



Mark TURNER

by Bob Funkhouser

*I*t was a long plane ride from South Africa. Mark Turner was right out of high school, having grown up in Cradock on the eastern Cape. He had never seen a big airplane, much less been on one. With only a few dollars in his pocket the young man was going to a strange country, however, he was going with an incredible opportunity to help fulfill his dream of being a horse trainer.

"I was first exposed to American Saddlebreds through my dad. He's my biggest influence," said Turner. "My older sister showed. My first horse was actually a jumper before I ever sat on a Saddlebred. He was a Gymkhana horse. We enjoyed horses as a family. Mom didn't have any interest in riding but she made tail bags and things for us. We would trailer in and out and stay at the campgrounds. It was a big social outing. I didn't even know you stayed at a horse show until I got here in the states."



Finding A Home A Long Way From Home



Through this gate and down this drive have gone some of the greatest horsemen, show ring champions, and producers the American Saddlebred industry has ever known.

Although he loved horses from an early age, training isn't something Turner sought at first. He thought for sure he was going to be a vet but he soon found out he couldn't take the blood so his next thought was to be a cop.

"I never watch much TV but when I do it's something like Law & Order," said Turner. "I always had an interest. That type of work keeps your mind busy and there's always action. That appealed to me."

Finally, the horses won out and Turner realized there weren't as many opportunities to learn in South Africa. He knew he needed to go to the states but he never planned on staying.

"I was scared to leave. It was my first time on a plane but I wanted to get here for John [Biggins]. I didn't want to let anyone down."

As a kid Turner had met Bud and Cindy Willimon and Helen Crabtree when they came

to South Africa to do a clinic. There was a South African Turner knew by the name of Chappy Scott who was a friend of Bud's and Scott asked Bud to find Turner a job.

"He set me up," said Turner of Scott. "He called Bud and Bud got me a job with John Biggins. I can still remember my dad telling me about it. I was in the back seat of the car and we were coming home from church. I almost jumped out of my suit when he told me."

"Bud met me at the airport and got me settled in. I'll never be able to thank him enough."

Turner wasn't sure where he was going, nor did he know anything about for whom he would be working, he just knew Bud had recommended it.

"Our family used to subscribe to Saddle & Bridle and of course by the time it got to South Africa it was a couple months behind but we used to fight over it when it did arrive. I knew about Michele Macfarlane

seeing all of her magnificent spotted horses in the magazine and we knew about Don Harris and Mitch Clark with Imperator and Sky Watch.

"John [Biggins] didn't have a directory listing and I never saw his horses advertised so before I came to the states I told my dad, 'I'm not sure who this guy is or if he's any good?' I wasn't there a week and I called my dad and said, 'This guy is unbelievable!'"

"I have so much respect for John Biggins. He's an incredible horseman. We got to be really close. In fact, the first time I left to go home and fulfill my service to the armed forces we cried and cried."

Turner returned home to take care of his mandatory service to his country but he knew he needed to return to the states and work with horses here. The comforts of working in Kentucky where everything needed for horses was so available had spoiled him.



"Bud had wanted me to come to DeLovely so in 1990 I returned and went to work for them. I started as a groom and worked my way up. It was the greatest experience with Raymond and Lillian [Shively] and Todd [Miles]. We made a great team for a long time and I learned so much from them. We all had our strengths and our roles."

"Mark came to us as a groom at DeLovely," said Raymond. "I knew he had shown horses in South Africa and we just kind of worked him in. He eventually started working a few horses and then he started getting so many he moved up to assistant trainer. The thing about Mark is he wanted to be a good horse trainer and he has worked his heart out to be one."

The Shivelys moved to Danville, Kentucky and DeLovely was in transition. Eventually Turner made the move to Harrodsburg, Kentucky renting stalls at David Crockett's farm, which was formerly Tom Moore's Arrowhead Farm. Raymond was already there with a few road horses so the student and the mentor were reunited again.

"I'll be the first to admit, I missed Raymond and Lillian," said Turner. "I don't have family here and they have been like my parents."

As things progressed Turner and Shively were basically running out of room where they were so they started looking for some place to go and they didn't have to look far. A few miles away the historic Oak Hill Farm had been dormant for some time as far as a training facility. The late Jean McLean Davis had left it to the longtime farm manager Peanuts Riney and he had farmed it. Ms. Davis had also made arrangements for him to care for the remaining horses until they died.

"I used to go over there and visit with Peanuts," said Turner. "I picked his brain and heard all the stories about the great horses and trainers who had been on the farm. I spent so much time there I knew every inch of the place."

The Shivelys and Turner joined forces to purchase, clean up and expand Oak Hill Farm. With an indoor arena and several stalls added, Desmar Stables was born. Desmar is the combination of Desmond (Turner's dad) and Mark.

"We're excited about it," said Raymond. "This is such a historical American Saddlebred farm and we wanted to make sure it stayed that way. We wanted to keep this in the Saddlebred community."

"Mark has gotten into the breeding so we bought some additional acreage and now have 125 acres here."

"I can't think of a better place to wake up," added Turner. "When I was in Indiana I would always say, 'I'll never go to Kentucky.' I knew I didn't want to go to Simpsonville or Versailles where there were so many barns. But when this opportunity became available I knew it was right. I got spoiled over at Crockett's where everything is so new and nice. This place is going to take some work, but I've got time. I'm not going anywhere."

"To start my own thing was scary but to have them [Raymond and Lillian] is a great comfort level. Just having Raymond here means so much and having Lillian as an instructor is an unreal opportunity. My business has grown a lot over two and a half years and Lillian is the biggest contributor to that. What an incredible opportunity for kids and adults to be able to ride with Lillian Shively."

"They have both guided me in business. There's hardly a thing I do businesswise that I don't ask their advice. I've gone from 15 training horses to 38. I have the right team. Besides Raymond and Lillian, Jesse [West] and Caitlin [Cooper] make it



Mark's dad Desmond (far left) is here visiting through Louisville. The Desmar family includes Lillian and Raymond Shively, Jesse West (back), Caitlin Cooper, Mark Turner and Olivia Turner.

easy on my mind. Both of them are good at what they do for the team. We all have different strengths."

Turner has gone from a handful of horses to a barn full of amateur and junior exhibitors. The team keeps a constant flow of horses to the arena for daily work, while Lillian is giving lessons in the attached straightaway, which was formerly the arena for Oak Hill. She also works outside on the beautiful track, which overlooks the cemetery where many world's champions are buried, including world's grand champions CH Oak Hill Chief, CH Yorktown, CH Dear One and CH Gimcrack.

While Turner enjoys showing himself he knows his business is about the amateur and junior exhibitors and he works his horses accordingly.

"I don't prepare them any differently for them than I would myself," said Turner. "I may take a little more out of them but I'm going to prepare them the same way. I do a lot of long-lining in the curb bit. At this time of year it's so hot we don't work them long. They are already fit and legged up, at this point we are doing just enough so that they are eager to come out tomorrow and do it again."

One of the horses in Turner's care has been a huge part of Turner's career. CH The Daily Lottery has been in his life twice now and he is grateful for every minute he's had with the legendary gelding. Under Turner's guidance the big-doing campaigner won the World's Champion of Champions Junior Five-Gaited title with an amateur (Mandy Martin) in her first year out of junior exhibitor. He went on to win the World's Grand Champion Five-Gaited title with Peter Cowart and the World's Champion of Champions Amateur Five-Gaited title with Gabe Deknatel under the direction of John Conatser.

Turner was fortunate enough to get him back for Eleanor Rainbolt-Forbes and together they won the World's Champion of Champions Junior Exhibitor Five-Gaited honors in 2015 and '16. No horse in history has won all four of those classes at Louisville.

"He's done everything for me. People might not even know my name if it weren't for him. He's made me a better horseman," said Turner of CH The Daily Lottery. "He's every horseman's dream. I can't imagine going to the barn in the morning and him not being there."



The multi-titled world's grand champion CH The Daily Lottery has played a big role in Turner's career. He is pictured here winning the 2015 Five-Gaited National Championship for the Rainbolt-Forbes family.



The graveyard on the property is a Who's Who of American Saddlebred greats. These are a few of the 20-some world's grand champions and world's champions buried there. Just this summer 1989 World's Grand Champion Three-Gaited CH Gimcrack joined the illustrious group of Oak Hill Farm stars honored with head stones.

This view of the barn shows what was the arena with turnarounds for Oak Hill Farm. For his Desmar Stables, Turner has added stalls on the front left, stalls in the former indoor and an arena on the right end of the barn.



"Raymond gets the credit. He saw something in him none of us saw. When he bought him as a three-year-old he was still a stud and he was half onery. Raymond kept saying, 'I promise you he's the one, just keep working him.' I showed him a few times as a three-year-old and he would make a pass or two that would get you excited. By the end of the year we were starting to see more of it. After we got home from Kansas City we gelded him and that changed everything. He got gamer and put everything into his work.

"I remember the spring of his junior year I was working him at DeLovely and a lady was there watching us work horses and she asked me who he was. I told her, 'I think this is the horse that will win the junior stake this year and one day will wear the roses.' She kind of smiled at me and said, 'He's too small.' A few years later after Peter [Coward] won the stake with him I ran into that lady and she said, 'you were right.'

"Mandy Martin was showing him that junior year and she was right out of junior exhibitor. He was doing great but I didn't know if they would tie her in an open class. She didn't win a class until we came back here to Mercer County and Robert



With a great appreciation for history, Turner has items from different trainers and exhibitors displayed in his barn, including pictures of Jean McLean Davis and this bench from Redd Crabtree's office. As Turner said, "No telling how many deals have been made on that bench."

Gardiner was judging. He tied her and that kind of opened it up for us.

"The week of Louisville Mandy was moving into college and she said to me, 'I'll show him in the qualifier but if you don't think we'll show back, I really need to move in the day of the championship.'

I looked at her and said, 'Mandy, we have a shot to win this thing. He has as good a chance as anyone.'

Turner was correct. The little gelding lit up Freedom Hall and with his young red-headed rider, garnered the junior stallion/gelding class and then the World's Champion of Champions Junior Five-Gaited honors. They also went on to win the ASR Sweepstakes at Indiana and the Junior Five-Gaited National Championship at the Royal. And then he was sold.

"It took me a while to recover when he left. Then a few years later I was fortunate enough to get him back," said Turner. "It's not often you get horses like this back. When we moved here to the farm he was the first horse we worked at this farm and then when we built the indoor arena he was the first horse worked in the arena. How fitting was it that it was Raymond who rode him that day to break in the arena? After all, he was the one who found him in the beginning. With all of the great horses Raymond has shown and ridden it was cool to see how much he enjoyed and appreciated that ride."

While CH The Daily Lottery has given so much to Turner's career, he also has been a horse that's taken lots of thought and effort. The biggest



challenge Turner has taken on was teaming the extremely game world's grand champion with a small junior exhibitor.

"We went to Louisville that first year with about 10 horses and I told Caitlin [Cooper], 'people are going to be watching us and especially see how we do with The Daily Lottery.' Well, that first class we were third but then we came back and won the championship. When we got home the phone started ringing and people started sending us horses.

"The next year (2016) we were even lower in the qualifier and I came back to the barn all depressed. Raymond was sitting in his chair and said, 'What's wrong Mark?' I told him I had planned on that horse being better than he was. I thought I had done my homework and had everything just right. He looked at me and said, 'You know, if you had won that class you wouldn't know what to do with him between now and the championship. You shake this off and get up tomorrow and go back to work. You'll figure it out.'

"Sure enough we come back and win the championship and they were really good. Tre' Lee helped me a lot. He was stabled close to us and we worked horses really early in the morning. He gave me some ideas and they worked."

Like most things in Turner's life he enjoys the lessons his horses have taught him even more so than the ribbons they have won. He loves the process of training horses and bringing combinations together. Turner constantly preaches to his riders that they can only control what they do and what they learn, not how they are tied.

With a great support system and team at Desmar Stables, Turner continues to grow as a horseman. In his unassuming way, he is bringing back to life one of the American Saddlebred's greatest farms and teaching lots of owners to enjoy this sport and not just for the ribbons and glory. While the spotlight is the goal, it's not something that is needed in his life.

"We all want blues and tricolors but I want to be on the same page with my owners about how good they show," said Turner. If they don't win, it doesn't matter as long as we've done our homework and made a good presentation. That's where our satisfaction should come from.

"When this is all over, I not only want to be known as a good horseman, more importantly I want to be known as a great person. I want to have made a difference in people's lives just like people have done for me."

Along with his dad, Raymond and Lillian Shively are two of the people who have made a difference in Turner's life and he is so appreciative of them. He knows he would not be who he is or where he is without them. And they feel just as strongly about him.

"The thing I like about Mark is his work ethic," said Lillian. "His drive is something else, it always has been. This is his passion; he loves what he does. He's an amazing horseman.

"What I love the most about Mark is he is very devoted to his daughter. No matter how busy he is he makes time to spend with Olivia.

"Raymond and I have been fortunate enough to have been a part of many young trainers who have gone on to do well and we want him to be the



On a hot July day, Lillian Shively was busy giving Alayna Applegate lessons. Applegate had recently won Lexington Junior League's Junior Saddle Seat Equitation Grand Championship.



Breeding American Saddlebreds is becoming another part of the equation at Desmar Stables. This foal is out of Olivia Turner's former gaited pony Silvashay.

next. We want to be here for him. He and Raymond are tight. They have the road horses in common. We went into the farm with the thought of helping him succeed. Success will come and go but we want to build this farm into a place where people can learn and enjoy their horses. I don't know when I've taught so many trainer's kids and that's been fun."

With a great upbringing by his parents, a passion for his trade, a work ethic to succeed and a support system from which he learns every single day, Turner has taken a level-headed approach to what can be a competitive and intense business. But like with everything he does, he's quick to give the credit to others. One of his views pretty much sums up who Mark Turner is.

"Some trainers might think we do, but we do not make great horses, the good Lord does," said Turner. "We just develop them, take care of them and stay out of their way."

Turner makes daily rides around the farm for a number of reasons.

"I know every inch of this place," he said.

