

TRIPLE THREAT

Integrity, hard work & patience — *key ingredients for Bruwer's success*

By Sadie Fowler

Most horse enthusiasts will agree, the mere thought of any Saddlebred trainer making it in Kentucky, regardless of how big his dream may be, is a longshot scenario marked by challenges and stiff competition in more ways than one. Add to that scenario the young and aspiring “dreamer” is literally from another country and starting out from total scratch, the odds become even slimmer.

When the dream is actually realized and the Jackpot has been won, there's really only one short and simple explanation of how it actually came to be. This trainer with a big dream must be made of nothing less than pure talent — and equally as important, lots of grit.

If you're asking A.J. Bruwer what it takes to make this happen, he'll tell you his answer, and it's real simple.

“Great horses!” he said. “This sounds simple, but it is very hard to come by. There is nothing else that will get you noticed in a better light than to have a great group of well-behaved horses ... Without good horses, good staff and good customers, it's just not going to happen!”

“Cutting corners and not being true to your word will always come around to get you.”

There's no doubt about it, Bruwer stands among the industry's upper echelon. He climbed his way up the mountain little by little, and credits staying on top of that mountain to plain and simple hard work, integrity and patience.

“When you live and have a barn surrounded by the best of the best in the heart of horse country, it becomes clear very quickly that you cannot slack off in any way of the matter,” Bruwer said. “Hard work and consistency are of course the most necessary ingredient for great stock — but honesty and integrity, to me, are of utmost importance.”

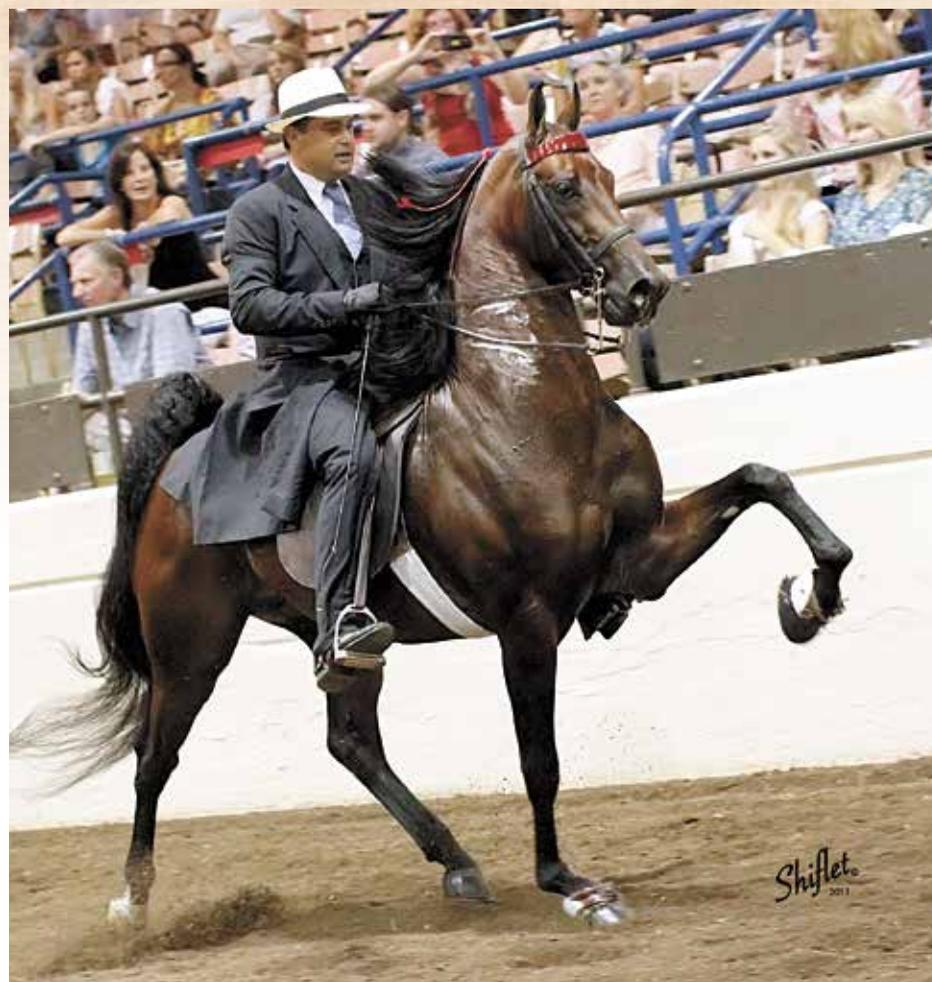
“The only way to continually maintain good rapport for your business in this industry is by staying honest and keeping your word with fellow trainers, customers and especially staff.”

CREAM OF THE CROP

When a talented, young dreamer desires to come to Kentucky to give it a shot, even under the best of circumstances, it's going to be tough. It's just that hard.

A.J. Bruwer had all the odds working against him when he moved to the United States from South Africa 25 years ago. He was young, had little money, no real connections — not much of anything more than what many would call a pipe dream.

But he dreamed big and kept his cup full — and eventually his talent shined through. Bruwer hustled for his American dream at every stretch of the way — and now, it's fair to say he got a pretty secure spot among the industry's elite.



A.J. Bruwer has followed his dreams and become a major force among the Kentucky barns. He is pictured here with the noted gaited stallion who is now becoming a successful sire, My Royale Charm.

Bruwer is such a banner name on the list of Kentucky's who's who that it's hard to imagine there have been any chance he wouldn't have made it. A success story like no other, Bruwer has stood the test of time and rests alongside the cream of the crop as he makes his mark on the world of American Saddlebreds.

When Bruwer landed in America in the mid-90s, he could have aimed to have a successful training establishment anywhere, but he never lost sight of the Bluegrass State, even when he had found success in other areas. Notch by notch, little by little, move by move, he finally ended up where he wanted to be, and he's never looked back.

“I fell in love with Kentucky when I first moved to the United States in April 1994 to work for John T. Jones,” he said. “After leaving and pursuing other opportunities, I always felt the desire to return — I knew it was where I needed to be. It was good experience for me to work in various places and barn environments across the country because it showed me the various components that make up a successful business.”

Bruwer also loves to buy and sell, and in his opinion, the market for that is most active in the Bluegrass State, where he can, within a day's drive from his barn, be just about anywhere he wants to be to scope out the next deal.

LESSONS FOR LIFE

Living in the heart of it all has taught Bruwer many lessons that have carried over to show ring success as well as life success. Above all else, he knows that honesty and being true to your word are key elements in achieving success.

"You have to be honest with your fellow trainers, customers and staff," he said. "Cutting corners and not being true to your word will always come around to get you."

Clients and friends describe Bruwer as being detailed-oriented, patient and having a keen eye for a good horse. As Bruwer reflects on those compliments, he says he agrees that details are important, but he says it goes beyond that — his focus on the people around him carry a lot of weight in his world.

"I've always been very big on detail — especially when it comes to the horses and caring for them — but being detailed also includes always trying to do the right thing for the people involved," he said. "It means a lot to me that I am trusted to look over such amazing animals for my clients and if I were in their shoes, I would not want a non-detail-oriented person looking after my horses."

"As far as having a good eye, I go by a very simple rule: I know what I like, and I never try to talk myself into anything otherwise."

By taking a few more minutes to cover the details, Bruwer believes you can gain respect and avoid many accidents and miscommunications in the long run.

Patience is a virtue that Bruwer has had to teach himself and has worked hard in doing so over the years. In fact, he admits he's still working on that a bit.

"As far as having a good eye, I go by a very simple rule: I know what I like, and I never try to talk myself into anything otherwise — it's a simple yes or no," he said. "Living by that standard has worked well."

PAIRING PERFECTION

Also known for having a knack for pairing amateurs riders with the right horse, Bruwer says it's not always easy, and sometimes the best of intentions still don't work out. What's his secret in doing this?

"Well, the most clear and difficult challenge to overcome is constantly knowing that no matter how well it seems a pair will work, sometimes the chemistry is just not there," he said. "There are many details and small things that could cause that to happen, so it is tough to keep those thoughts from distracting you on the greatest qualities of a horse and rider combination."

Bruwer has been very fortunate to have clients with him for several years, and he says the more someone is with him, the easier it is to cater to their personality and preferences or taste. In addition, he wants it to look like his rider and horse belong together.

"I actually enjoy putting a good-looking team together much more so than showing myself," he said.

PASSION FOR THE BABIES

Also passionate and talented in his ability to develop young horses, Bruwer says this is one of his favorite parts of his job. He thoroughly enjoys the young horses and tries to maintain a good balance of both young and amateur horses in the barn.



Bruwer (far left) has enjoyed putting horses together for customers even more so than showing himself. He was with Mark Strong, Theresa Vonderschmitt, Lizelle Hill, Vicki Reed and Hannah Smith at last year's Southern Saddlebred Spring Fling.

He enjoys every aspect of a young horse.

"There is something magical about a foal entering the world for the first time, they are so cute to watch as they play and develop into yearlings," he said. "The best feeling of all is when you watch a horse that you brought in from the field making a victory pass in Freedom Hall. It's even better to sell them and let someone else take the victory pass!"

Having been around more than a few years, Bruwer has witnessed many changes, progress, challenges and other natural events as life in the American Saddlebred world has progressed.

When he was first starting out, customers used to love to watch their horses shown by trainers, which Bruwer says isn't really the case so much anymore as people generally prefer to show their own horses.

"I've learned that is actually a great thing — it gives trainers like myself the opportunity to assist in making dreams come true, which is a very rewarding feeling."

BRUWER'S TAKE ON TODAY

Bruwer believes the Saddlebred industry is very healthy today, thanks to the people who have been dedicated and actively involved over the years. These people are doing a great job to pave the way and make a difference in the role horses play in the lives of the next generation.

"Our breed also owes a lot to the barns with big lesson programs that do a thankless job of promoting and expanding the love of the American Saddlebred to kids and adults alike," he said.

One question that often comes up among discussions at horse shows or back at the barn: Does the breed market itself well enough? For the most part, Bruwer believes the answer is yes, but there is always more that can be done.

"If you look at old photos from shows in the 80s and earlier, you can't help but notice the difference in attendance," he said. "With today's technology and ability to watch a show from your home, I'm not sure what long-term effect that will have on show attendance."

BEST OF THE BEST

In speaking about the actual horses he's encountered over the years, Bruwer laughs a bit — he's been around long enough the list is quite long in terms of the lessons he's learned from key horses he's trained.

"I could keep you here all day with the different things each horse has taught me over the years, but that is also something that a person can't appreciate unless they experience it for themselves," he said. "Horses have a way of teaching you the things you need to learn at different points in your life."

Reflecting on some of his very favorites over the years, Bruwer points to a few standouts as being Kalarama's New York Lady, Liberty's Magic, CH



Liberty's Magic won several titles with four different riders under Bruwer's direction.

Mesmerizing, Heir To A Kiss, Cary on Broadway MBA, Bravo Blue, Hi-Fling, Forever A Mystery, My Royale Charm, Hez So Charming, Cherished Asset and Ziggy Stardust.

Of course, there are countless others as well, but the most important thing for Bruwer is that no matter how long that list gets, he still loves what he's doing and feels excitement each time he enters the barn, and the ring.

Preparing for shows and staying organized, balanced and rested are challenges for everyone in life, perhaps especially for horse trainers. Bruwer says the only thing he can say that consistently happens before any given horse show is that his nerves kick in.

"I think that's about my only ritual," he laughed. "If I ever stop getting nervous, then it means it's time for me to do something else in life. I don't do anything different when it comes to preparing for a show — big or small, they are all equally as important to me."



Heir To A Kiss is one of several stars Vicki Reed has been paired with while showing with Bruwer.



One of Bruwer's favorites, Kalarama's New York Lady has been a world's champion in the open and amateur divisions and continues to be a force with Vicki Reed.

"The best feeling of all is when you watch a horse that you brought in from the field making a victory pass in Freedom Hall."

Like everyone else, Bruwer says he aims to have his horses at their peak in August for Louisville.

Speaking of Louisville, Bruwer says one of his most memorable moments spanning the decades actually took place at Louisville. It wasn't necessarily his best memory ever, but it definitely stands out.

"Showing in Louisville for the first time after breaking my leg really freaked me out, and if anyone remembers my ride on Royale Charm, they'll understand," he laughed.

Another favorite memory: Bruwer raised and trained last year's Three-Year-Old Five-Gaited Stallion and Gelding World's Champion, Hez So Charming. He says that was one of the best feelings he's ever experienced.

A LOOK AT LIFE AHEAD

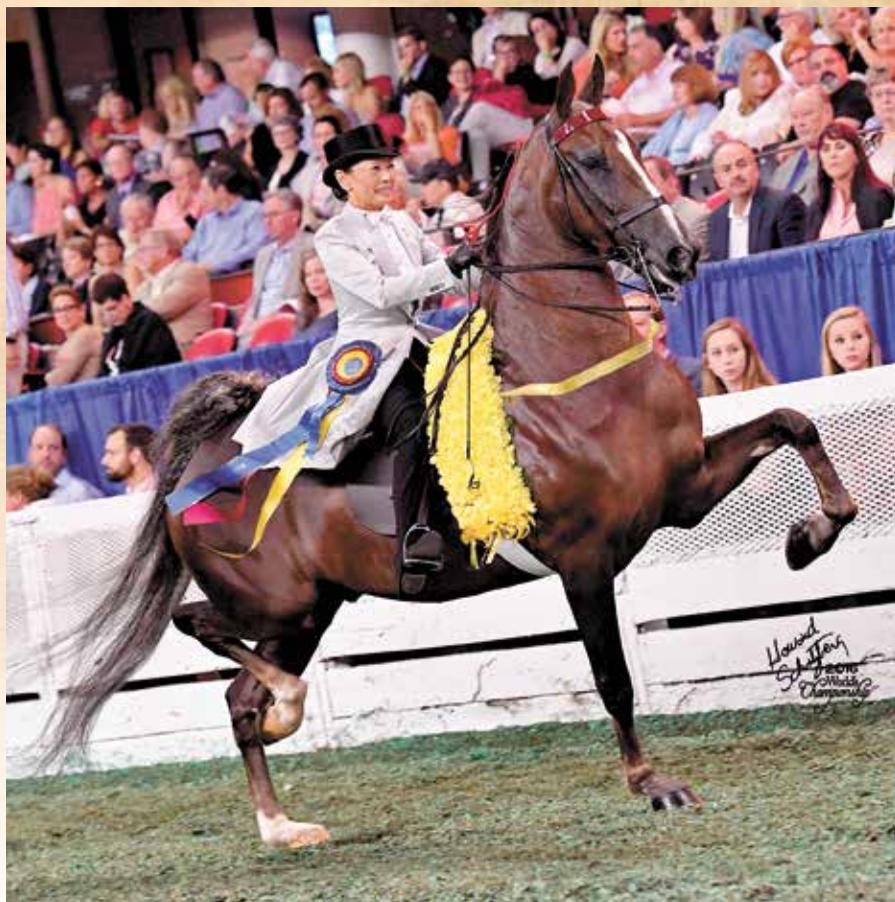
As the world turns, Bruwer remains excited and optimistic about the future. His goals include continuing in his role as a high level trainer for many more years to come. He would also like to breed a few more great young horses.

Staying at his peak requires dedication and discipline. There's really no room for anything other than horses and barn activities, Bruwer says.

"I think there are very few trainers who are ever able to completely get away from the barn," he said. "Nelson Green once told me that the best fertilizer for a farm is the owner's footsteps. That was one of those small antics that has always stuck with me and made more and more sense over the years."

Though he rarely gets away, Bruwer says he does enjoy traveling when time allows. He loves seeing new things and says he's had some amazing cross-country motorcycle trips that showed him a side of this country many never get the chance to experience. If he gets the chance in the winter, Bruwer does his best to go home to South Africa and visit his family and friends.

"I still love it there very much," he said, adding his favorite leisurely activities of the moment, whether here or there, include golfing and flying. In fact, he started taking flying lessons last year and he says one of his greatest successes of the year 2019 relates to that.



Theresa Vonderschmitt and Forever A Mystery were the World's Champion of Champions Amateur Three-Gaited Park team under Bruwer's direction.

"The fact that I flew a single-engine Cessna plane from Kentucky to the Bahamas and back home again to Kentucky was one of my greatest successes this year," he laughed. "I lived to tell the story, but I won't be doing that again!"

"If I ever stop getting nervous, then it means it's time for me to do something else in life."

MENTORS MAKE IT HAPPEN

It would be remiss to summarize Bruwer's life without mentioning the many great mentors and influences who have supported him in his long journey.

"There are so many people I have great respect for and have learned great life lessons from in this business, but John T. Jones is the person who helped me realize that I really could do what I love in life and make a success of it," he said.

To this day, Johnny is one of Bruwer's best friends and mentors. He is also the person who stepped in when he was hurt.

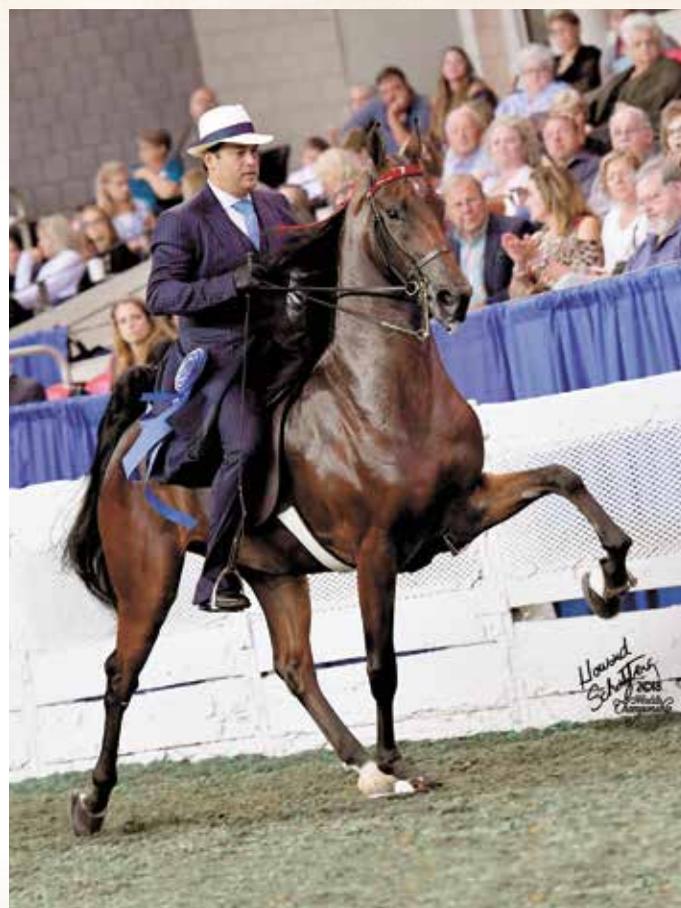
"He took care of my training barn like it was his own and kept business running as usual," Bruwer said. "He has been there for me every step of the way...it's very difficult to find someone like that in life, and I consider myself very lucky to have a friend like him."

Friendships, integrity, honesty and hard work are just a few key words that describe Bruwer's take on life and success. Is there one key principle or philosophy that drive him in his quest to live a good life?

"Always treat people the way you would want to be treated if you were in their shoes," he said, referencing a simple yet solid creed of the universe. "I left everything behind in South Africa — my entire family, friends and life — all to



Bruwer and Vicki Reed have teamed up for many show ring victories with several different horses.



Hez So Charming is a colt that Bruwer is really excited about as he developed the My Royale Charm son to win last year's World's Champion Three-Year-Old Five-Gaited Stallion/Gelding title for Theresa Vonderschmitt.

train horses in the United States. That was a very big sacrifice for me, so I knew I better do and be my best every day. Thinking that way helped me then, and it still helps me now."

In closing, Bruwer touches on another bit of wisdom that he believes helped him succeed, and it's what he'd share with anyone else out there with a big dream.

"You steal success with your eyes," he said. "Always watch everything around you, because you can learn the most that way. Above that, be honest, respectful and patient, because good things are in store if you put the time and work in."