

# THE 2019 YEAR IN REVIEW IS DEDICATED TO SMITH, ALEXANDRA and SANDY

# Lilly

BY SARA PIZZUTO

Merger Springs Farm has been at the helm of success in the Saddlebred industry for a myriad of years. Smith, Alexandra, and Sandy Lilly have been at the forefront of this West Virginia based establishment, carrying on a family tradition steeped in a rich history of over 100 years in the equine world. From junior horses to junior exhibitors, first lessons to first victory passes, building careers to building world's grand champions, the team at Mercer Springs has been able to put their stamp on all facets of the industry. Their achievements throughout their remarkable 2019 show season, with both American Saddlebreds and Hackneys, have earned them this Year In Review dedication.

A strong passion for horses was instilled in the family dating back to the late 1800s and early 1900s. Sandy Lilly explained that her family developed an affinity for "saddle horses" and used them as their means of transportation until the advent of the automobile. Her grandfather was a physician who rode his horses to his patient's home, while her father always had a Saddlebred or two for her to ride.

"He found a pony through his friend, Carl Carper, who was the uncle of retired trainer, Patty Kent, which he got for me when I was four," Sandy said. "It was probably that pony that cemented my love for all things equine. His name was Rex, and I'm told I couldn't pronounce 'R' so I called him 'Wex.' He was perfect and my best friend. I practically lived in the barn from that moment. I began showing him when I was 5, and never really had a choice as to what I wanted to do from then on."

Sandy's father eventually bought Mercer Healing Springs in 1954. The former healing springs resort was quickly transformed into a horse and pony farm later tagged as Mercer Springs Farm.

The desire to ride horses continued into another generation with Sandy's son Smith. He explained that a career in the equine industry was something that always appealed to him.

"I've just always been fascinated by horses, particularly fancy show horses," he said. "It was something that I always thought about even when I was at school, so I decided to follow my passion into the horse business."

Smith worked for Larry Barbee, Fred Sarver, Nelson Green, and Mitch Clark—all mentors that he credited for guiding him before he returned to his family's Mercer Springs Farm to assume the role as head trainer alongside his wife Alexandra.

Like Smith, Alexandra's family was well immersed in the horse world. Her mother worked Arabians at the family's barn. Saddlebreds were introduced into her life at age 11 as well as National Show Horses.

"Each new horse had a lot to teach me," she said. "I was lucky to have some very kind teachers. I got to do some catch-riding at shows, which opened up more learning opportunities and I also did some teaching along the way. I knew I wanted to keep working horses and showing as an adult, however, I didn't expect to be doing it for others. But, it has turned out very well."

Alexandra soon was in need of a change of scenery in her early 20s and found Sandy Lilly, who suggested she come to Mercer Springs Farm.

"I wasn't sure if I should move across the country. I had a lot of stuff," Alexandra said. "But she talked me into it and it was the best decision of my life."

Smith and Alexandra assumed the head training responsibilities together at the farm. Their 2019 show string featured a total of 44 horses under their guidance. A group of assistants continuously work alongside this husband and wife duo—many of whom have gone on to have successful careers of their own in this business. Smith explained that he finds it incredibly satisfying to be able to mentor many young equestrians and guide them in their budding careers.

"I think it's tremendously rewarding to work with motivated people every day," he said. "I think it helps me be a better horse trainer because I know that my staff is motivated to learn how to be horse trainers. That makes me all the sharper on a daily basis to try and be the right example for the right kind of horsemanship that I would want to see followed by anybody that would be associated with me. I think it keeps us all doing the best job that we can. There are first best and second best solutions and it keeps us trying to stretch for the first best solution with whatever the training situation is."

Smith, Alexandra, Sandy, and their assistants are fortunate to be involved with the careers of a stellar group of top show horses—many of whom finished their 2019 season with world's and national titles. Tango's Token Kiss is one of those incredible performers, as Grace Arnold's exquisite chestnut arrived in the ring in 2019 with three Three-Gaited World's Grand Championship titles to his credit. However, the plan for Token



Smith, Alexandra, and Sandra Lilly are big on having a staff of aspiring trainers who put a lot of care and dedication into their steeds. This was the 2019 World's Championship Horse Show team: (l-r) Andrea Harry, Hannah Fuller, Ben Chappell, Joe Ellington, Emma Fedorcak, Amos Williams, Sandy Lilly, Alexandra and Smith Lilly, Janaye Lykins, Tori Heck, Kayla Vogel and Brett Self.



Smith and Alexandra Lilly have had Mercer Springs Farm in high gear, continuing a century-old family tradition.



Sandy Lilly has been breeding horses since the early '70s and she was rewarded with a world's champion this year. Seek Your Fortune was the ASR Amateur Kentucky Futurity Two-Year-Old In Hand World's Champions with Kenny Wheeler and Brad Noel presenting the Mountainview's Heir To Fortune son.



One of the highlights of the year was Alexandra riding three-time world's grand champion Tango's Token Kiss to the World's Champion of Champions Ladies Three-Gaited honors for Grace Arnold.

Kiss last year was not in the open division but rather, he made his first foray into the ladies division with Alexandra in the saddle. At the suggestion of Arnold, Alexandra prepared to make her return to the show ring aboard the world's grand champion. Part of this preparation required rehabilitation efforts after having both hips and both knees replaced. However, riding a horse of Token Kiss' caliber proved to be a big motivating factor in Alexandra's recovery. She explained that she spent her days practicing with the farm's lesson horse before finally sitting aboard Token Kiss in March.

"The challenge was on to get ready," she said. "The new hips were working well and I began to regain my confidence riding him. Him being a three-time world's grand champion was on my mind, but I was able to keep my nerves at bay. He is a popular horse and I knew people would be watching, plus there are several really nice entries in the ladies division. We would have to be on our game."

Smith had full faith in both the talents of his wife and the infamous three-gaited campaigner.

"He's a true show horse," he said. "I also love that he was built to be a great walk/trot horse and he has great ability, so he is just the whole package. If you were going to design a world's champion three-gaited horse, you would draw one up that looks like Tango's Token Kiss and thinks like Tango's Token Kiss and moves like Tango's Token Kiss. Alexandra's always had a great feel of the horse. She is also great at presenting a horse in the ring. She looks beautiful on a horse. So her riding skills were not the issue. It was getting her healthy enough to do that and of course learning to ride that horse."

With both Alexandra and Token Kiss prepped for their 2019 competition, they entered the ring with an ambitious agenda- to vie for top honors in what was one of the season's most competitive divisions. The beginning of the season brought wins for this team at both Bonnie Blue and Shenandoah before they made their debut together in the fabled Freedom Hall of the Kentucky State Fair. The ladies three-gaited competition was in fact so steep that a duel ensued with the announcement of a workout in the over 15.2 qualifier. Alexandra and Tango's Token Kiss captured the reserve world's title, before storming into the ring on Saturday night for their championship. They felt the warmth of the winner's spotlight on the green shavings, as they were crowned the Ladies Three-Gaited World's Champion of Champions.

"Showing in the ladies division this past season was a thrill," Alexandra said. "To be in the workout at Louisville with two ladies who are legendary in our sport was an honor. I knew I could be third in a heartbeat as they are both great competitors. Tango's Token Kiss is a pro. I think a big part of what makes him successful is that he is a beautiful horse who looks like he is enjoying himself and would be fun to ride. Who wouldn't like that?"

The reigning world's champions were next on display in Hale Arena at the American Royal. In a repeat of Louisville, Alexandra and Token Kiss brought the qualifying red ribbon back to the Mercer Springs stall fronts before being crowned the Ladies Three-Gaited National Champions later in the week.

"Being second in both qualifiers and then returning to win the championships was exciting," Alexandra said. "Each class we showed in this season I learned more about Tango's Token Kiss, and he got to know me. I think in the championships we were both just stronger and maybe a bit more determined. I love showing and competing, there are so many details you need to get right."

Another sensational three-gaited team that indeed got it right this year was the newly paired partnership of Ceil Wheeler and Don't Mention It. Smith explained that this entry had never been shown by anyone other than a professional when he was purchased by the Wheeler family.

"He was a little bit of an unknown quantity for an amateur," he said. "He had won a world's championship for Emily Lee but they had only taken him to two shows-Louisville and Harrodsburg. I got to show him the first couple of times and then Ceil showed him at Shenandoah and at Louisville, so it was just an evolving



A big kid at heart, Smith relates well to his younger riders. In this shot he and Sallie-Mason Wheeler perform their post ride handshake ritual, following one of Sallie-Mason's six winning rides at Louisville.



Saturday night at Louisville was an exceptional experience for the Wheeler (Kenny & Ceil) and Lilly (Alexandra & Smith) families. Ceil rode Don't Mention It to the World's Champion of Champions Amateur Three-Gaited title and Alexandra won the World's Champion of Champions Ladies Three-Gaited honors with Tango's Token Kiss.

process of getting him just where he was comfortable in the ring."

The combination of Don't Mention It and Ceil Wheeler added yet another coveted garland of roses to the Mercer Springs banner with their victory as the Amateur Three-Gaited World's Champion of Champions.

Daughter Sallie-Mason Wheeler was yet another Wheeler equestrian to achieve success with this three-gaited campaigner. She debuted aboard Don't Mention It at the American Royal to sweep the highly competitive junior exhibitor three-gaited 14-17 division. Her remarkable 2019 season also included an extraordinary week in Louisville with her four five-gaited entries. Sallie-Mason teamed up with Man Of Magic and CH Bodidly to top both sections of the Junior Exhibitor Five-Gaited 14-17 class before returning to the ring with Man Of Magic to be named the world's champion of champions in this division. She repeated the same feats in the five-gaited show pleasure ranks with Blackout and CH Callaway's Brioni.

Fellow junior exhibitor rider Kate Smith came together with a new partner this year, as she and Rango Tango left Freedom Hall as the Junior Exhibitor Three-Gaited Show Pleasure 14-17 Section One World's Champions.

"Our two junior exhibitors worked so hard," Sandy said.

From young riders, the attention at Mercer Springs also turned to young horses, as their homebred Seek Your Fortune—a Mountainview's Heir To Fortune son—won his first world's title as the ASR Futurity Of Kentucky Futurity Amateur Two-Year-Old In-Hand World's Champion with Kenny Wheeler and Brad Noel presenting. Sandy explained that her family has been able to resume their breeding program in the last several years after a long hiatus. Her longtime friend Fred Sarver helps to manage the program with his Cornerstone Farm by taking care of their mares and colts.

"Seek Your Fortune was the second foal we raised from Off The Charts, who showed great promise as a show horse, but I liked her pedigree so

much I decided to breed her," Sandy said. "And I'm so happy I did. It felt great for Seek Your Fortune to win at Louisville. He is just beautiful and is a great training horse as well. We are so grateful to Fred and his wife Karen, and their wonderful staff for all they do."

Sandy herself also made a return to the show ring on the lines of Grace Arnold's fine harness entry I'm A Looker in Kansas City.

"I had never driven him and I hadn't shown for a number of years, so I was almost reluctant but it was so much fun," she said.

That fun and excitement felt when showing horses seems to be a common sentiment sensed by those associated with Mercer Springs Farm as well as the Saddlebred industry as a whole. Smith explained that he appreciates the support of his peers in the equine world—something that he said you don't often see in other businesses.

"Most of the trainers and most of the owners are very happy to see somebody else succeed with a great horse," he said. "We have had so much



Ponies have become a part of the Mercer Springs string of champions, especially for Grace Arnold. She is pictured winning with Heartland Jamin' at Bonnie Blue. They went on to be reserve world's champions this year and Alexandra drove Jamin' in the season finale to be the Hackney Pony National Champion.



George Anne Nash was called on to show several ponies for Grace Arnold this year. Pictured with Mercer Spring's Kayla Rose Vogel, Nash drove Mastercraft's Forecaster LF to the Amateur Road Pony National Championship.

support for Alexandra and what she did this year and so much support for Sallie-Mason with what she did and I think it's genuine and I think we try and be supportive of other people who do well. People really appreciate a great horse no matter who has it."

Those great horses that prevailed in 2019 with Mercer Springs Farm are a product of an incredible team that work tirelessly to achieve success throughout the vast number of divisions offered in the industry.

"It really takes a village and it has to start with wonderful owners," Sandy said. "Ours are the best. We're also privileged to have a terrific staff. This group is so dedicated to their horses and the horse's welfare comes first. It is often we find them in the barn after hours checking on a particular horse,

cleaning their tack, etc. And what a group of fabulous horses to work with. How lucky can you be?"

Part of that team includes Sandy's extended family that continues to each play a role in the horse business. She explained that her husband Tom is supportive of all they do, while her sister Dr. Clare Seagren has a veterinary practice that focuses on acupuncture of horses and small animals. She travels to Mercer Springs from her home in Kentucky once a month to work on their horses. Additionally, Sandy's younger son Wyatt stays in touch through his horse show announcing, while Sandy's granddaughter is continuing with her riding lessons.

Smith, Alexandra and Sandy's extensive family involvement in the equine industry and their passion for horses has been a crucial part of the success of Mercer Springs Farm. Their rich

history is unparalleled and something that brings Sandy great joy and pride.

"It just means the world to me to have Smith and Alexandra, the fourth generation of our family, continue the work which we have all loved and been thrilled to be a part of for over 100 years," she said. "We have a tremendous group of youngsters coming on and I just love watching and helping with them. Smith cautioned me about entertaining a particular two-year-old that is a homebred star out of Hallelujah Chorus last week, because I so love watching them work. I told him I sure hoped when he got to be my age-older than dirt- he would still be as excited about these horses as I am every day. I'm sure that won't be a problem."



Larry Hartsock returned to the show ring for the first time in a long time. Aboard The Big House he debuted at Bonnie Blue, winning the Amateur Five-Gaited qualifier and championship before going on to a top 3 at Lexington and a reserve world's championship at Louisville.



Nancy (l) and Ally Ehle have had several stars with the Lilly family. Ally and Save The Day were the 2019 Amateur Three-Gaited Reserve National Champions. They also won the Three-Gaited Championship at Devon and amateur championships at Bonnie Blue and Raleigh Spring.

Smith is a huge supporter of the Devon Horse Show, which provides a great audience for the American Saddlebred and Hackney Pony. He won the 2019 Five-Gaited Championship with Walterway's Mini Me. Mercer Springs has a long relationship with breeder Larry Hartsock, who has sent many homebred stars to the Lillys over the years.

