

Bob Brison

Turning Out Top Horses and Riders

BY ERICA RAE FAULKNER

Patient, quiet and calm. Three words that perfectly describe one of the most noted horse trainers in the industry today. Fairview Farm, a large operation settled back in the country in New Bloomfield, Missouri, plays home to some of the top horse and rider teams in the country. Bob Brison makes this state-of-the-art facility his home and his place of work. Turning out quality stock and talented riders and using his training abilities in a fashion that allows customers and horses to feel comfortable, Brison is without question one of today's great trainers. With a reserved demeanor, yet friendly and welcoming, he has worked his way to the top in the American Saddlebred industry.

Growing up in the Oregon area, Brison began his fascination with horses at a young age. Like so many others, he grew up riding in the 4-H programs and had Shetland and Hackney ponies at an early age. Brison states, "My parents have always been supportive of my love and desire to be around horses. It started out as just a way to keep me out of trouble. I think that used to be pretty common for most kids who have horses."

He makes no bones about the fact that having the responsibility for animals at an early age helps to create qualities in a person that will only help later in life. "The time and dedication it takes to care for an animal of such size certainly helps the young generations to stay focused and driven on a successful path," said Brison.

Active as a young boy, he spent time partaking in some of the typical sports that young boys enjoy, such as soccer and basketball. He even enjoyed moments out in nature with his dad and also with his friends hunting pheasant and deer. He was exposed to all types of activities, yet his love for horses was always the strongest. Brison recalls the moment he knew he wanted to be a horse trainer.

"When I was younger, I had been involved with horses for a while, but still didn't know where I wanted to be later in my life," recalled Brison. I was at one of the larger horse shows with some of my friends. I remember seeing all the decorated stalls, the flowers, and the attention to detail in the atmosphere as a whole. I clearly remember seeing a man standing outside the stall area. Someone brought a horse out to him and he got on and went to riding. He came back after some time and they brought him out another horse, and off he went to work that one. That was what I wanted to do with my life, work horses. I asked my friend who that man was, and he told me it was the 'horse trainer.' I knew that day I would become a horse trainer."

Having chosen a career with horses, it only made sense to try to learn from some of the best. Brison started his journey at Singing Hills Stables where Virgil Helm was trainer. Starting out as a caretaker he spent his time grooming and learning the ropes of the industry. Brison says, "It is definitely a hard industry. You have to be very determined and focused to succeed. But I really think it's like that with any profession. You need to give it your all. Whether it's the horse industry or any industry, you have to enjoy what you do."

After high school, he made the move to Iowa where he went to work for the well-known and highly respected Dr. Alan Raun at Reedannland Farm. It was here that Brison really got his hands on working horses and not just grooming. He had the opportunity to work some stock on his own under the guidance of Dr. Raun. This helped confirm for him that this was what he truly wanted to do as his career. "I really learned to love the process of horse training," claims Brison, "The bits, the shoeing, and the training. I love all of it. I became totally engrossed in the process of racking a horse. The timing was so interesting to me, and trying to figure out all of the pieces."

Learning as much as he could in the year he worked for Dr. Raun, he eventually moved back to Oregon and returned to working at Singing Hills Stables, this time as an assistant trainer. It was through his time working with Helm that Brison came to meet the lady who would eventually be his wife, Tonya Helm.

Tonya grew up around horses as well. However, it is safe to say she was a bit more involved with Saddlebreds at an early age than Bob simply due to the fact her family was involved in running Singing Hills Stables. Sister to Virgil Helm and daughter to Garland Helm, her entire family was all about horses and so it was no surprise that these two hit it off and went after their dreams together.

Bob Brison will tell you that his relationship with Garland Helm was special and he is thankful for the role that Helm played in his life. "He was a wonderful father-in-law," Brison explains. "He passed away this year. I am so thankful for him. He was such an optimistic man, always making himself available if you had a question and always giving much appreciated advice. And boy did he have some great stories."

Brison continues to tell of Helm and his relationship with



Born and raised at Fairview Farm, The Brightest Blue won the Three-Year-Old Five-Gaited Mare class at Louisville this year, after which she was sold to Hillcroft Farm.

the family. "Not only was he a wonderful father in law, but he was also a stand out grandfather and great grandfather." Garland Helm operated a barn in Evansville, IN. Growing up in this environment is what helped shape Tonya Brison into the wonderful rider she is today.

Tonya Brison handles all the bookwork and is at the farm daily to help keep the operation running smoothly. It is no surprise that Bob Brison speaks highly of her and her involvement in the farm and in his daily life. "She really is a major part of our farm. Without her, none of this would be possible. I couldn't focus on my job if it wasn't for her making sure everything is running properly."

He is also very complimentary on his wife's ability to team a horse and rider together. "She really has a great eye for a horse. She can match up a horse with an amateur rider and make it a perfect picture. I really value her opinion." Along with her keen eye for horses and her behind the scenes work, Tonya Brison is also very supportive to her husband when things are not always going as planned. "She is the one I turn to when things are not going well. I can always rely on her to be there for me when things are challenging and when I need some encouragement."

Two children came of the relationship of Tonya and Bob; one is the good riding Morgan Brison, who has won her fair share of blue ribbons over the years. Sarah Wisdom, the couple's older daughter, grew up and went on to find other interests besides horses. As Bob Brison states "Sarah was born when I was working for someone else. She really never got to just have fun in the barn; it was a different environment than it is now. She always enjoyed the horses, however she just did not choose to make it her only focus in life. She is successful today and still brings the grandkids by for rides on the horses. Tonya and I are both very proud of our daughters."

Morgan Brison is also full of praise for her father. "My father means the world to me. He has seen me at my highs and lows and has never given up on me. He supports me in my horse shows, my basketball and in my life in general. He has taught me that when you fall, what matters most is how strong you come back." Morgan continues, "He has instilled in me the value of hard work and to never give up on your dreams. I couldn't be any more proud to call him my father."

Eventually, Brison moved from the Northwest and went to Missouri to work at Callaway Hills; the largest breeding and training facility of American Saddlebreds at the time. Having taken a job as an assistant while Johnny Jones was there, he starting working on his skills with the young stock at the stable. After a good year with Callaway Hills, he joined back up with Virgil Helm. Helm was working in Missouri then, so this time the job change kept Brison in the Midwest.

History has a way of repeating itself and eventually Brison crossed paths with Mrs. Weldon again and the door was reopened at Callaway Hills. Brison put in many years at Callaway Hills, turning out horse after horse that would go on to accomplish great victories. One of the most memorable horses that came into his string of colts was the great CH Callaway's Born To Win. He recalls his early years with this talented animal.



One of the many great horses by Designed that Brison has started for Redwing Saddlebred Farm, I'm A Fashionista, shown here after winning the Junior Three-Gaited at the 2014 American Royal.

"I remember him being out in a herd of colts. He was not big and stretchy by any means. But there was just something about him." He goes on, "It seemed like he was always watching you, and he was curious and friendly. His demeanor was so nice that I thought 'let's just go put a halter on him, I bet he will just come right in.' Well it wasn't quite so easy. Needless to say, the rodeo was on!"

It was also during this time that Brison was working the extremely gifted CH Callaway's Forecaster. "At that time I was also working Forecaster. And I will be honest, he was the horse that we thought had the most promise." Brison showed Forecaster as a three-year-old, making their debut at UPHA Chapter 5. CH Callaway's Forecaster eventually

was sold through the sale and went on to be very successful. One of the most noted wins for this horse was his victory in the Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship in 2003. Nancy Leigh Fisher was his partner when he won that class trained by Lynda and Andy Freseth at Hollow Haven Farm.

Returning home from the sale that Forecaster was sold through, Brison focused on making Born To Win the best he could be. "When we got back from the sale, the one that we sold Forecaster through, Born To Win just happened to be one of the colts that was left. So we went to work. He was definitely a late bloomer, a very willing animal though. I learned so much working this horse. He was very smart. You could try something with him and if it didn't work, he would pick up on the next thing you tried with ease. He let me make mistakes and we both came out the other end of it just fine." CH Callaway's Born To Win went on to be the partner to Gayle Lampe. These two were the ones to beat in the ladies five-gaited division. Although they won many blues, it's worth noting that they won the Ladies Five-Gaited Championship at Kansas City six times.

CH Callaway's Born To Win was just one of the many horses that Brison developed during his years at Callaway Hills. Another great one that Brison had a big admiration for was the standout fine harness horse, CH Callaway's Copyright. Brison comments on how he learned a lot from this show ring favorite as well. "I remember when we had Copy. He was so cool. I remember the first time at Louisville with him. He was a two-year-old then and we were showing in the Two-Year-Old Three-Gaited class. I thought I was so smart back then. I had this big plan all worked out. During the week leading up to his class I got up in the wee hours of the mornings to work him. I wanted it quiet when I worked him. I wanted him focused on me and listening to me. He was so good when I worked him that night. We went ahead and made the decision that yes, we would show him."

That next day Copy and Brison hit the show ring. They did not win the class, but Brison did come away from the experience with more knowledge than he had going in. "I was excited to show the young horse. I truly felt I had prepared him exceptionally well. What I realized during the class was that I had prepared him yes, but I had not prepared him for 'Louisville.' He went down the chute and the crowd was wild. He hit that gate and you could just tell his whole world got turned upside down.

I could feel him shake. To say he was overwhelmed would be an understatement."

He stuck with the young horse and rode him every step, giving him all the guidance he could. "That day I learned one of the most valuable lessons I could have. There is an enormous difference between getting a horse ready to show at any show and getting a horse ready for Louisville. I have learned to let my horses experience atmospheres as close to what Louisville will be like, so that they are ready for it. I am very thankful to have learned this lesson early on."

CH Callaway's Copyright was later sold through the sale in 1998 to Fox Grape Farms and went on to be one of the most prominent fine harness horses that have ever graced the show ring. He won the Fine Harness World's Grand Championship with trainer John T. Jones in 2001 and from there on out he was never beat in the show ring. He is right up there with some of the other great ones, winning the World's Grand Champion Fine Harness title six years in a row.

Working with young horses and at such a large breeding establishment, the buying and selling process of the industry is obviously one that Brison has experience with. With so many good horses having come through his doors, he isn't bashful about the fact that he cannot help but form a bond with some of them. "It is always hard to let them go when you sell them. It is part of the business and you accept it, but that doesn't make it any easier. You just end up bonding with some of them by nature of the fact that they are there with you every day. You spend your life with these animals, it is impossible to not get attached."

Continuing on, Brison describes this same situation, as he recently had to say goodbye to one he had a special attachment to. "We had a filly this year named The Brightest Blue that I had a hard time selling. We raised her and have been with her every step of the way. Just this past August we won the Three-Year-Old Five-Gaited Mares class at Louisville and went on to sell her to Misdee Wrigley Miller and Hillcroft Farm. It was hard to let her go, we really had gotten to know her. She is such a special mare. You start out with all these plans with these horses and these goals that you want to accomplish with them. Then sometimes the opportunity to sell is just too good and you cannot turn it down. It's a hard part of the business."

A lot of trainers have a knack for training certain types of horses, and Brison is often known for his outstanding presentation of young stock and his ability to teach a horse to rack. Although often seen on young horses of all divisions, he has a soft spot for a gaited horse. "A good horse is a good horse no matter what and I certainly have enjoyed all the nice horses I have had the privilege of working. However, I truly enjoy working a gaited horse. They are just kind of my thing I guess." Having years of experience with working with a gaited horse, Brison eagerly tells of his first time trying to teach one to rack. "I remember the first time I tried to teach a horse to rack. This was years ago, when I was in my teens. I remember trying and trying and trying and feeling like it was so difficult. I honestly never thought I would get it done, and I most certainly thought that I would never be continually successful at it if I did get it done." However, it only took that one time for Brison to be hooked on the process. "Once I accomplished it, I really enjoyed it. Now, I have gaited so many colts that I couldn't even count them if I tried. Once you learn the first steps on how to get it done, you can learn to do it. Anyone can learn to do it, it is just something you have to work at and keep trying. It is all about timing."

In regards to working a gaited horse, Brison has some advice for the young up and coming trainers who may be trying to work with their first gaited horse, or refine their skills to accomplish the task more efficiently. "I think that one of the issues that arises when young aspiring trainers are trying to teach this gait for the first time, is trying too hard. They overdo it and they don't even



Morgan Brison and CH Take A Guess had many successful years of showing under the watchful eye of Bob Brison.

realize it. As I was once told 'you don't make them rack, you let them rack.' "

"I think if a person has a desire to learn, then they can become skilled at anything. They are going to make mistakes, but if you keep focused and stay patient, you can improve and figure out the process of gaiting a horse."

After many successful years at Callaway Hills Brison realized that deep down, he really wanted to own his own facility. The idea of walking out his back door to his own barn just kept motivating him to open his own facility. "Mrs. Weldon had gotten ill and it was known that she was eventually going to be backing away from the level of involvement she had previously had. I felt that this would be a good time to go after my dream. Callaway Hills was an amazing place to work and I am forever grateful for the opportunities I had there. However the timing was right and I opened my own farm."

Fairview Farm is a state-of-the-art training and sales facility. Boasting 41 stalls in the training barn, there is also a broodmare barn that has 11 stalls and a lesson portion of the facility that is home to 8 lesson horses. Large indoor and outdoor arenas provide ample space for working his top show horses. Brison and his wife live on the property and if you ask him, he will tell you that this is one of his favorite things about the facility. "I really love the fact that my job is in my backyard. Every day I get to walk out my door and do what I love. That right there is an amazing feeling. There is not a single day that goes by that I don't love what I do or the situation I am in."

Accompanying Brison in the barn is a great assistant and a wonderful instructor as well as a group of good grooms. His assistant Nick Kinsinger is a valuable part of Fairview Farm. He joined the team about a year ago and helps Brison mostly in the area of starting the young colts. Although Brison also points out that Kinsinger is certainly helpful in the training of the show horses as well. Kinsinger is no stranger to the business as he has a strong background in training and showing ponies.

Valerie Kron gives roughly 40 lessons a week at the farm and is always welcoming new riders to her program. She not only teaches the lessons but is always lending her talents to Brison to help him work horses. One of Kron's greatest successes as a teacher was when she coached Brison's daughter Morgan to a World's Champion title in 2011 in the Saddle Seat Equitation 16



Bob Brison working the talented Glenview's Excelalante. Brison gave this horse his great start, and today this talented gelding is still winning for the Manilow family.

Mr. Center Stage is just one of the top horses put out by Fairview Farm. Here he is pictured winning the Novice Three-Gaited Class at the Midwest Charity Horse Show in 2008 for previous owner Theresa Vonderschmitt.



Year Old class, as well as numerous other wins in the equitation division. Kron has worked with Morgan Brison for years, shaping her into the top rider she is today. She is a fundamental part of the success of Fairview Farm.

Brison feels the lesson program at any stable is important for the success of the horse industry in general. "You know, it's hard to say how much business comes from the lessons, if you only look at those that step up to buy a show horse. Honestly, I don't think that many riders in the show ring come from our lesson program specifically. However, what I do think is that having a thriving riding program really helps to expose our breed to others."

Brison is very enthusiastic about helping grow the Saddlebred industry, in all aspects. As he says "It is not just the show riders that make this industry survive. It is important to involve everyone in any aspect they might find interest in. There are so many people that have never even been around a horse. And with society these days, I am sure that number is declining. I remember as a kid everyone was around horses. Kids were outside playing and there was real interaction with animals and nature. We just do not see that type of lifestyle as much anymore. So I strongly feel that a lesson program allows people to experience a horse, to see how a barn works and to become involved. You never know where the people who come through your door may end up. Sure, they might not go on to purchase a horse. But how do you know that they won't go on to be a farrier, or a horse show photographer, maybe even a masseuse for the horse industry. There are so many avenues to be involved in with our sport."

At every show they attend, the team at Fairview Farm puts top contenders in the ring. CH I'm Something Wicked, CH Manilla Thrilla, Soquilis Georgia Kracker, CH Take A Guess, Designed By You, Callaway's Unsolved Mystery, CH Mr. Center Stage, CH Bravo Blue, CH Glenview's Excelalante', So Swank, Look Of Success, Say Yes To The Dress and Balenciaga are just a few of the quality horses that Brison and his team have put in the ring and/or sold out of Fairview Farm. It is nearly impossible to name all the horses that this talented trainer and top-notch facility have produced.

Developing his horses into top stock is always a priority. Yet there is no denying the fact that Brison also develops quality relationships with his customers. The Coup family has been a customer of Fairview Farm for years now, and their loyalty to

him comes from the relationship he has built with the family, but maybe even more so with his almost mentoring relationship with Katie Coup. She started riding at Fairview Farm in March of 2011. It did not take long for Coup to see what talent Brison possessed with a horse and she knew that riding with him was going to be an experience she would cherish for all her life. Brison has many qualities that make him a top pick when Saddlebred enthusiasts are looking for a trainer. Coup goes on to explain that one quality that really stands out for her is his patience. "I truly admire Bob's patience," she states. "I am not sure I have ever seen Bob rush anywhere. On that note, it's a good thing that he's got Tonya or I am not sure that he'd ever get a horse to the ring on time!" Coup says with a smile.

"It is such a wonderful thing, his patience. It is a wonderful quality to have when working as much young stock as he does. Or, with working 'fire breathing dragons' like my own mare. He taught my mare Mosette to wait, which I can tell you is no small feat. He also taught me to take my time as well, and the more I think about it, I have to say that I am not sure which one these tasks was the harder one." And with patience, comes the formation of wonderful partnerships, as Coup continues to describe, "I really

admire Bob's attitude of partnership with his horses. Bob does not ride as a dictator unless it is absolutely necessary, but rather teaches his horses and riders how to work together as a team."

Coup has found a lot of value in Brison's training, even more than just the patience he exhibits when working to put a horse and rider together as a team. A lot of good trainers will tell you that you need to approach each horse as an individual and treat them as such. Coup describes that this is also a strong point of Brison, as well as how he approaches each horse with an understanding that they are an animal and what their instincts are. "I think another of Bob's strong points as a trainer is the interest that he shows in how a horse thinks and operates naturally. He uses a horse's natural instincts, rather than working against them. This obviously helps a lot with the partnership between horse and rider as well. Bob isn't about using force, he takes his time to understand the horse he has in front of him on any given day."

Kris Naros is fairly new to the Fairview Farm family, however she already has seen the value in what Brison can provide

"It is such a wonderful thing, his patience."



Bob Brison trained and showed Soquili's Georgia Kracker as a young horse. Here they are pictured winning the Junior Three-Gaited Grand Championship at the Kentucky State Fair in 2009. This grand show horse is still winning today.



Morgan Brison shows in many divisions with much success. She is seen here winning the Saddle Seat Equitation 16 Year Old class at Louisville in 2011. Learning from her father and from Fairview Farm instructor Valerie Kron, Morgan is a fine example of top notch riders produced under Bob Brisons watchful eye.

as a trainer. She is quick to comment on how enjoyable her experiences have been with Brison. "It has been such fun since joining the Fairview Farm crew. George (Designed By You) and Bob had such a bond, the way they looked at each other brought a smile to my face and tears to my eyes."

Naros also comments on Bob and Tonya as a team. "Bob and Tonya are a remarkable pair, both have deeply rooted knowledge of our breed, characteristics of various bloodlines and the history of the breed. I could listen to them for hours. They never stop and are always on the go working hard for every customer to find just the right horse for each one. Bob and Tonya perfectly compliment and support each other. They are hardworking, honest, encouraging, humble, and a ton of fun, too! They truly care about what's best for the horses and their customers."

"It is a joy watching Bob work with the young horses," Naros says. "He is quiet, kind, gentle and patient - and the horses respond to that. It has been exciting to watch Bob bring Gatsby along this summer and I am looking forward to seeing the finished result next season! The Brison's track record speaks volumes as to their combined talents. At Midwest, it was interesting to note the great number of the top placing horses got their start with the Brisons. They are a wonderful, talented couple with a great family that it's been a real pleasure getting to know. I could not be happier!"

Ann Fleming Horton, current owner and rider of Breaking Vegas, is yet another customer of Fairview Farm. This team made their debut with a blue ribbon ride in the Novice Rider Country Pleasure class at Central States Benefit this year. She also is very complimentary in regards to Brison and his training. "Bob Brison is an awesome trainer. He is extremely talented, very knowledgeable, patient, kind, hilarious and humble! Everyone loves him--the horses, clients, his family and friends. Bob and Tonya Brison are a great team, and I'm very fortunate and grateful to be a part of Fairview Farm."

Another longtime customer of Fairview Farm is Judy Werner, owner of Redwing Saddlebred Farm and the famed stud Designed. Brison has turned out many horses for Werner over the years and the appreciation she has for his abilities as a trainer is evident by her years of loyalty.

It is evident that the customers of Bob and Tonya are happy

with the quality of care and attention to detail that the team provides. However, it is not just the customers who notice and appreciate what Bob Brison brings to the table. Chuck Herbert, owner and trainer at Cedarwood Farm in Evansville Indiana, speaks highly of his colleague, "Bob and I love to talk horse training. We will often call and share stories. He is so incredibly intelligent, and honestly he probably is the smartest horse trainer I know." Chuck continues to describe what he feels makes Brison unique. "This guy thinks of things that other people never think about. He is always thinking of his horses. We were on vacation in Jamaica, and we were out sailing. Mind you, none of us really know how to sail. There was this contraption that was a sort of release to let the sail out. Bob was looking at it for a few minutes and then he commented on how he thought maybe he could find a way to use it in some aspect of his daily training with the horses. I had to laugh and remind him, 'Bob, we are on vacation!'"

Herbert also makes note of how handy Brison is. "Bob is one of the most talented men I know. And he can make anything. We were on a road trip one time and he was talking about stitching and making harnesses and such. I had to tease him and ask 'could you make clothes for Morgan?' He laughed and said he probably could. He is just that good, if he can't buy it, he will make it." And one point that Herbert really felt was important when it came to Bob Brison, was that he was honest. "I have to say that every single horse I have purchased from him, was exactly the horse he described. He tells it like it is, he is one of the good guys if you know what I mean."

There is no doubt that the horse show community will continue to see the name Bob Brison and Fairview Farm in the spotlight for years to come. Brison works every day to learn something new and continually improve his operation and his horses and rider combinations. With a patience unlike many and a real love and respect for the horse, it is no wonder why so many horses work so well for him. Heading into the end of the season, be sure to look for Bob Brison at Kansas City and take a moment to appreciate his efforts and presence at the show. He has been the trainer who started so many outstanding show horses, you never know if someday he might be the one who starts yours.