

Pepper Hill Farm

A BUILDING BLOCK FOR GROWTH

By Sadie Fowler

Eric Griedl and Erica Savary, owners of Pepper Hill Farm LLC, in the countryside of Wisconsin, pride themselves in running a business that is known for its family-friendly atmosphere centered around American Saddlebreds and Hackney ponies. Currently, they have 25 horses in training, 10 school horses and a couple of broodmares — and, of course, you can't forget the two cows.

"As a husband and wife team, we are fortunate to do what we love and really enjoy bringing new families into the fun world of showing and the Saddlebred," said Savary, adding that Pepper Hill teaches an impressive 75 lessons a week.

Located in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, about 45 minutes west of Milwaukee, Griedl and Savary tend to cater to amateur and junior exhibitors and specialize in starting people from the ground up. Often, their new riders start in the Academy program and eventually work their way up to owning a horse of their own.

Before there was Pepper Hill

Pursuing careers in the horse industry was a natural fit for both Griedl and Savary as both were exposed to horses early in life. For Griedl, his parents raised Morgans so he grew up riding, taking it quite seriously by about 13 when he began taking lessons with Jay Wood at Westwood Farm in Minnesota.

"I was the ultimate barn rat and Jay and his family took me in and let me spend summers at their farm," he said. "I had a couple Morgans, my nicest being Heaven's Renowned that I showed at Oklahoma. He went on to be a finals-winning equitation horse."



The young couple met at Louisville in 2006 and two years later they said "I do."



Eric Griedl and Erica Savary are enjoying the ride of becoming established horse trainers in a highly competitive region.

When Griedl was 15, he started lessons with Bob Griffin, who was working at Wood's farm. It was there that Griedl was introduced to the American Saddlebred. When Griffin moved to Schallock's Star Hill Farm in Wisconsin, Griedl followed and spent many of his weekends helping out at the barn wherever he could.

Savary's journey was a bit different, but her love for horses did come at an early age as well. Unlike her husband, neither of her parents were horse people.

"I was just the typical horse crazy little kid," she said. "When I was six, my parents told me that if I joined a 4-H club and took lessons for a year and proved that I was dedicated that they would buy me a pony," she said. "I think they thought that horses were going to be like all the other activities that I tried and that I would quit after six months."

Savary proved her parents wrong, and her parents stuck to their word. Soon enough, she had her first horse.

"I continued in 4-H and showed my horse western for a couple of years," she said. "I went to state, did quiz bowl and judging. It was actually a great foundation for horse care and I learned a lot."

There were a few kids that showed saddle seat in Savary's 4-H club and she was drawn to them for their beauty. When she was 11, she had the opportunity to go to the Eastern States show where she was able to see the NEHC Medal Finals.

"I fell in love with equitation and Saddlebreds," she said. "Around that same time, I was given a little Arabian that I showed saddle seat on the local circuit. After a few years, my parents saved up money to buy a very inexpensive Saddlebred."

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The person Savary had been riding with suggested she go ride with the Garones.

"Much like Eric, I became the ultimate barn rat and spent all my free time at Fairfield South," she said. "My parents always supported me as much as they could and I had several nice horses including CH Oh By George!, CH Sultan's Valentino, Bubble and Squeak, and CH Lullaby Magic ... I showed all over the country and even was fortunate to win a reserve world's championship."

Stepping ahead

After high school, Griedl went to college for a semester but then decided he wanted to work with horses full-time. He went to work for Rick Wallen, where he helped him break colts and groom horses.

"I gained a lot of experience with young horses and how to break colts," he said. "I then went to work for Paul Priebe — for two weeks. During those two weeks, I made three trips to Mike Roberts' and back, and Mike offered me a job."

Griedl worked for Roberts for about a year and says that is the place where he received a lot of opportunity to show as well as learning how to market a horse in order to sell it.

"That year, we sold over 50 horses in all price ranges," he said. "I then worked for Scott and Carol [Matton] for a year, which was really my first exposure to a barn that did everything from lessons to colts ... That year, we had five weanlings in the Wisconsin Breeder's Stake and all five made the top 10 out of 50

"It's like a bit of Kentucky in Wisconsin."

weanlings."

At this point, Bob Griffin and Tom Thorpe had just started Northern Tradition Farm and it was exploding with horses. They needed help and Griedl took the job, working as their assistant trainer for three years.

"There, I learned how to really turn out a horse and rider for the show ring," he said. "To this day, Tom is one of my best friends."

As life progressed, a life change eventually brought Griedl back to Knollwood in 2002 and he stayed there for 13 years. During that time, he says he received a well-rounded education in everything from shoeing to lessons to breeding and everything in between.

"They helped make me the horseman I am today," he said. "I also learned a lot about bringing new people into the business. They gave me a lot of responsibility and I really learned what it takes to have your own farm."

In the meantime, while Griedl was working his way up the ranks, Savary was also working hard. She calls the time during her teenage years that she spent at the Garones a major highlight of her life.

"I spent every spare moment there, and I have them to thank for teaching everything from putting



Erica and Eric have worked tirelessly to bring riders up through the Academy ranks and into show suits. This group of Pepper Hill riders at the Academy National Championships included (l-r) Natalie Fischer, Allie Daury, Kayla Riley Glidewell, Julia Lecke and Ashley Nickey.

on a tail set, to jogging horses, to driving a truck and trailer," she said. "My last equitation horse, CH Lullaby Magic, was purchased in June of my last year of equitation and was completely unequitated. Gary let me do a lot of the work myself and by November, we were able to complete patterns at the finals."

Savary didn't do much with horses during her college years, which were spent at American University in Washington, D.C., where she earned a degree in art history. From there, she had planned on going to graduate school but felt burned out and wanted to take a short break before doing so.



Alexis Krahn prepared to hit the ring aboard CH Final Deklaration. A winner at Louisville and Kansas City, "Cliff" has been a part of Eric's life since the Andeker son was born at Knollwood Farm.



Eric has enjoyed success with a couple of top gaited horses recently, including Heir Comes The Man (pictured) and last year the junior mare, Kalarama's I'm So Fancy.

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(l-r) Allie Daury and Ashley Nickey both enjoyed 2018 Academy National Championships.



Earlier this season Erica enjoyed a tricolor ride aboard Kalarama's I'm So Fancy to win the Ladies Five-Gaited Championship at River Ridge.

"I needed some time off and so I went to work for Todd Graham in West Virginia running a lesson program," she said. "He had no lesson program and I had no idea what I was doing but in three months, I was teaching over 50 lessons a week."

While there, Savary says she also received a lot of exposure to breaking colts and breeding horses.

After two years, Savary went to work at Chestnut Lane in North Carolina with John Whalen where she received a lot of opportunity to show some nice horses. She also had lots of responsibilities there, including overseeing the equitation riders and their horses.

Eventually, Savary moved to Wisconsin where she worked for Terri Anne Ullman, aiding in building a lesson program from the ground up. In fact, the core base of her client group today is comprised of folks who started in that very lesson program.

Meet Pepper Hill

In a nutshell, Pepper Hill is comprised of a little bit of everything; a wide range of riders and horses, including a few colts and even some broodmares.

After marrying in 2008, Griedl and Savary moved to their current location in November of 2015 when they were finally able to purchase a farm after several years of leasing. They first met at Louisville in 2006 at a time when they were each working for different barns that trained horses for the same owner.

"Eric was working for Knollwood and I was working for Chestnut Lane in North Carolina," Savary said. "We were engaged by Christmas and I moved to Wisconsin the following year after Louisville."

For the next three-plus years that followed, Savary worked for Ullman at Winsome Farm and then in January of 2011 she started Pepper Hill Farm.

"Originally, I had four school horses, one that I owned and three that Terri Anne generously loaned me," she laughed. "I had no show horses and no real equipment to speak of. Terri Anne had changed her business plans and decided to go more into the

breeding world. She was instrumental in us getting started as she essentially let me leave with all of my lesson students and four school horses and saddles and bridles for them."

For two years, Savary leased stalls at a local facility and by the summer of 2013 she had needed more space and found out that Dave and Sarah Patton's old barn in Mukwonago had that space available. She moved there in 2015 with 13 horses under her banner.

While all this was starting, Griedl was finally able to find the right time to gracefully part ways with Knollwood — the place he was grateful to have called home for 13 years — to join his partner in life.

"Things quickly expanded after that and soon enough we had taken charge over the whole farm," she said. "In June of 2015, we found out about our current farm being offered for sale and toured it on a whim, not really thinking that we had any chance of buying such a nice facility. At Louisville that year, we found out that

SAVARY SPEAKS ABOUT ACADEMY ADVANTAGES

Erica Savary and Eric Griedl say their passion to grow the breed comes from necessity; it's what they know.

"As a newer barn and someone who started with just lesson students, it was just the natural progression," Savary said, explaining where her passion to grow the industry comes from. "I think our secret of having so many converts from the Academy world is just letting the horse sell itself. So many trainers are so pressured and want to get riders on a show horse after just a year or two in Academy ... The parents feel pressured and then start to get resentful when the bills start piling in and the rider is struggling."

As with anything, patience is key. Most of the riders at Pepper Hill probably spend three to five years in Academy and then, they are the ones who approach their trainers about buying a horse and moving up.

"When it is their idea it makes everything so much easier," she said. "Also, when riders have spent so much time in Academy, by the time you go shopping for them, they are very good riders and we don't have to buy the typical babysitter horse that we will have to sell in one year."



Part of the Pepper Hill Academy team: (l-r) Kayla King, Olivia Stollenwerk, Julia Lecke, Avalynn Friedrichs, Allie Daury, Kalina Kapetanovic, Lydia Stollenwerk, and Kayla Riley Glidewell.

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the owner was willing to work with us to come to terms that worked for us.”

A few weeks later, the couple was in New Hampshire celebrating the wedding of Devon Garone and Kyle Gagnon when they received a call of very good news.

“It was that weekend when the actual offer and acceptance happened,” Savary said. “We were having to email and send and sign everything at the actual wedding. There was a competing offer and we had to act fast!”

Perks of partnership

It’s fair to say, both have come a long way and progressed well in their chosen careers, which happen to also be both of their passions. As most could imagine, there are ups and downs when it comes to working with your spouse on a daily basis.

“We are literally with each other 24 hours a day but it does help that we are both living our dream and really are each other’s best friend,” Savary said as she described their relationship. “We both tend to do a little of everything and have a string of horses that we mainly work.”

Both Griedl and Savary are very involved in the training of all the horses at Pepper Hill and will often switch it up if something isn’t working or either needs a fresh perspective.

“We both work horses and teach lessons, although Eric has made me promise that he doesn’t have to teach anyone under a certain height,” she laughed. “We are the only instructors on the farm and do all the lessons, from tiny tots on up. We pride ourselves on knowing every family that walks through our doors and having a relationship with them.”

From a business perspective, Savary handles all the book work while her husband enjoys maintaining the outside chores. He’ll admit he even loves driving his semi. Though the pair has seemingly figured out what works best in terms of operating their business, like anything else, there are challenges.

“It definitely can be a challenge,” Savary laughed. “There are times where we have to agree to disagree or just agree that we are turning it off for the night and not talking about it until tomorrow.”

In further describing her husband, Savary calls him a real people person, something you really have to be in order to succeed in the type of business they’re in.

“As much as business revolves around horses, it revolves around people just as much,” she said. “Eric is a big kid at heart and makes it fun while also expecting 110 percent effort at the same time ... I definitely let Eric do more of the talking but when I do talk, I definitely do not mince words. You will always know where I stand on things.”

In fact, Savary says she actually tends to be a little harder on some of their riders and is the perfect match for the youngsters who might need a little more tough love while her husband is better with the kids who have to be boosted up and perhaps coddled a bit.

Both Savary and Griedl are incredibly grateful for all they have, including each other, careers they love, horses and clients they adore, and a facility that puts sweet icing on the cake.

“We are so fortunate to have such a nice place that is in a great area with lots of families that have an income to support horses as a hobby,” she said. “It’s

fun that the area has lots of Saddlebred facilities. Sheri Brandl and Mark Bodnar are literally our neighbors, the Freseths are less than five miles away, the Mattons are 15 minutes away.

“It’s like a bit of Kentucky in Wisconsin. It’s nice having the resource of so many horse neighbors.”

“I think to grow, we need to encourage the barn rats to do this professionally,”

What’s in a name?

The name Pepper Hill actually started years ago when Savary was showing equitation at Lexington and there was a typo in the program. She laughs at the memory as she explains that she lived in Pepperell, Massachusetts although it was mistakenly printed in the program as “Pepper Hill.”

Her instructor at the time, Marsha Garone, thought it sounded very wealthy and snobbish and they continued to joke about it. Savary was nicknamed “Erica, from Pepper Hill.”

When it came time to name her facility upon going out on her own, Pepper Hill was the only name she could think of when she had to start up an LLC.

Making memories

Since Pepper Hill became official, it has been making some serious impact among the competitive



Raising young people to be barn rats and great adults is the goal for Erica and Eric. Having ridden with Erica for 10 years, Julia Hoffman and Lauren Treiber are in that group.

world of American Saddlebreds. They are excelling by creating winning combinations and enjoying every minute of it. As both reflect, it has all been special, but there are a few standout moments they can both point to.

For example, Griedl quickly says that Mocha’s Mudslide played an impactful role in developing his skills as a trainer.

“He was the first horse that I equitated and I put him and Emily Mayer together to be Top 10 in all the finals, trimmed and pleasure, in one year,” he said.

Similarly, Savary can point to horses that had an early part in terms of influencing the ability she has today, including Henry Hudson. She ended up with him when the Treiber family moved him to her. She says he was a bit of a project and had been a nomad, passed from trainer to trainer.

“Many people told me that a kid would never be able to show him but 12-year-old Lauren Treiber proved them all wrong,” she said. “We were very successful with him. He was a kind horse but not very trusting. It took a lot of hard work and time with both horse and rider to just get them in the ring but it was a happy moment proving everyone wrong.”

The future looks bright

Team Pepper Hill has indeed put itself on the map and both Savary and Griedl agree they are fortunate to have a great group of clients who have been with them for a good number of years, aiding them in their path to success.

“We want to continue bringing new people into the industry and making it a fun and worthwhile experience for them,” Griedl said. “Our customers don’t necessarily spend the ‘big money’ relatively speaking, but we like to think we do a good job picking out suitable horses that represent an animal that can compete at the biggest shows.”

In that regard, both Savary and Griedl also share a passion of growing the breed and bring with them wisdom that’s far beyond their years. In order to reach new heights and prevent declining numbers, they say it is imperative for the industry to market itself in a way that reaches the masses.

“I think to grow, we need to encourage the barn rats to do this professionally,” she said. “So many times, you hear trainers telling kids to ‘never’ do this for a living. If they love it, they should do it! Have a back-up and be smart about it, but we need more young professionals who are willing to pay their dues and work their way up the ladder.”

Saddlebreds are easily the root of Pepper Hill, and quite simply, both Savary and Griedl believe they are the most beautiful horse of all.

“We are both kids that rode one Saddlebred and were hooked,” he said. “They sell themselves if you can just get people in the barn.”

Encouraging others to get involved are not just words to Savary and Griedl; it is an action they live by and set with their example. Looking back at their own success, they wouldn’t change anything.

If you love something, both agree, sometimes you just have to go for it.

“If you jump, you will swim,” she said. “We have had many big decisions that needed just blind faith ... so jump, you can make it work!”