

Shine On

SARAH RUSSELL STABLES

By Jackie Hale

Sarah Taylor Russell grew up in Davison, Michigan and began her riding career with Jodi Higdon at Executive Farms in Grand Blanc. When she was 13 years old, she began riding with Kathy Boggs at Cape Cod Farm in Spring Valley, OH. "I still lived in Michigan, but I traveled to Cape Cod as much as possible and spent summers there. Thank God for awesome parents," Sarah remembers. "I had a very successful equitation career with Cape Cod winning World and National titles with Saddlebreds and Morgans. I was also on two Gold Medal winning World Cup teams. I learned a lot from Kathy, Gene, and Erin about how to adapt to riding many different types of horses."

Sarah attended Michigan State University and earned a degree in Animal Science. "During college, I had the opportunity to instruct two Arabian riders to National Top Ten titles and a Reserve National Championship at Youth Nationals," Sarah recalls. "After college I moved to Kentucky and worked at Nelson Green Stables for my first professional job. I learned to groom and care for horses, all the ins and outs of tack, and the importance of turnout. Nelson also gave me my first opportunities to work and show young horses." She continued her equine education at Taylor Creek Stables and Avalon Stables before starting her own business in Tampa.

She and her husband, Ross, met at Michigan State. They were married in 2011 and his career as a Veterinarian in the Thoroughbred industry took them from the Kentucky/Indiana area in the summer to Florida in the winter. "Unfortunately this relocation twice a year made it impossible for me to train American Saddlebreds," Sarah said. Their son, Kellan, was born in 2013 and as he grew older, they decided that they wanted to settle in one place, and they chose Tampa, Florida.

"I was excited to work again, but I expected that it would be a while before we could afford a training farm in the Tampa area," Sarah recalls. "I called my friend and fellow Florida trainer, Maria Gilman, for advice. I knew Judd Stables already had a great assistant, but I thought she might be able to point me in the right direction. She told me about Avalon Stables and introduced me to Pam Roush. I began working as an assistant trainer and instructor at Avalon Stables in January 2015. Ross and I were casually looking for farms to buy or rent to eventually start my own stable and have a clinic location for his Veterinary practice, which was quickly growing." In mid August, Ross found just that. "He was on his way to a client's farm and he passed by this place with white fences, a big barn, and a huge covered arena, which is a big deal in Florida. When he got to his client's place he asked 'Why are there no horses or cars there?' His client informed him that the owners had just put it up for lease." The Russells were excited about this unique opportunity and they jumped on it as quickly as possible, as there were several other interested parties. Sarah embarked on her dream of owning her own stable and opened the doors of Sarah Russell Stables in Wesley Chapel, FL on October 1, 2015.

The 24-stall facility is home to a small group of show horse clientele in their first year of business. "We have had a very successful show season so far in 2016 and look forward to finishing the year strong," Sarah said. She has a few new adult clients that rode Saddlebreds growing up, got out of it for a while, and just started back riding with her last fall. She adds, "Two of them have already purchased show horses and we look forward to getting back in the show ring as soon as they are ready."

Deirdre Oakley is one of those adults who returned to the ASB world after raising a family. "Three kids and 20 years later, the bug bit me again and I wanted my 15 year old daughter, Grace, to have a taste of what I did growing up," she tells us. Both are enjoying riding and driving Breve Latte in the Academy division. Deirdre goes on to say, "Sarah is great with the teenage girls. She communicates so well with them and instills self-confidence and discipline."



Sarah and Ross Russell with son, Kellan.

Another adult rider back in the business is Paige Cowley. Originally from Dayton, OH, she and Sarah coincidentally grew up riding just a mile down the road from one another. Paige showed on the 4-H and B-circuit while Sarah was at Cape

Cod Farm, but their paths never crossed. A friend gave Paige a newspaper clipping about the Grand Opening / Fall Festival at the new Sarah Russell Stables last October and she attended. "Sarah got me right back in the saddle and in April of this year I purchased a two-year-old prospect from Kalarama," Paige said. "It's a perfect match because Sarah is developing the horse while I am getting back in the swing of things in the Academy division." Paige goes on to say, "Sarah is a great coach because she has a mix of tough love and encouragement. She knows just what we need to hear and motivates us to do more."

"I think my niche is working with junior exhibitors and amateurs," Sarah tells us. "I love the precision and beauty of equitation, and the excitement and power of the performance divisions." She admits, "Training horses can be very rewarding at times while disheartening at other times. But when you add training a rider to equitation, those feelings are even more intense. These riders have the desire to learn and accomplish new things, and to be able to help them achieve that is an awesome feeling." She continues, "I also love the challenge of trying to find the perfect horse to match each rider's personality and style of riding. The process of finding that horse, working to become a team, and seeing it all come together is my favorite part of this job."



3-year-old Kellan shares his parent's love for horses.



Sarah Russell Stables and Russell Equine Sports Medicine occupy this 24-stall facility in Wesley Chapel, FL.



Sarah capturing the Senior Saddle Seat Equitation Championship at Lexington Junior League in 2004 aboard Undulata's Time to Shine.

Brooklyn Krone is one of Russell's up and coming equitation stars aboard Stone Gate's Natalee Kate. Her mom, Kristen, shares that they began training with Sarah last fall after seeing significant progress in just a few lessons. "She gives 110% to Brooklyn each lesson. She's not on the phone or distracted – she is totally focused and vested in each rider," Kristen said.

Cheryl Donaldson echoed those sentiments. Her daughter, Annaliese Donaldson-Pham exhibits Millionheir's Row in the Five Gaited division. "Annaliese's dream has always been to own and show a five gaited horse at the World's Championship, and Sarah made it a priority to make that dream come true," Donaldson said. "She tirelessly looked for a horse that would be the right fit for our daughter. In this business, trustworthiness is a major factor and

we trust that there is no hidden agenda with Sarah." She continues, "We feel very fortunate to have her in our lives. She speaks my daughter's language and has such enthusiasm for each rider's victories, whether it be tackling a challenge in the lesson ring or accomplishing a personal goal in the show arena."

Located about 25 miles due north of Tampa, Sarah Russell Stables also has a growing Academy program. "I have a lot of 6 year olds," she laughed. "We offer summer and holiday camps and also work with a local school." Her son Kellan's day care makes field trips to the stable – free of charge – where they spend a couple of hours petting a pony, having their photo made with a horse, and doing arts and crafts. "The Monday after Lexington Junior League I'll have 50 eight-year-olds here!" Some of those children will return for riding

lessons. "I hope to build a strong academy program and introduce as many people as possible to American Saddlebreds. If I am lucky, they might just buy one someday," she said with a smile.

Sarah is pursuing her judge's card, teaching riding lessons, doing camps, hosting groups and training horses. All of that, while raising their three year old son, and expecting a little brother or sister for him in January, 2017. "Ross and I feel so fortunate to have been at the right place at the right time to be able to lease this farm. It has made a big difference in the growth of both our businesses, and allows us to spend more time together as a family," she said. With any luck it will also make a big difference in the growth of the American Saddlebred in the Sunshine State.



Sarah and her clients enjoying a winning week at Dixie Cup Classic in Conyers, GA



Sarah is pursuing her USEF Judge's License and recently completed her Learner Judging requirements at Midwest Charity.