



BEHIND THE SHOW SCENES WITH

Barbara DUNHAM

BY SARA PIZZUTO

Often, it is a winning horse and rider team that is illuminated in the spotlight following a victorious feat at a show. However, behind the scenes, the spotlight shines on an equally important team—the horse show management. This team of employees is responsible for the development, execution and operational procedures that allow for each show to become a reality. Without their efforts, horse shows would cease to exist. Barbara Dunham has been a familiar face at the helm of some of the country’s most premiere equine events. Her dedication as a horse show manager has enabled multiple competitions to thrive, and allowed for the return of the upcoming River Ridge Horse Show.

Barbara Dunham’s involvement in the horse show industry began with a singular pony.

“My father bought my oldest son a Shetland pony and from there it went,” she said.

This kick started Dunham’s attendance at horse shows. She explained that her journey to horse show management was a natural progression. She initially arrived at each show to support her son but soon found herself volunteering and assisting with the inner workings of the event. The Portsmouth Charity Horse Show, a local show four miles from Dunham’s Ohio home, was where she began volunteering.

“I didn’t set out to manage,” she said. “I just was there at the horse shows with my son. You go to the horse show and you volunteer and then pretty soon you are getting into doing what we do. I worked for years before I ever got into managing a show. People would say, ‘Could you help do this? Could you help do that?’ and I said, ‘Well of course.’ And then here I am. I have done it forever it seems like.”

Barbara Dunham’s management roles soon evolved, and eventually led her to the title of horse show manager. Dunham had been leading the charge at the River Ridge Horse Show for a lengthy amount of time before the coronavirus pandemic swirled across the nation and forced the untimely shut down of the show in 2020. The unprecedented virus continued into 2021, leading to the shutdown of the horse show for the second consecutive year.

“We were sad because we had finally gotten it to a point where we felt it was going some place,” Dunham said. “It’s hard to get these shows together and it was just very sad. We thought it was over with. I just thought River Ridge is gone. And then things got better and I said let’s try this again.”

Dunham made it her mission to bring River Ridge back in 2022 and worked tirelessly to ensure that the show would indeed run. Dunham explained that she is a firm believer in

writing personal letters and making phone calls to try and attract participants to return to the show.

“I am a big note writer,” she said. “I would call and write people and invite them and I did a lot of note writing where I would tell them that we would love to have them come to our show.”

Dunham is quick to mention her daughter Dayne Maple, who she said has been an integral part in managing each horse show as a secretary and ensuring that River Ridge would return.

“I could not even begin to think of doing this without Dayne,” Dunham said. “She is excellent with the computers. She is just a great person and so good in the office. She is very good at what she does.”

In addition to Dayne Maple, Barbara Dunham works alongside additional family members who are all involved in their own way in the horse industry. They are all fortunate to share a common passion for horses.

“My granddaughter is working with the box seats and I had another granddaughter that has always been involved too,” she said. “Both of my sons show horses. Dayne shows a hackney pony. We are just a bunch of horse nuts.”

Together, Dunham, Maple, their family and the additional River Ridge staff are looking forward to a wonderful week in Ohio at the River Ridge Horse Show. Dunham explained that they added \$1,000 in prize money to both the Three-Gaited Park Championship as well as the Three-Gaited Park Pleasure Championship, which she hopes will attract more entries.

“I think that is exciting to have because we never have big money classes,” Dunham said. “I think it’s helped. I wish we could do that every year.”

Dunham also explained that River Ridge prides itself on its hospitality. She is looking forward to attending to the needs of each participant and equally thrilled that both Jimmy Robertson and Fay Lowry will be on hand to judge the classes scheduled at the show.

It is these class schedules that Dunham explained is the most difficult aspect to horse show management. She said that ensuring that each class is properly added and that the schedule runs smoothly is often her most difficult task.

“Getting that schedule down is the hardest thing we do,” she said. “I work constantly. I think about horse shows all the time. It isn’t just now. We talk about how to improve horse shows year round.”

The number of entries in attendance at each show is also often at the forefront of Dunham’s mind.

“We never get enough entries,” she said. “We are always looking for more. That is the biggest thing. I have always

said that if I can maintain what I had last year I am happy. If we had 300 horses last year, and now we have 305, I am thrilled.”

Whether overseeing a multi breed show like River Ridge, or managing the Gold Cup Morgan Regional Horse Show, Dunham explains that it is her staff that helps make the show an enjoyable experience for all.

“We try to be congenial and nice and we try to not run into any strangers,” she said. “They may be a stranger when they first walk in but they won’t be by the time they leave. We just try to make everyone feel welcome. And if you have a good staff, everyone will feel welcome. I have a great staff that works for me. We have some new people this year who we haven’t had before at River Ridge and I am excited to meet them.”

It is the people that she meets through the horse community that Dunham says makes her job so enjoyable.

“I am a people person,” she said. “Wherever you go, you just find more great people. They are all alike. They all love these horses and I do too. Wherever you go, you always run into someone you know.”

It is this community of competitors that Barbara Dunham works to hard to please throughout show season. With River Ridge and Gold Cup set to run this year, Dunham and her staff will once again look to bring an unparalleled horse show experience to all attendees. Dunham’s experience, efficiency, and inviting personality will aid in the success of each show that she manages as the gates open for the first class on the schedule. As River Ridge returns this year and Gold Cup once again takes place, Dunham and her team will focus on creating a memorable event that makes people want to return for years to come. “I want them to say ‘Oh, let’s go back next year.’”

1 Barbara Dunham has enjoyed a lengthy career as a horse show manager. Her work has allowed for the success of multiple equine events. Jim Taylor presented her with the UPHA Herman Miles Horse Show Manager of the Year Award at the 2014 Convention.

2 The River Ridge Horse Show will return this year after a two-year hiatus. Dunham is looking forward to more memorable moments with horse enthusiasts. When Don Harris was honored ringside in 2018 she was by his side and counts that as one of many favorite memories.

3 Dunham works alongside her daughter Dayne Maple when managing each show. She credits Maple for being an integral part of her horse show management team.