

Donna Moore

“Her Life Was Way High and Way Low and A Whole Lot Of Fun In Between”

BY BOB FUNKHOUSER

“In 1980, I beat Donna [Moore] in the Ladies Five-Gaited Championship at Louisville. I won a division of the qualifier and she won the other. I beat her in the championship with Bandstand. That was the greatest thing I had ever done at that point and it remains the greatest thing I’ve ever done in the show ring.”

Those were the words of Mary Gaylord McClean, one of the all-time winningest exhibitors at the World’s Championship Horse Show, when remembering the iconic Donna Moore.

“I remember being in such awe of her,” continued McClean. “That was before Melissa [Moore] ever came into my life, I remember having so much admiration for Donna and just being in the same ring with her was a thrill.”

What was it that made Donna Hobbs Moore the legend that she was, the legend that evoked admiration from top of the line professionals and amateurs alike in many different walks of equine competition?

“I remember being in such awe of her,” continued McClean

She had an aura to her that left some people quaking in their boots and others wanting to absorb all they could from her because they knew they were in the presence of greatness.

The stories shared among her peers in the hours following the January 18th death of Donna Hobbs Moore, 82, give some insight to the woman who became a legend, a woman who excelled in every aspect of the show horse industry and did so in a time when women weren’t really afforded the opportunity to succeed at that level. Pioneer is just another adjective describing the former rodeo girl.

Born January 28, 1931, to Ray and Iva Hobbs, Donna grew up in the Kansas City area and early on became involved in the stock horse and rodeo worlds, eventually becoming a part of a trick-riding group known as The Rodeo Kids. Her life took a sharp turn at the age of 13 when riding her pony to practice one day she saw her first American Saddlebred.

Donna was quoted in an earlier Lexington Herald Leader interview as saying, “I’d sit and watch them train that Saddle Horse. They’d let me tie my pony up to the fence and watch. I finally got in with them.” And hence, the Saddle Horse world was forever changed. Donna had a way of finding her way to the middle of the action, no matter where the action was. There will be more on that later.



Donna Moore was a fierce competitor and given a nice harness horse she could flat outdrive anyone. She is pictured here with 1986 Fine Harness World’s Grand Champion Vanity’s Showcase.



This Annika Bruggeworth picture is from Louisville 2002, the three blondes! While they had their moments, Donna was extremely proud of daughters Melinda and Melissa, son Stu as well as granddaughters Ashley and Erin.

That same Herald Leader interview spoke of her business prowess, even at an early age. It told of her going to a local horse sale every other Friday night and buying unbroken ponies for next to nothing. She'd take them home, break them, ride them back to the sale where she'd put them through and make a little profit.

"They cost nothing at the time and I don't know how I started, maybe I knew somebody that sent me one," she exclaimed. "I remember keeping that money in a sock in my drawer and I'd get so mad if anybody would borrow it to go to the grocery store or something. I'd count it every night."

One of what would prove to be thousands of very smart decisions over the course of her career, the young horsewoman sought out fellow Missourian Jane Fahey and soon became her friend and pupil. It was also Fahey that gave Moore the money and courage to leave behind everything she had in Missouri, including a family, to start up a career and relationship with an upstart Illinois horse trainer by the name of Tom Moore. A chance meeting at the Chicago International sparked a chemistry that would not be denied. A year after they met, they were married. Yes, during the Chicago International Horse Show! Daughter Melinda was born two years later and Melissa would follow shortly thereafter.

She had the guts to do what she thought was right...

"She was a fighter. And I mean that in the most positive manner," explained fellow Hall of Fame trainer Bill Wise. "I knew Donna when she was a trick rider. We always got along well. She was a real horsewoman. She didn't vacation; horses were all that she did."

"Donna had a great eye for a horse and was a real smart business woman. She had the guts to do what she thought was right and she loved a good fight. She was one of a kind. Donna always knew what she was talking about and she knew how to carry out her ideas. Some people may have great ideas, but never know how to implement them. Donna could!"

"When I formed the ASHA Sweepstakes committee she was the first person I called to be on the committee."

Donna and Tom fought their way to the top of a very competitive area in that time period (1960s). They would make Ed Jenner's Knolland Farm the epitome of the show horse world. In 1964, Jenner purchased what was described in Who's Who In Horsedom 1963-1969 as "a palatial, one hundred and eighty-eight acre, Frank Howard estate in Richmond, Illinois. The estate, containing a 49 stall training stable, a 13 stall yearling barn, and a 74 stall broodmare barn became the home of Knolland Farms." Melinda Moore once described it as "a small city."

The two had the most incredible horses, which included

Donna drove Broadland's Patrician Lady to the 1976 World's Champion Fine Harness Mare blue for Jackie Lee Behling. In '74, she rode the daughter of Broadland's Captain Denmark and Ace's Patrician Lady to the Three-Gaited Reserve World's Grand Championship and Three-Gaited 15.2 & Under Reserve World's Championship. Donna directed Patrician Lady and Behling to the World's Champions Of Champions Amateur Three-Gaited title the year before that.



Aboard French Commander, Donna won the American Royal Junior Five-Gaited Championship in 1978 and came back in '81 to win the American Royal Five-Gaited Championship. That same year they were third in Louisville's gelding stake and then came back on Saturday night to be named Reserve World's Grand Champions behind Imperator and Don Harris.



Not only did Donna have a great eye for a nice horse, she also had a great eye for good basketball, being an avid UK fan and supporter.

After one year in Kentucky with Tom at Grape Tree Farm, the couple divorced and went their separate ways professionally as well. Her first world's champion following that split was the 1972 Junior Three-Gaited title with CH Main Dame.



One of the favorite subjects of the late, great photographer H. Leon Sargent, Donna and Tom Moore as a couple set records and did things in ways that would change the course of the Saddlebred world. Nothing like Ed Jenner's Knolland Farms (1961 – 1969) had been seen before and nothing has come close since.



Bonanza, Private Stock, Miss Helen, Mr. Moonshine, Top Hat, Bellissima, The Contender, Hallelujah, Anacacho Chapel Bells, Big Time, Tinker Bell, Cara Mia, Duke Of Daylight, Showtime, Hayfield's Majorette, Love Note, and King's Rocket, among others. Some of their customers besides the Jenner family were Jackie Lee Behling (Sweeney) and Nancy Leigh Fisher.

Together, they were a force like we've never seen. Apart they were just as formidable. It was reported that their last year together at Knolland Farms they had 30 world's champions. Their first year apart they had 15 world's champions each.

"We had such a great time back in those days," said Jeanette Durant. "Tom and Donna, Pat and Chat [Nichols], Ben and Dolly [Segalla], me and Dick [Durant], we all spent a lot of time together. We had a great time together and would share stories about our days, our horses.

"Donna had the best sense of humor, was always fun to be around. She was also very smart about taking care of her horses; she knew them inside and out. She had such a good eye for a horse. She would go out and buy something and Tom would raise hell with her but more times than not it turned out. We were down on the South

Shore and Donna went out and bought The Contender. Tom said to her, 'Tell me you didn't buy that worthless thing. By golly, you'll just have to work him then.' Donna turned to him and said, 'that's okay, I'll just be the first woman to win the Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship.' It wasn't long before Tom saw what Donna already knew and they went on to be world's champions.

"Wherever she went; Missouri, Illinois or Kentucky, she made an impact. They knew Donna Moore had been there!"

It has been repeated time and time again that Donna had a keen eye for a horse and for what rider/driver to best go with that horse. That proved to be true for owner after owner, decade after decade. The best of the best gravitated towards her and she took them to their goals.

The Cowan family was one of Donna's first big clients on her own. In 1972, they won eight world's titles with the likes of Main Dame, Sea Of Secrets, June Day, Society Selection, Nashville Cat and Cindy Cowan (equitation). A highly successful association with the Lyman Phillip's family's Alpha-Sun Stables in the mid and later '70s followed the Cowans. Donna had several great horses for Allen and Susan Phillips as they moved from the junior exhibitor into the amateur ranks. Among their unforgettables were CH Princess Blanchita, CH Alpha-Sun's Cabaret, CH Denmark's Heir, CH Courageous Decision and CH Fortunate Commander.

Another milestone in her career came in the early '80s with the Shannon Run Sale. She had set up shop in Versailles, Ky., on Shannon Run Road to be exact. She joined forces with neighbor Ed Pendleton to develop the now historic Shannon Run Sale. Don Brookshire had worked for Donna and Tom when they were in Wheaton, Ill., and was the Pendleton's manager at the time the sale was conceived.

"I went to work for them in 1961 when they had first gotten married," said Brookshire. "I was from South Carolina and wanted to be a horse trainer and knew about this young couple in Illinois that was setting the world on fire. That's where I wanted to be. I called them up and gave them my sales pitch but they didn't need anyone. The next day they called back and hired me.

"As far as the sale, Mr. Pendleton and Donna were 50/50 partners and he depended on me to handle his horse interests so for seven months Donna and I worked side by side putting that sale together. Between the two of them they had about 30 horses to go in the sale. They put a million dollars into an account for the sale. Donna and I would get on a plane and go here and go there looking at horses for the sale. We were only interested in taking top stock, whether it was a show horse, prospect or broodmare. They had to pass our inspection. We ended up with 60 head of horses selling for six and half million dollars.

"Everything was done first class. We had a big party the night before where we fed nearly 2,000 people and had an open bar. Videos of all of the horses played on screens throughout the party. Our sales catalogue was all four-color and each horse got a two-page spread. We did things that had never been done before. We had Claudia Sanders provide the food for the concession stand at the sale, there was valet parking, all seats were reserved and there wasn't an empty seat in the house. In fact, it was standing room only. We had so much fun doing that sale. Donna always said she was as proud of that sale as anything she's ever done.

"Donna has had a hand in many parts of the business but she's always had a great influence in the breeding side of it. Three stallions topped the sale that day. Preferred Property brought 1.3 million, Sultan's Matchmaker brought \$610,000 and Family Jewels brought \$385,000. Sultan's Great Day sold as a two-year-old that day as well."

Brookshire had the privilege to work for her and with her during different points in Donna's career and he has nothing but the utmost respect for every part of her game.

"Everything was done first class..."

"She had the greatest eye for spotting a horse at all ages, from a colt to a broodmare. She was the greatest I ever saw. No one was even close! When looking at horses she made her mind up instantly and took care of business. Very seldom did I ever see her try to dicker back and forth with you. Shoot, she already had a plan as to who was going to own that horse next and what they were going to pay for it. She was always one step ahead of you.

"Another thing that separated Donna from the rest of us was nobody could outwork her or out condition her horses. We worked seven days a week; there was no taking a day off. From a month before Rock Creek through Kansas City it was seven days a week. She left nothing to chance. She paid a little more because she expected more and she usually had the best help. Donna was the first one in the barn and the last one to leave. You could not outwork her. Quitting time was when the last horse had been worked and put away, not at a time on the clock.

"Donna also had a personality that was bigger than life. If she was your friend you couldn't have a better friend. And if she was your enemy, you couldn't have a worse enemy. She was passionate about everything she did."

Carolina horsewoman Kim Cowart echoed Brookshire's sentiments when it came to Donna's work ethic. "I worked for Donna for about three years. And I mean worked!" exclaimed Cowart. "She was fun to work for. It was the first time I had actually been a part of a 'show barn' and I loved the way we did things better than anyone else. Her care and training of horses was second to none. She was a charismatic, colorful, shrewd businesswoman and I loved her. She never backed away from any kind of challenge and was tough as nails."

Great eye for a horse; a complete horsewoman; renowned judge; and astute businesswoman could also be added to the list of accolades that have been bestowed upon "the blond bombshell" as Donna was sometimes called. Slowly she became a land baroness, buying farms all over Kentucky. Some she would fix up and sell, just something else she happened to be very good at.

"Donna and I go back 45 years," said noted horseman and close friend Tom Stone. "She was the hardest worker you've ever seen. The almighty dollar drove her, but she could stay out all night, come in and change clothes and go right to work. She never missed a beat.

"There were a lot of great times with Donna. She was something to watch operate. One of her favorite sayings when discussing not coming out ahead on a deal was, 'Honey, we'll make it up down the road.'

"One time I was at the airport, hadn't been home in a while and someone snuck up behind me and took my ticket out of my hands. I turned around and it was Donna and Bridget Parker. Donna said, 'Where you going?' and I said, 'home.' She says, 'no you're not, you're coming with us!' I knew I was in trouble

but I went with them to Texas to look at horses at Jim Bray's. Rich Robertson was working there then. He showed us some horses and broodmares and colts and afterwards I was standing outside with Donna and Bridget and I turned around to go back in the barn. Donna said, 'Where you going?' I said, 'I'm going in to buy that two-year-old that I liked.' She said, 'you don't want that scrawny colt. You won't be able to even start racking him until he's three because he's so poor.' 'Yeah, but I like him,' I shot back. Donna again said, 'Stoney, why do you want to throw your money away. That's what you'll be doing.'

"A week later a truck shows up at the farm and the first one off is that two-year-old. She bought him. He turned out to be French Commander, a horse she sold to Cynthia Wood and then bought back and sold again. Donna was an operator. She always laughed that she made a living out of buying horses that weren't for sale. She was the best there ever was."

Another member of Donna's "inner circle" was Jack Nevitt. He was once quoted as saying, "There's Donna and then there's the rest of us."

One of the next chapters in Donna's storied career

*Great eye for a horse;
a complete horsewoman;
renowned judge;...*

featured William Shatner and his 1985 purchase of her farm on Shannon Run Road, the farm that became Belle Reve. Relying on her Missouri roots, Donna selected mares strong in Stonewall King blood to cross with the Shatner's Two and Three-Year-Old Fine Harness



Ambition was one of Donna's early stars in the Knolland Farms days. Ambition was sold to Meadowbrook of Ft. Wayne, Ind., with Dudley Abbott as manager/trainer. Ambition would win the World's Champion Amateur Harness Pony and World's Champion Ladies Harness Pony titles in 1969 with Mrs. Walter Probst. Abbott and his wife Sharon were close friends of the Moores, along with a group that included Dick and Jeanette Durant, Pat and Chat Nichols, and Ben and Dolly Segalla.



Always surrounding herself with talent, Donna is pictured here with John T. Jones (middle) and Tom Stone (far right) listening to her good friend Johnny Clark, an amazing horseman who trained polo ponies and thoroughbreds, in addition to being "a smart horse trader."

World's Champion Sultan's Great Day and eventually his son, Great Day's Came The Son. That cross proved to work well as one of the early results was World's Grand Champion Simply Mahvalous B.R., a horse that went on to win four World's Champion Of Champions Amateur Fine Harness titles with Bill Schaefer driving under the direction of Donna. Later World's Champion Five-Gaited Stallion Belle Reve's Renaissance Man (I'm A New Yorker x Peavine's Little Lady) would join the Belle Reve breeding program.

Others born at the Belle Reve nursery that made household names for themselves included World's Grand Champion Winter Day, Day By Day, Mahvalous Day, I'm Mahvalous Too, Royce, A Day To Remember, Star Track, Triple Treat, New Tune, Winter Belle and A Day By The Sea. The Shatners were having the time of their lives showing and raising horses and Donna directed it all.

The Shatners, Mr. and Mrs. William Schaefer, Ann Trimble, Linda Johnson, Cathy Coniglio, Judy Shepherd, the list of major clients just continued. In



In 1983, Donna drove an undefeated four-year-old named Preferred Property into Louisville and went head to head with Tom Moore and Night Prowler giving the Louisville audience something to go crazy about. The white-legged stallion had topped the Shannon Run Sale earlier in the year at 1.3 million and finished second to Prowler in both the stallion/gelding qualifier and world's grand championship.

'86, Donna won her first Fine Harness World's Grand Championship driving Johnson's Vanity's Showcase. Under the ownership of Mr. and Mrs. William Schaefer Donna returned to the World's Grand Champion Fine Harness winner's circle in 1990 with Simply Mahvalous B.R. The next year William Schaefer drove him to the Amateur World's Champion Of Champions honors. That same year Donna directed Joy Schaefer and

... there will never be another one like her.

Callaway's Mr. Republican to the Ladies Five-Gaited World's Champion Of Champions title in addition to the UPHA Ladies Five-Gaited Horse Of the Year.

She would later direct William Shatner to World's Champion Of Champions Amateur Fine Harness titles with Eleanor Rigby and Revival. Donna also managed the World's Grand Champion Five-Gaited titles of Shepherd's Callaway's New Look. Bob Gatlin rode the roses in '91 and Dave Becker was up in '92.

Donna would spend her working twilight years buying and selling a few horses, watching over her Thoroughbred interests and keeping a close eye on the careers of daughters Melinda and Melissa. Even though long divorced, she and Tom also stayed close in their later years.

This writer was privy to one of her great acts of

kindness towards "the Tall Man." In the summer of 1991, Tom Moore's barn in Harrodsburg, Ky., burnt to the ground, killing many horses and destroying nearly all the tack and equipment. The following summer while at the Mercer County Fair I was visiting Tom outside of his barn at the historic fairgrounds and here comes Donna walking up, dressed up like always, not a hair out of place, and she was carrying the most tattered old five gallon bucket you could find. She walks up to Tom and says, "here you go you ole son of a bitch," dropping the bucket at his feet. He dropped to his knees, tears running down his cheeks going through the bucket of sparkling curb bits. Donna

had salvaged the bits from the fire and had them re-chromed for Tom. I'll never forget the smile on her face as he looked up to thank her."

Nearly everyone who's been in the sport of showing American Saddlebreds has a Donna story. Volumes could and have been written about her, as there will never be another one like her.

She paved her own way. She never shied away from controversy. She could prepare a horse for an amateur without ever having been on its back. She could buy a horse that wasn't for sale. She could spot

a future world's champion through the scruffiest coat of hair on a poor colt. She gave back to the industry through breeding programs and serving the UPHA and ASHA on various committees. She could socialize and communicate greatly with the elite and the hired help. She found fun in everything she did.

In addition to giving a great foundation to daughters Melinda and Melissa, Donna also had a great number of aspiring horsemen and horsewomen spend time at her graduate school. Among them were Don Brookshire, Bob Vesel, Nelson Green, Don Bridges, Tom Stone, Dave Becker, Bob Gatlin, Lynda Freseth, Bill Waller, Kim Cowart, Mike Tunstall, Todd Miles, Butch Payne and Karin Folkers.

Green remembers her fondly. "We had some great adventures, many of them you can't print. I was a kid in South Carolina and had a pretty nice private job at Merry Lane Farm. I was doing okay and hadn't been there long when in walked Donna Moore. The Eastover, S.C., area was a Saddlebred hotbed at that time and she was going to make sure she was right in the middle of it. Next thing you know this guy's got a horse in training with her.

"I was at the Atlanta Horse Show and Donna was judging. She told me [Bob] Vesel was going to take a job in South Africa. I asked her if I could have the job and she told me I'd have to lose some weight before she could put me on those nice horses. I went home and lost 100 pounds in four months and went back up there and got the job. It was like going to Disneyland for an upcoming horse trainer. She was so businesslike, so picky about everything she did. She could also make you feel like you were such a good friend, and you were! You knew if Donna liked you.

"In the barn you couldn't out work her. She would flat get it. I loved that she had absolute nerves of steel; a great eye and a great feel for what to tell a rider to do.



William Shatner and Donna Moore had a lot of laughs and a lot of success together. Under the Belle Reve banner, many world's champions were bred, raised, shown and sold.



Before becoming a four-time Amateur World's Champion Of Champions with Bill Schaefer, Simply Mahvalous B.R. was the 1990 World's Grand Champion Fine Harness horse with Donna driving. As Belle Reve's breeding manager, Donna also engineered the birth of Simply Mahvalous.

"A lot of her success with customers had to do with how she made it fun. There was a lot of laughing with Donna. She was brilliant in how to deal with people and make them laugh. She could get away with saying things to anybody that no one else could get away with. That was Donna!" Green referenced that Donna had lived a life that was way low, way high and a whole lot of fun in between. That line would sum up the life of Donna Hobbs Moore nicely. At the end of

That was Donna!"

the day she literally spent a lifetime involved with horses, surely the reason she was put on this earth. She wanted nothing else: horses, horses, horses and well, maybe also to make money. She did both with an unrivaled passion, leaving behind a legend that will live long in the hearts, minds and journals of all those associated with the horse that changed her life, the American Saddlebred.



The last horse Donna showed was Call Me Ringo. The stallion son of fine harness world's champions Sultan's Great Day and Eleanor Rigby, Ringo would go on to win yet another World's Champion Of Champions Amateur Fine Harness title for William Shatner as well as be a highly rated sire.

Ode to Donna Moore



Truman and Mark Twain are two greats Missouri can claim
And there's a native gal amongst us who also gained great fame.

She was a cowgirl from Kansas City.
If she'd stuck with rodeo, it would have been a pity
...Cause she could ride and was stacked, blonde and pretty!

She hooked up with a fella named Tom Moore
Together they were destined to write Saddle Horse lore.

They got married and she moved to the corn belt state.
In business, they were a team that was simply great.

Along with the Durants, Pat and Chat,
The Moores proceeded to put Chicago on the map.

Knolland Farm was a world of its own.
It housed some of the greatest ever shown.

But all good things must come to an end,
"To the Heart of America Sale,"
They were told the horses to send.

So they packed up and moved to ole Kentuck,
To Grape Tree Farm to try their luck.

Tom rode to glory on the mighty Yorktown
...Another good one Donna had found.

Versailles was a place they had a lot of fun.
'Til shots rang out and Tom had to run!

Well, the story of the night makes quite a tale
But let's just stop with, "No one went to jail."

Now Donna was alone to make her name
She did it at The Red Mile on a mare named Main Dame.

On Shannon Run Road she made her mark
She worked hard every day, long after dark.

Her nails were polished, her nerves were steel
She was always hustling to make a deal.

Now...Donna has two daughters – Today they're well known.
You would almost think they were her clone.

Sometimes about them, she will rant and rave.
"Honey, those girls are going to put me in the grave!"
But the next thing you know it's "Honey, Can't you see?"
"Those girls are wonderful...Don't they remind you of me?"

Perfection she sought, perfection she found.
Her horses were high headed, fit, and sound.

An eye for horse flesh that no one can contest,
But CHARM was the real key to her success.

She's bigger than life, she fills up a place
She can fashion herself to anyone's taste.

You know it's a shame, it's just not right
That Jim B., Pittman and Art can't be here tonight.

Oh, how we'd laugh at the stories they'd have told

'Cause when the Lord made Donna, he broke the mold.

Josie Forbes
ASHA "Donna Moore Roast"
October 26, 2002

A Walk Down Memory Lane With Donna Moore



Always working a crowd, Donna was pictured here with Jim Koller and Charlie Diehl (r).



Pictured with daughter Melinda, Donna Moore and Dudley Abbott went back to their days in Illinois.



A highly respected judge, Donna was on this panel with Bob Gatlin and Jimmy Miller (r).



So many things could be said of this picture: John T. Jones, Donna Moore, Bridget Parker and Paul St. Charles.



Phyllis and Don Brookshire with Donna and Tommy Biederman. Don and Donna put together what has been hailed as the greatest sale in Saddle Horse history, the Shannon Run Sale.



Early on, Donna (c) studied under the great Jane Fahey. She considered Fahey (far right) the greatest trainer of all time with Lee Roby second and Tom Moore third. They were joined by Margaret Ann Robertson, wife of the late Jim B. and mother of Jimmy and Walt Robertson.



With their time together at Knolland Farm in Illinois, Tom and Donna Moore made the greatest team in the history of the breed. Inducted into the 1990 World's Championship Horse Show Hall of Fame, they both had great solo careers after they divorced.



The social scene was a big part of the show horse world back in the day. Tom (center) and Donna (far right) had a great circle of friends that got together often. They are pictured here with the Palmers who owned Duke Of Daylight and the Dickeys who owned Grape Tree Farm.



Donna is pictured here holding court at Rock Creek.



Two legends of the American Saddlebred industry, Donna Moore and Don Harris.