

Heidi Kunkel

And Her Iconic Smile

BY BOB FUNKHOUSER



Heidi and the multi-titled World Champion HVK Courageous Flaire starred under saddle and in harness. "Heidi's approach with her horses was amazingly simple: buy or breed the best horse she can and patiently and meticulously care for them and give them every possible opportunity to become great," said Laura Valerio MacKinnon.



The team of Kunkel and Stevens did many wonderful things together. Among them was the 2009 World Champion Park Harness title with SYP High Definition.

When asking Stephen Longo what he will remember most about his dear friend who passed away May 15 at the age of 54, he instantly replied, "her iconic smile" and that statement is indeed how we will remember Heidi Kunkel. Not only was her smile glowing and infectious, it was rather amazing considering the health challenges that she faced over and over. Life threw more than curveballs at Heidi. She got hit with 95 mile an hour fastballs over and over and each time dusted herself off, flashed that smile and said, "Is that all you've got?"

"She left a huge void here. All we see is Heidi in the barn," said Longo. "She was the bravest, most courageous woman I've ever known. In the past five years I bet we've talked every night, sometimes way into the morning. We could talk about anything. She was such a positive person. To watch her at the end though was a struggle because it wasn't Heidi."

A lifelong resident of Webster, MA, Heidi was born the daughter of the late John J. and Elizabeth M Kunkel. A Standardbred race horse owner, he shared his love of horses with his daughter who began riding with Carolyn Mills. That's also the place she met a guy named Rick Stevens who would forever be a part of her life. Heidi's first show horse was Echo Brook Fireball and her first Oklahoma star was Elm Hill Bay Leader, trained by Gary Walters at Troutbrook Farm.

That love of horses went beyond those who gave her pleasure in the show ring...

"Heidi got out of horses for a while but she hung out at the barn with me and Rick [Stevens] and when Courageous [Flaire] became available, she got back in," remembered close friend Laura Valerio MacKinnon. "Heidi and I were a package deal. We had a lot of wonderful years together, a very loyal friend. She was so dedicated to her horses and their care."

That love of horses went beyond those who gave her pleasure in the show ring, whether participating or watching. She started rescuing minis, which have long been housed at the Mike Carpenter Stables, along with her recent show horses.

"She was the most kind-hearted person, would do anything for anybody or anything. She helped many people without them even knowing it. She rescued so many animals Heidi was like Superwoman," exclaimed another close friend, Roxanne Sardelli. "She got me into rescuing."



Under the direction of Rick Stevens, Anne Benson (r) rode Stonecroft Byzantine to the World Champion English Pleasure title for Heidi.



Heidi was inducted into the 2015 New England Hall of Fame as Northampton was the site of some of her memorable titles, including the 2002 Amateur Park Harness Championship with HVK Courageous Flaire. Tony Lee, one of her competitors had this to say. "I will always have very special memories of our friendly "Ken and Barbie" rivalry in the Amateur Park Harness division with Queen's Vanity Flair and HVK Courageous Flaire. Heidi's fierce competitiveness, yet loving heart, are traits I feel very lucky to have experienced. She was truly one special lady."

...she has left us with great memories, great friendships, a great model of how to conduct oneself...



Just this past year Shana Gish (second from right) drove Stonecroft Triumphant to the World Champion Ladies Park Harness title for Heidi. Close friend Stephen Longo was part of the winning team with trainer Mike Carpenter.



Mike Carpenter directed Heidi and Stonecroft Triumphant to several top performances. She loved driving a good harness horse and he was one of her last stars.

"We got to be good friends back in the mid-90s with Rick [Stevens] and Laura [Valerio]. We were inseparable. Anytime we were together it was a good time, especially hanging out at the barn watching horses work. Our philosophies regarding horses were very similar: take time with the young ones and let them be what they want to be. If we weren't together we would talk on the phone for hours.

"She was just so amazing because something was always trying to beat her down. She would be in the most excruciating pain and you would ask her how she was and she would respond, 'Wonderful!' I'm going to miss everything about her. It doesn't even seem possible that she's gone."

Heidi Kunkel, the person, was not blessed when it came to health, however, Heidi Kunkel the horsewoman and friend, was extremely blessed. Besides having

some great people in her life through horses, it was her four-legged friends who brought her the most enjoyment. Over the years she was teamed with and cheered for some of the biggest stars in Morgandom, including HVK Courageous Flaire, HVK Diamond Bold, Stonecroft Byzantine, KDS Star Wars, and SYP High Definition GCH. Most recently she had JW Standing Tall, Stonecroft Epiphany, and Stonecroft Triumphant with Mike Carpenter and Equinox Bossanova with Christine Nava.

Heaven received a warm and loving soul when ovarian cancer took our good friend Heidi. Although gone, she has left us with great memories, great friendships, a great model of how to conduct oneself through good and bad times, a history of great horses and most of all an iconic smile that will never die.