park Harness World Championship defeating such teams

as AFF Beulah with Lisa Howa and MLF Cimmerian with Paul Brisco. Having conquered that challenge, Kunkel and Courageous went on to the next obstacle, as the stallion returned to the park saddle division. Two more World Championships were garnered, the Amateur Park Saddle titles in both 1999 and 2000.

"Our time together was amazing," said Kunkel. "Courageous liked me and as soon as he heard my voice he would start talking, looking for treats, however, there was no mistake about it, this was Rick's horse. That horse loved him. He related to Rick. For the rest of us he would put his ears back and act like a stud; he never put his ears back at Rick. And he always used his ears in the ring.

"I think the great ones are different, extremely intelligent. He was such a character and he loved what he did. Showing was what he lived for. My favorite times with Courageous would be the final ride before a big show, that was always a blast. I knew there would be lots of entertaining and we would get to the end of a straight-away and he would park out, throw his tail up over his back and snort. It was the coolest thing."

HVK Courageous Flaire lived out his life at Stonegate Farm in Rhode Island. He lived in the same stall since he was eight-years-old. He was an inspiration and friend to those closest to him.

"He changed our lives forever," exclaimed Christina Abt. "He had a special mission for everyone that owned him."

Now, this magnificent animal will be rejoined with the person that knew him best. You just know Courageous and Rick are back together, strutting their stuff.



Christina Abt was elated with "B-Bob's" Amateur Park Harness World Championship (with Alan Abt) following a two-horse workout with the legendary Topa's Krystal.

Remembering One Special Night

BY CHRISTINA M. ABT

It was a historic show ring moment--the kind memorialized by veteran horsemen over late night, whiskey-laced, barn banter. A story perfectly scripted and dramatically played out on a world championship stage.

The year: 1993. The place: the coliseum at the Oklahoma State Fairgrounds.

The Morgan World Championship Horse Show was winding down to its final days. On this second to last evening, the Amateur Park Harness World Championship was about to be called. But first, a fireworks display was on tap in the coliseum. Great entertainment for the audience--a distraction to edgy competitors on standby in the adjoining warm-up ring.

Then, as happens at such moments, everything went into fast forward motion. The ringmaster called the class. Whips began cracking. Nervous amateurs jockeyed for position. Intent trainers kept pace alongside. Immaculately-groomed horses harnessed to spit and polish buggies barreled toward the in-gate. Shouts of last-second directions and encouragement echoed through the coliseum. Spectators cheered as favorites burst under the bright lights and onto the fragrant tanbark.

Yeah boy!

Seven horses tore up the ring that night, each one titled and respected. Yet there was one among them who was a cut above the rest. A mare that had taken on all comers--mares, stallions and geldings alike--and soundly whipped 'em.

Topa's Krystal.

Krystal was competing that night as a 13-time world champion under saddle and in harness. She was deservedly revered and beloved not only by her owners, Linda and Bob McLemore of Apple Flat Farm, but by the Morgan show world at large.

People were drawn to the coliseum that night to witness this great mare's performance. However, they were also intrigued by her accomplished challengers: Nobility, Plantation Showbiz, Brentwood Command, Roadshow St. Patrick, LQ Mark Twain and a particularly gifted young stallion, titled with two world championships and unconfirmed potential for more, HVK Courageous Flaire.

Courageous was the first offspring sired by the renowned Kohler stallion, Noble Flaire, and out of the acclaimed park harness mare Val's Christy. While his registered name was partly connected to his parentage, his barn name of "Baby Bob" (later shortened to B-Bob) evolved directly from his sire's nickname ("Bob"), after the iconic horseman who had bred Noble Flaire, Bob Whitney.

B-Bob began his illustrious show career as the 1991 Four-Year-Old Park Harness World Champion. It was at that point that my family purchased the rising super star as an amateur park harness horse for my then husband, Alan.

B-Bob and Alan's first year was filled with tricolor wins, including that of unanimous Grand National Amateur Park Harness Stallion. However, the season ended with a painfully disappointing third place finish in the world championship. It was a disappointment that motivated my family and our trainer, Harry Embree, to give all that we had, and more, in order to come back the next year and get it right.

1993 followed the same pattern for B-Bob and Alan as they again enjoyed a tricolor show season all the way through the Grand National Championship. It was also the path that brought them to that world competition against one of the best Morgan show horses in the history of the breed.



Christina Abt escorted HVK Courageous Flaire and her then husband Alan through the out-gate following their World Champion victory pass following a historic two-horse workout with Topa's Krystal.

I had a bird's eye view of the show ring on that night of nights, teetering high atop the outer edge of the coliseum wall. While I desperately wanted to watch the class, I was there for a singular purpose, and simple though it was, I was fiercely dedicated to my task. As B-Bob came out of the far turn and hit the straightaway, it was my sole responsibility to whistle, chirp, clap...whatever it took to animate the stud as he passed by the judges.

To be honest, I don't remember much about the first way of that class, other than thinking Krystal's reputation was well-deserved and she would be hard to beat. I also knew that the second way of the ring always belonged to B-Bob and, true to form, when the game stud turned around that night, he gave every horse in the ring all they could handle.

As the amateurs lined up and the judges begin their decision making, a ping pong match waged inside my head. Was B-Bob good enough to defeat the undefeated Krystal? Would the judges have the nerve to beat her? Was his outstanding second way good enough to challenge her exceptional first way? Had I missed a winning performance by the others while keying on B-Bob and Krystal?

As it turned out, I was not the only one struggling with such questions. When ring announcer Bill Carrington broadcast the class results, he delivered an unexpected message. The judges were unsure of their winner. They needed a work-off to make a final decision. I sat literally hanging off the edge of the coliseum wall as two names were called out. Topa's Krystal and Courageous Flaire.

Such head to head competitions are special events for horse show spectators, awaited with greedy anticipation for the thrilling performance to come. Yet as I watched the two champions move out of the lineup, as all around me begin wildly cheering the elite contest, I felt little excitement over this one-on-one work off. Rather, I began silently praying to the horse gods that our past year of blood, sweat and tear efforts would be enough to help B-Bob perform his best.

With a call for a park trot, the compact liver chestnut mare and the rangy bay stallion began their show ring battle. As in the class, Krystal was strong and solid, the epitome of a world champion. Yet B-Bob was different this time. As I watched him perform, he was clearly pulling harder, going higher, driving off his hocks more than usual in his first way

of the ring. Looking more closely at this horse who I had come to know and love, it seemed almost as if he knew that there was an important difference in this particular competition. It seemed as if he understood that this was the time, this was the place, this was the moment to give his all.

As the drivers reversed their horses and prepared to battle again, I was unsure what to expect. B-Bob had given so much the first way of the ring, would he be able to deliver his always-stellar, second way?

As the call came for a park trot, B-Bob and Alan were positioned halfway through the far turn. With a cluck Alan gave the signal and his game stallion began a trot that I had often heard described by veteran horsemen but never witnessed. With each step, it appeared as if B-Bob was climbing a ladder, higher and higher. And the more he climbed, the louder the crowd cheered until the stunning performance felt like a collaborative effort between humans and horse.

Finally, with one more exciting turn around the ring, the class was complete.

The two champions returned to the lineup and, along with the entire coliseum, edgily waited for the judges' decisions. Within minutes that seemed much more like hours, Bill Carrington finally spoke the words that my family had worked and waited for through the intensely long year. HVK Courageous Flaire was the new Amateur Park Harness World Champion.

As anyone who wins a world championship will acknowledge, those first moments become a blur of overwhelming emotion as the tricolor ribbon, the royal blue cooler and the collar of roses are presented, placed and photographed. I do know that as I helped create that Kodak moment, I was so incredibly proud of B-Bob and all that he had given to earn his new world title. Yet what followed I believe truly proved the essence of this grand champion's remarkable heart and soul.

As Topa's Krystal was announced Reserve World Champion, her owners decided, on the spot, to retire their treasured mare. After accepting her reserve world honors, they released her from the buggy, and ceremonially walked her around the ring, receiving a standing ovation response. It was an unexpected and emotional tribute for a great horse. It was also a time that required Alan and B-Bob to remain respectfully out of the way. Following a full class and an intense work off, Harry, Alan and I were all concerned about this unusual circumstance and how long B-Bob would continue to patiently endure.

As it turned out, our concerns were needless, as through every step he took that night, B-Bob was a champion. And when it came time for him to once again gear up and display his talent under the dramatic world championship spotlight, B-Bob raised up and gave his all, as he was bred to do, as he was destined to do and as he continued to do in years to come, through world championships in harness and under saddle, for those fortunate enough to train and own him.

It was and will always be my honor to have been one of those blessed individuals.

B-Bob. You were the best....horse...competitor... friend.