

# Caramel Popcorn

## Brings Debbie Ellis Her First Louisville Blue!

by Leeann Mione

LOUISVILLE, Ky. - Debbie Ellis has developed the reputation in the horse industry as extremely hard working, knowledgeable, loyal, a quick study and worthy of any and all praise she receives.

When her yearling colt Caramel Popcorn (I'm First x Fox Grape's Caramel Cream) won the Yearling Breeders Open World's Championship Tuesday morning, there were a lot of people who made sure to take the time to congratulate her.

She's so well thought of that it was easy to find people who wanted to speak on her behalf and extol her virtues. When Ellis heard her colt's number called out she was a flood of emotions both happy and sad and to understand that, you have to go back to the beginning.

Debbie grew up on a large dairy farm in Medina, Ohio. It is the site of Jim and Jenny Taylor's Memory Lane Farm now. She was one of eight kids who were raised by a single mom. Debbie's dad died just days before her fifth birthday.

Her mom used to take them to a pony farm nearby where Debbie would ask "Can't we just put a pony in the trunk and take it home?" She was horse-crazy from the beginning. Her mom did get them a pony for Christmas and the kids drove it everywhere.

When she was in the fourth grade she got her first horse job. She went to Moxley Meadows, a very large Standardbred Farm, to interview to see if she could clean stalls but while her mom was waiting in the car, she saw a worker who would be heading to the hospital after being hurt by the farm's stallion. Debbie's mom promptly said 'no' to her having a job at that farm.

That led Debbie to Lucky Shamrock Quarter Horse Farm where she cleaned stalls, fed and groomed horses through her junior high school years. Her introduction to American Saddlebreds came at Acquiviva Farm in Medina, Ohio, where she cared for the Saddlebreds and Arabs. "I cut out a picture of a Saddlebred that I kept in my wallet and vowed to myself that some day I would own a Saddlebred," said Debbie.

When Mr. Acquiviva, "Amie", got hurt he started his own trucking company and taught her how to ship horses coast to coast. She again worked her tail off and gained the reputation of being very good at her job so she began to get the "elite" horses to ship or the problem horses who needed special attention and the expensive horses whose owners wanted them to get special attention.

She loved her job but her love of Saddlebreds never waned. The trucking company had a terminal in Simpsonville, [Ky.] and she fell in love with the area. "I knew I ultimately had to make the



*Caramel Popcorn (I'm First x Fox Grape's Caramel Cream) was the Yearling Breeders Open World's Champion for owner and breeder Debbie Ellis.*

move to Kentucky if I wanted to make my dream of owning a Saddlebred come true and I fell in love with Shelbyville," said Debbie.

When the opportunity arose about 15 years ago, Debbie purchased acreage in Shelbyville and established Ellis Farm, always with the purpose



Gerhardt Roos showed off Ellis' beautiful yearling after the class back at the Rose Stables stalls.



Debbie Ellis and trainer/handler Gerhardt Roos showed off the blue ribbons won by Caramel Popcorn. The baby helped lead Rose Stables to an unbelievable week in Louisville.

of breeding and foaling out broodmares. She credits Dr. Hugh Behling as being one of her greatest influences. "He taught me everything I know about breeding," said Debbie.

Lynn Via was one of her very first clients. She and Nancy Trent came to the farm and quizzed her to see how she would do and in her trademark, inimitable style Lynn Via sent Debbie 35 or 40 horses right away. Debbie foaled more than 25 babies for Fox Grape Farms that first year. "We just hit it off when we met," said Debbie. "I really learned a lot from her and her breeding program was really rolling when she died."

Via thought so much of Ellis in fact that in 2013 she gave her the mare Fox Grape's Caramel Cream. "Lynn didn't think the mare was really fitting into the Fox Grape breeding program and thought I could do well with her. Sired by (SA) Dorian Wild Temper and out of the Uncle Jimmy McDonald daughter Lollipop Lollipop, the beautiful mare was an eight year old.

Caramel Cream had already produced a 2010 colt sired by Deep Blue as well as 2012 and 2014 colts, both sired by I'm First. Both of those colts are getting rave reviews.

John Scheidt, of Stonecroft Farm, is another in the breeding industry who has been a huge help to Ellis and he is quick to give her praise. "I've known Debbie for a very long time and she is one of the hardest working, most ethical people you'll ever meet. The list of people who trust her with their prized mares is a long one including Linda Fischer, our Stonecroft Farm, Cindy Carcione and Mary Gaylord McClean."

He went on to say, "I've never sent a horse to Debbie that I didn't have complete confidence that she would take great care of."

Ellis' farm now is actually two farms in one. The main farm is approximately 25 acres and she's got about 120 acres total between the two. Her

reputation precedes her and in 2016 she foaled more than 50 babies. At any given time she's got a waiting list of 25-30 people.

With so many animals and so much responsibility, Ellis never focuses on herself. It's just not in her nature, so when her yearling colt out of her Caramel Cream mare began to get a lot of attention, she brushed it off and said to herself 'I'm just a little fish in a big pond. I'll never be able to show at Louisville much less have my in-hand entry do well.' She had the dream and she had the desire, she just didn't have the faith that something so great as a world's championship could happen to her.

She had a great cheerleading squad including legendary NFL coach Buddy Ryan. Debbie met Buddy through his Thoroughbred race horses. "He was my first client," she said. Ryan and his wife lived in Lawrenceburg, Ky., but he came to Debbie's farm almost every day to see his horses. "He and I just hit it off and I was great friends with both him and his wife. After she got sick and died I told him he could come live with me; that I would take care of him. He loved the horses, including the Saddlebreds, and he loved being in Kentucky. I really thought of him as a dad."

"We used to always joke around with each other and he'd say "If you ever get a good one, I'll go in with you [meaning into Freedom Hall]". Then we'd just laugh, never believing it would ever come true," she added.

It took trainer Gerhardt Roos and her horse friends to convince her that her Caramel Popcorn yearling could be the one to finally bring her a world's championship.

"That colt just stood out from the beginning," said Gerhardt. "As if he was saying 'I'm a somebody'. I told Debbie the first time I saw him "He's the one. He can win it all."

Roos went on to say, "This seems to be a great cross. I'm First with the Wild Temper on the dam's side makes them really pretty and very athletic. There is a full brother to this colt in training at Autumn Hills that is being called 'exceptional'."

With her friends and peers all telling her he was the one, Debbie entered the yearling at Louisville (her first time to ever do so) and entrusted Gerhardt to show her first colt.

In Saturday evening's 14-entry ASR Futurity Of Kentucky Yearling class, Caramel Popcorn left Freedom Hall as the reserve world's champion and when he came back Tuesday morning to take the win in the Open Breeders class Ellis struggled with her emotions.

Dr. Owen Weaver and her husband were there in the seats with Debbie as she thought about Buddy Ryan (who just passed away at the end of June this year), mucking stalls as a kid desperate to own a Saddlebred someday, her years of shipping horses owned by other people and of falling in love with Shelbyville, Ky. The thoughts brought both tears and smiles.

She thought about the beautiful mares and babies that she takes such wonderful care of and of the dream she had carried for so long of having one good enough to set foot and win on the green shavings of Freedom Hall.

In the insulated-from-the-outside-world bubble that is the World's Championship Horse Show, it seems that every moment is either the best one ever or the worst there ever was... for someone. We see hopes get shattered and dreams come true and it's always a great week when good things happen to good people especially that hard working, dedicated woman who still has that cut out picture of a Saddlebred that she wished for so long ago.