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BY ANN BULLARD

Small – and powerful. That’s the way many people describe Hackney Ponies. Some might describe Larry Ella Stables the same way. For with but 12 stalls, a handful of mares and no indoor arena, Larry Ella has left an incredibly powerful mark on the Hackney Pony community.

Simply put, Larry found a Hackney bloodline that he liked – and he’s built a career on it. The Ontario-based Hackney Pony specialist can trace much of his and his clients’ successes back to one pony, Mark Of Success and his son, Mark Of Excellence.

But that’s getting ahead of the story, for Ella had a happy, successful life long before he became one of the leading Hackney Pony trainers in the business.

The first thing to understand about Larry is that he’s a Canadian – through and through. And with that comes a passion for playing on the ice as well as with the ponies and horses that his family showed.

“My whole family had Hackneys and Shetlands when I was young,” Larry said, adding he “showed in kids’ classes. I won a reserve at the Royal Winter Fair when I was eight. I missed a few years along the way, but I’ve been showing there a long time.”

And he’s passionate about hockey.

“I played all the way through minor hockey,” Larry said. “A scout came to some of our games and a teammate mentioned I might want to try out. I thought I might go on and play for a junior team, but I really was too small.”

He did continue with hockey in winters through his teen years. In summer, he “had plenty of things to do. I worked ponies pretty much all the time. When I was in

school, I’d work ponies in the summer for Mum and Dad and sometimes take one or two for someone else. That was my summer job.”

Larry and the lady who would become his wife had known each other from childhood. They went to school together and her father actually coached his hockey team.

After high school, Larry had little thought of training ponies as a profession. He entered the general insurance business; Diane worked for the same agency. At night, he would work a few ponies.

“I would groom and he would work them at his parents’ place in Woodbridge,” Diane said, adding, “I’d never had anything to do with horses in my entire life.”

They married October 26, 1985.

Larry spoke of the family that helped give him his professional start.

“George and Mildred Lewis had a farm near me. After their son was killed in an automobile accident, they decided to build a barn and arena and get some horses. He chose Morgans; his daughter and her husband wanted Hackneys. Mr. Lewis offered me a job to work for both of them.”

“I started working ponies; Diane took over the insurance agency,” Larry said, adding he continued to help Diane with their business. “By that point in time, we’d had our girls, Amanda and Shannon. We had moved to the house and acreage where we are now. We built a barn and started taking some outside ponies to train.

“With the training business here and Diane having to travel every day to the insurance office, we decided to move that office to the farm. For years, it was inside the front door of the house.”



The American Hackney Horse Society honored Larry by inducting him into their Hall of Fame at Louisville in 2014. Rodney Root, Adam Bovaird, Shannon Ella, Andy Freseth, Karen Waldron, Helen Thomas, Shawn Ricci and Brooke Jacobs joined in the celebration.



Larry is the only one who has shown Giselle. He drove her to her fourth Harness Pony World’s Grand championship last year.



Larry had trouble controlling his emotion after Giselle was called out as winner of her fourth consecutive world's grand championship. Adam headed her in the ring.



At 10-years-old, Larry showed such ponies as Rocket and the Shetland, Golden Princess.



Karen Waldron recognized the potential of the itty-bitty youngster she saw at Ella Stables. Par Excellence. Karen and Larry shared drives with the stallion, winning world's titles in 2000, 2003, '04 and '05.

In 1982, Larry and his dad purchased the bay pony, Kilrow's K.C., a stallion he worked while with the Lewis family. Several other nice ponies joined the Ella string.

Denny Lang and Skip Shenker are two of several trainers who encouraged Larry in the early days. In 1988, he sold the first of the great young ponies Larry would train for the Lewis family. The dark brown, white-stockinged Mark Of Success won the Ontario Hackney Association Futurity his first trip away from home. To say the pony was electrifying would be an understatement, as witnessed on the online video. He put that stamp on his sons, daughters and generations beyond.

"We didn't breed a lot of mares to him, just a couple of George's and a couple of outside mares each year," Larry said, pointing out that Mark sired but 11 registered ponies. "He produced a high percentage of top show ponies."

The late Sallie Wheeler purchased Mark Of Success at the end of the 1989 season. However, Larry had another, even greater one in the proverbial oven. He had bred Mark Of Success to Texan Steve Cochran's Apollo's Fashionette.

"I really liked the mare and I certainly knew her breeding," Larry said. "She was a full sister to a number of fantastic ponies, and I loved Mark Of Success."

"That colt was Mark of Excellence. Steve decided he would sell the colt when Mark was a yearling," Larry said. "Diane and I had not been married that long and had just moved. Yet we decided to go ahead and purchase him. At the beginning, Paula and (the late) John Gonzalves were our partners; after John died, Paula didn't want ponies any longer, so we took over in his later years."

Diane recalled those early days with the colt that would put the Ella name in headlines. "Mark was pretty run down when he arrived, but we nursed him back to health. It was a gamble when we bought him as we'd never seen him."

"Our life revolved around horses. I ran the insurance business and Larry started doing the ponies full time. It worked. And we managed to raise two beautiful girls. Larry is very fortunate to get to do something he loves as a job."

Larry says "Mark of Excellence was one of the very best: a terrific show pony with talent beyond belief. He was very high-powered; however, it became tougher to breed and show him at the same time. He'd be looking great at home; we'd haul him to a show and he'd lose 30-pounds on the way down, just worrying and sweating in the trailer."

"People seeing him at a show would say, 'what a powerhouse.' He was like that every single day at home. He never was mean or ornery with people; on the other hand he was high-powered. He passed that along to his offspring. The motion he had front and back, especially the back end: that's where the motor is in any animal. At times, Hackneys lost a little of that back motion but he passed it on. The combination of those bloodlines, his dam was the older Hackney blood, I think that's where a lot of substance, strength, back-end, and the power came from."

While Larry may have limited Mark's show career, the young stallion did compete on the world's stage, winning the Hackney Pony World's Grand Championship in 1994 and the stallion and gelding class four years later. Most



Springtime at Larry Ella Stables means beautiful pastures and time to get the ponies outside.

important for the Ellas and the breed, he passed his charisma and talent on to the next generation.

"I was very, very fortunate to have Mark of Excellence," Larry said. "What he did for me and provided me to work with ... to have an individual like that. Some people can go through a lifetime and never have one like that. It was a gift. I guess I owned him on paper, but he owned himself. To have him on the farm for all those years was a gift, it really was."

Among those offspring: Bent Tree Farm's On the Mark, Spirit of Success, Moment of Excellence, Par Excellence, Raymonda, Tri-Mark and the incomparable Giselle. Since moving into Harness Pony competition with Ella in 2011, Giselle has been defeated but once, in her debut show with Larry at Lexington in 2005. She won that grand championship and the mare and world's grand championship titles four consecutive years.

Karen Waldron recalls her first visit to Ella Stables as "so special. I remember going up there in the winter, after the Royal Winter Fair. I didn't know Larry well at all."

"Larry told me he wanted to show me a two-year-old he had gotten in the fall. He brought out this itty-bitty colt that took my breath away. I asked if he were something for sale. Larry said not yet, so I asked for first rights when they decided to sell."

Karen bought Spirit Of Success that week, but had to wait until the end of July, 2000, before Larry called her about the youngster.

"Larry said he and Diane had decided to sell, and knew I had asked for first rights," Karen said admitting the timing could have been better. "Shawn and I were planning our wedding in Toronto for early August. I asked Larry if he could hold the pony for me until after we could get there; the earliest would be the day after our wedding. We went to Larry's on the way to our honeymoon."

"We tried him out and fell in love. Ours is one of the relationships that was meant to be. Get married, go to Larry's and we've been together as a big family ever since."

Karen changed the pony's name to Par Excellence. Whether shown by Karen or Larry, he was a super star. Karen drove him to his first world's titles, the Four-Year-Old Harness Pony qualifier and championship in 2001. She and Larry drove the stallion to five more Louisville blues or tri-colors. He is retired to stud at Karen's Virginia farm.

Karen says she and Larry have been close since "we bought Spirit of Success. Once we started buying ponies from him, we've developed a very good, trusting relationship. Since the ponies were by his stud ... no one knew how to develop those ponies as well as Larry. That's how our relationship began."

"What Larry has created with a handful of ponies ... there have been some pretty incredible animals over these many years. He has 12 stalls and less than a handful of mares. He is very responsible with his breeding and will not breed to anyone's outside mares if he doesn't believe it is the correct cross. He will turn you down if he doesn't think it's a benefit to his stallion and the potential offspring."



Larry spruces up the tack before the group's first show of the season, the 2015 Ohio State Fair.



Shannon had a great drive with Smoking Aces at Lexington.



Larry and Diane celebrated Mark Of Excellence's 1994 Hackney Pony World's Grand Championship win.



Mark Of Excellence stamped his looks and talent on generations of Hackney ponies. He is pictured in his show ring debut at Ontario.



Adam drove Bent Tree Farm's The Lightning Thief to a pair of Reserve titles in the Amateur Roadster Pony Division at the 2014 Royal Winter Fair.

He handpicks what he's going to do and is a great avenue up there for people who want ponies to do various things."

Witness the great harness pony, Giselle. Karen and Larry decided to breed her outstanding Vindicator daughter, My Sweet Georgia Brown, to Mark. In 2005, a trimmed-in-white bay filly hit the ground. She showed a season in the roadster division, but Karen recognized Giselle's exceptional park trot. In 2010, the filly arrived at Ella Stables.

Giselle is a great example of Larry's patience. He took a year to get to know her, shipping her to shows and working her before she actually showed. She made her harness pony debut at Lexington, earning a yellow ribbon in the Limit Harness Pony class. She came back to win the grand championship. Since then, she has won 16 of the 17 classes in which she has shown.

Larry says he "doesn't really warm up Giselle at Louisville. I just get her on Stopher Walk and if she wants to walk, I let her walk. If she wants to jig, I let her jig. I know when I go down that ramp I'm going to have plenty of pony so I never let her get to that level when warming up."

"Giselle is Larry's pony," Karen said quietly. "I've driven all the others, but she belongs to Larry."

As for Giselle's future: "Karen says she can't wait to see her babies, me neither," Larry's daughter Shannon said. "She is like a Victoria Secret model, she walks out and struts to the ring. She knows she is pretty fancy."

The last of the 89 Mark Of Excellence registered foals hit the ground in June 2014. The dark bay mare, out of Twin Willow's Kaitlyn, was bred and is owned by Larry's long-time client and sidekick, Adam Bovaird.

Karen says, "Larry is a very hard-working, focused man, out there doing it himself. And Adam is just a Godsend. When we go to the farm to practice for a few days, we go out and spend hours working these ponies. He puts his heart and soul into focusing on ponies; there's little outside."

"When he's working his ponies, that's all Larry is focusing on. He's not one of these people who can multitask when in the midst of working with his animals. And he's one of the best friends someone can have; he'll always be there for you. He has one true passion and is totally focused and does as well as he possibly can. He doesn't get involved in other people's business. That's why he's such a great judge: he's completely objective and totally honest. He might not tie the one that's the most popular if it's not the one that should be tied that day. He is an incredible horse show judge."

Larry Ella Stables definitely is a family affair. People often wonder why Diane rarely is at a show. She's the stay-at-home who takes care of the barn chores while Larry is on the road. He made sure their daughters, Amanda and Shannon, had nice ponies to show. Today, Amanda is married and works as a paralegal. Shannon divides her time between school, working for two publications and helping at the farm.

Shannon spoke of growing up as an Ella. "It was amazing; I'm so grateful to have been able to grow up in this world. Dad let me and my sister choose our own pathways. He wanted us there, but never forced us to do so. I got the pony bug real early and never lost it. It's nice that he and I can share this together; it never gets old. We'll sit and talk about ponies and watch old videos."

While the ponies came first, both Amanda and Shannon grew up as typical Canadian small town girls. Ice skating and hockey were a large part of their lives.



Larry and Amanda enjoyed their father/daughter dance at her wedding to Mike Ferrito.



The Royal Winter Fair is the season closeout for many Hackney exhibitors. Karen Waldron won the 2014 Open Harness Pony and Canadian Harness Pony Championships with Sweetheart Of Success.

“My Mom and sister are tall and blond; Dad and I got the vertically-challenged genes,” Shannon said. “My sister and I used to live on the pond in the winter. When we were younger, we figure-skated and played pond hockey.”

They both showed ponies. Larry says he probably got more excited when they showed than when he did.

“We used to show at Louisville and the Royal Winter Fair. When the girls got involved, we went to the smaller, one day shows in our area. They would show the ponies, load up and come home. They had tons of fun doing that. You have to prepare ponies for the bigger shows; it’s the same with an individual. Lots of times the smaller shows are more fun than the bigger ones. The kids can show two to three times in a day and have fun. That gave them experience and made them better drivers. I could teach them at home but they still had to show. Without that pressure factor, they had fun.

“Before we started, we agreed if the girls wanted to show, great. If they chose not to be part of it, that was fine too. When I was young, my mum and dad never forced ponies on me.”

Shannon plays an important role for Ella Stables, especially when it comes to organization. She says Larry is meticulous about where things need to go, but it’s up to them to put them there. Her professional life has made it more difficult to perform one of her most important jobs: setting up the tack room at horse shows.

“Last year, I had to juggle my work schedule around the shows. They went to Louisville without me,” she said, explaining she didn’t get to Louisville until Monday. “They (Larry and Adam) had to set up that huge tack room without me. I think they called from six to eight times. They sent pictures and we did a lot of face-timing about where things needed to go. It was pretty entertaining. They both said ‘next year we’re not doing this. You have to be here; we can’t do this on our own. They were hopeless.’”

That shouldn’t be a problem. In August, she returned to Kentucky to finish her senior year at Jefferson College in Louisville, Kentucky.

Adam Bovaird has been part of that family for years. He had been friends of the senior Ellas for “a long time. I grew up with ponies of my own. When I was in school, things came to the point where I didn’t have time for ponies at home. Instead I decided to move to Larry’s and go to bigger shows. On summer vacations I would work with Larry and go to shows. After I finished school, I continued helping him.”

As a Court and Tribunal Agent, Adam sets his own work hours. Larry’s working ponies at night is ideal for him. For the past 18 years, Adams has made his home at the Ella farm. And he often can do his legal work from home.

“The way I look at it, when you do something you passionately enjoy, it’s not work,” Adam said. “Yes, I do a lot of grunt work, but it saves on gym memberships.”

Adam says “the most fun I think we have is working at home developing youngsters. That’s what I enjoy the most. With the stress and work involved, shows are not as much fun as I would like for them to be. At home we can be laid back and see the improvement from start to finish. I’ve seen a number from day one. I’ve been with Giselle since we’ve had her.”



Superstitious? Perhaps, but the Ella team and Giselle never leave home without Dolly. A child left the doll at the tack room during the Royal Winter Fair. Dolly, now adorned with Giselle’s braids, is at the ring for every one of Giselle’s performances.



Shawn Ricci, Shannon, Larry and Karen Waldron enjoyed the Ella’s Hall Of Fame party at Louisville in 2014. Photo courtesy of EventMix

Not having an indoor arena presents some challenges. Larry does have an indoor round pen where he can work the young ponies. Show ring veterans such as Giselle get to enjoy the winters watching the snow fall, being turned out in the round pen and out-of-doors when the weather permits.

“Ohio [State Fair] was our first show this year. Normally we try to get out earlier,” Larry said. “We have to plan our show season around what the weather permits.”

Larry and Karen Waldron’s names have been associated with a number of great ponies. None has grabbed more headlines than the four-time world’s grand champion, Giselle.

“Giselle is a wild child-and-a-half every day,” Shannon said. “Dad says every year he thinks he might have her a little more broke. He’ll jog her the first time and says ‘I don’t think she’ll ever be broke. She truly is the definition of one of a kind. We’ve been lucky to have some amazing ponies. But they don’t make them like her.”

“Dad has done exceptionally well. He doesn’t remember all his accomplishments, everything he has won. He just thinks like he hasn’t won anything at all, and that’s why the thought of Giselle’s winning four years in a row shocked him so badly.”

Not surprisingly, show ring memories aren’t at the top of Larry’s list. Rather, he said, “My memories are about learning stuff, the knowledge I’ve gained along the way. I’ve learned from a number of different people through the years. To have that knowledge and then make your own way of doing things, to try it and see how it works ... that makes my memories.

“Breeding is exciting for anyone. You have a stallion, find out what bloodlines cross with him. You see what your own stallion throws and what mares are needed to help him. Then you have the offspring; that’s pretty exciting. I worked Mark Of Success and knew a bit about him. I knew Mark of Excellence and now we move into his offspring.”

“Most of our ponies are by Mark or his sons,” Larry added. “The whole group we’re working are connected back to him. Yes, they’re all different, but there’s a common theme, number one being that heart. They have that motion, drive and want to be show ponies. You don’t have to chase them and that type of thing.

Larry spoke about his philosophy as a trainer and the way he brings a youngster along. “I’m a great believer in turning them out and letting them grow up. Unless they’re exceptional, we don’t show them as three-year-olds. Sometimes we push them too hard when they’re young and they burn out a bit. Sometimes we wait until they’re four or five before they start showing. These ponies last because they are allowed to grow up and develop. And they have to mature mentally. To get to the show ring, you have to work hard every day. And there’s the whole aspect of going to a show: the trailer ride, strange surroundings. For us, it’s 12 hours to Louisville. I always think of having a pony in the ring and what it looks like. It’s a big job for a young animal, a lot for a youngster to take on.”

Today, Larry is working nine ponies. A “couple” of yearlings and two-year-olds are outside. Karen has others at home.

So who is Larry Ella? The simple answer: a quietly confident man who loves his family, his friends and his job. He’s a man living his dream.