





# HIGH CALIBER STABLES

## A High Quality Experience

BY SARA PIZZUTO

**I**n its simplest form, the famed High Caliber Stables began with High Caliber. However, the name isn't referring to the high quality of horses and riders who have reached the pinnacle of success under the direction of head trainers Mary and Evan Orr. Rather, the barn was named to honor Mary Orr's first show horse, High Caliber.

"He died the day I married Evan," Mary said. "Evan told me that he knew he had done his job and Evan would take care of me moving forward. Evan also said that when we had our own farm we would name our farm in honor of him."

Now more than a decade after its inception, High Caliber has in fact become the ideal moniker to represent a barn filled with a myriad of accomplished American Saddlebreds. Mary and Evan Orr along with assistant trainer Kelly Lockhart and their team of professionals are responsible for the widely successful horse and rider combinations that make their home base at their Greensboro, North Carolina farm. They pride themselves in not only training world's champions, but in developing their riders personally outside the show ring.

Establishing careers as horse trainers was a natural progression for both Mary and Evan Orr. This husband and wife duo both began riding at early age. Mary Orr grew up in Fall River Mills, California- a small rural community in Northern California. Riding was quite common in this area as many utilized their horses to herd cattle.

"I absolutely loved horses which meant when I asked about riding I started riding and competing in barrel racing at rodeos," Mary said. "I was very slow and it was clear I might not be a rodeo star."

Still, Mary's passion for horses never dulled and she eventually landed in Red Bluff, California, riding with Shirley Hall. She was primarily a western rider, though she dabbled in all seats. Mary's love for all things equine continued throughout her childhood and she knew that a career in the horse industry was inevitable.

"I honestly never wanted to be anything else than a horse trainer my whole life," she said. "I have no idea where it came from. It was my passion. My dad always said, 'Do what you love because you will be doing it for a lifetime.' For me that was simple- training horses and teaching riding lessons."

As a student at William Woods University, Mary's focused turned to the American Saddlebreds and saddle seat riding with the help of Gayle Lampe. While there, she helped with the Callaway Hills sales and Biggins adult clinics, and later honed her training skills alongside Marilyn McFarlin, Peter and Kim Cowart, Virgil Helm and Cash Lovell. Her husband Evan also worked diligently with some of the breed's best before the establishment of High Caliber.

Evan's journey into the horse industry began on a family vacation during a trail ride in South Dakota.

"I really enjoyed it and I came home and asked my mom if I could ride some more," he said. "My mom was an emergency room nurse that worked with a lady that had horses. I started by just taking a weekly riding lesson out there in Illinois and learned to ride there and just kept doing it."

Like Mary, Evan also enrolled at William Woods University, becoming the first male student accepted into the school. Following his college graduation, he then apprenticed for equine professionals including Bob Brison, Martin Teater, Peter and Kim Cowart, Tom Bombolis and Cash Lovell.

Together, Mary and Evan both assumed assistant trainer roles at Cash Lovell Stables. They then made the decision in 2008 to begin their own business. They began leasing a barn in North Carolina from Charles Leonard before eventually purchasing the 73 acre property in Greensboro that is now the current home of High Caliber Stables.

Their career as horse trainers have linked them to a plethora of world's and national champion Saddlebreds, with Mary Orr having early success aboard the highly touted CH Our Charming Lady. The mare's owners, Jack and Donna Finch were first introduced to the Orr's when Donna took her first saddle seat lesson with Mary in 2005. Under the ownership of the Finches and the training of the Orrs, Our Charming Lady and Mary won 37 out of the 38 classes they showed in together. With Mary in the saddle, CH Our Charming Lady was named the Three-Gaited World's Grand Champion in both 2008 and 2009

- 1 The Orr/Finch partnership began with one mare. Now Mary and Evan develop the industry's future stars with offspring from the Finch's breeding program.
- 2 It is all about family at High Caliber and that shone through with both Vickie Byrd (left) and Mary Orr (right) in attendance at McGee Bosworth's college graduation. The Bosworths attribute the High Caliber Family as instrumental in McGee's success both in and out of the saddle.
- 3 Mary's attention to details never wavers even right down to straightening a young Ellie Kangur's derby in 2014.
- 4 Evan Orr seen here on the rail at The Red Mile has many faces as he rides every step with each rider.



Sophia Anderson is new to the High Caliber family this season. She has enjoyed much success with Riverdreams' Spitfire including their most recent win at Lexington Junior League.



Mary's parents Debbie and Dan Marcum are an integral part of High Caliber. When they aren't busy keeping up with their grandchildren Debbie has shown both pleasure driving horses and ponies over the years with Dan as her biggest fan.



Almost a decade ago, Mary and Evan Orr were honored with the UPHA Young Trainers of the Year Award only a few years after the start of their High Caliber Stables. Jess Verrill presented at the 2012 convention. (photo by Jacobs Photography)



Everyone will always remember Mary and Evan putting on a great show as Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers at the American Saddlebred Museum's fundraiser at the World's Championship Horse Show in 2016.

as well as the Ladies Three-Gaited World's Champion of Champions in 2007 and 2010.

"I love everything about that mare," Mary said. "She was all quality. In the stall, hauling and at the horse show she was very quiet. She was all business. She knew when it was time to work. There was no trail ride or walk around the ring. She was there to perform. She expected the best of me and all of my focus. There is nothing like the feeling of riding that power and discipline."

CH Our Charming Lady achieved every top honor possible for Donna and Jack Finch and Mary and Evan Orr. She was the 2009 triple crown winner, the 2009 ASHA Horse Of The Year, and was three-times the overall UPHA Three-Gaited Horse Of The Year.

"She and Mary were magical together," Donna Finch said. Every time she went in the show ring she just got better and they got better as a team. It was just electrifying to stand on the rail and watch the two of them."

After her exceptional show career, CH Our Charming Lady retired and joined the broodmare band of the Finch's Sedgefield Saddlebreds in 2010. She has since been inducted into the Broodmare Hall Of Fame-being honored for her top producing offspring.

"Her offspring are so much like her when it comes to what they look like and when they are ready to truly fire," Mary said. "They hit their stride when they are ready. It is our job to read the signs and to be consistent. Just like her they won't let you down but they also do not like to be told what to do. They like to be asked. They also get better with age."

Donna Finch explained that she has found the perfect cross with CH Our Charming Lady and Undulata's Nutcracker. One of their latest offspring, three-year-old Sedgefield's Invictus, has become a standout performer with Evan Orr in the saddle this season.

"It's as though he has all of the best physical and performance characteristics of his parents," Donna said. "Every time he goes into the show ring, he becomes more confident and steps up and it's like he understands what his

job needs to be. From a confirmation point of view, he's exceptional. He's what we look for in a Saddlebred and he just thinks good. When Evan takes him to the next level, he goes there very agreeably. Our Charming Lady was like that."

With an ever growing barn of both young horses and seasoned show ring competitors, High Caliber welcomed Kelly Lockhart to the team as an assistant trainer in 2019. A native of England, Lockhart began riding at the tender age of four with her aunt and was quickly exposed to a variety of different breeds of horses.

"Riding and caring for horses was always my hobby while growing up and the barn was my favorite place to be so I decided to turn it into my career and I love it every day," she said. "The High Caliber family was incredibly welcoming from the start. The process of moving and getting to know all of my new co-workers, both two and four legged was slightly overwhelming but was very exciting and still is. I feel incredibly lucky to be around such amazing people and animals on a daily basis."

The trio of Evan, Mary, and Kelly work together to train each horse under their care at High Caliber. Evan explained that they, along with Pablo Guido who assists with their colts, use a collaborative approach when working with their horses. Their distinct personalities work together with the horses' best interests in mind.

"There are times when we look at each other and say, 'I need a break from this horse or this horse needs a break from me,'" he said. "So somebody else will work it for a little while and we have found that sometimes some fresh eyes and some fresh hands can be helpful. We definitely are much more of a collaborative team and I know that that is a little bit unique. In the long run I think it's helpful because we have different strengths and weaknesses and focuses."

"Sometimes working as a team means Mary might be riding with Evan and I on the

ground helping and watching or vice versa,” Kelly added.

This training approach has aided in the development of both world's and national champion teams showing under the High Caliber banner. With the 2021 well under way, High Caliber has been responsible for the success of exciting new pairings in a myriad of divisions-earning top honors in all facets of the Saddlebred industry. Riverdreams' Spitfire and Sophia Anderson have thrilled crowds in the junior exhibitor five-gaited ranks this year, while four-year-old Undalatte debuted in the five-gaited pony division with Anne Ellis Bohannon. Top show pleasure entries include Ro & Me's Heir Express with Bradley Marlow, Newline's Big Redd with Ella Reagan, First Lieutenant with Donna Finch and Sedgefield's Miraculous with Dr. Lisa Shorter, while Becca Turner has been campaigning Blues Final Impression in junior exhibitor park. Ellie Kangur, Dori Zandy, Aida Jones and Sophia Anderson are each becoming teams with their new three-gaited partners Beckon The Blue, Mia Dolce, Sylvanhall's Class Action and Say Yes To Success, respectively. Then graduating from the academy ranks this season are Megan Jobe in the saddle seat equitation ranks with Honor Code, Lily Kate Wilson showing in the 14-17 show pleasure division with CH Kalarama's Out Of The Ordinary, Kayleigh Billips riding Sedgefield's Belladonna in 13 and under show pleasure and Molly Gurling in pleasure pony under saddle aboard CH Seamair Premiere.

“Our motto is that no matter who you are, no matter what horse or what division, for people to be the best that they can be and for the horse to be the best that they can be,” Evan said. “Defining goals and what the horse and rider is capable of is most important. You need to individualize things to put people where they feel successful.”

Vickie Byrd has long been a client of Evan and Mary's, enjoying many memorable seasons under the High Caliber banner. Some of her most thrilling rides have come on the back of her late gaited star, Iconium.

“I met Iconium when he was a three-year-old,” Vickie said. “Steve Allred from the Carolinas

raised him. I loved him as a three-year-old but he was a lot. We went and looked at him and I thought this is not for me, not yet. So I got him when he was 10 and he was still a lot but he was the most fun horse in the world and he had the biggest heart. There was no quitting ever with him, not one step.”

Monnington Veiled Mistress is Byrd's latest gaited teammate, whom she along with Evan have excelled with in the show ring this season. Byrd explain that Mary, Evan, and Kelly work extensively with each of the horses in training.

“They put a lot in and they expect a lot from us,” Vickie said. “The more you try, the harder they will try for you. As I am getting older, Mary keeps pushing me and keeps that drive going in me, which I really appreciate. They are very honorable people. I just enjoy being around them. They keep me thinking young.”

Vickie Byrd said that she greatly enjoys the camps that Mary Orr plans once a year in preparation for show season. Evan explained that in addition to these events, many of their riders spend ample time at the barn in order to further their skill set. He believes that quality time in the saddle is crucial and hosts many large group lessons to prepare his riders for the deep competition and large classes known to exist at some of the breed's biggest shows.

“Our people ride a lot,” he said. “Because we have so many lesson horses, they can ride a lot on a variety of horses which can teach them things like your ability to adapt to a horse when you get on. We do a lot of big group lessons so a lot of our people are not intimidated when they get in a big class in somewhere like Louisville. It might be a crazy Friday night lesson at High Caliber but it's not the first time they have been in the ring with a dozen or more horses.”

“I work all of the time on horsemanship at home,” Mary added. “I love challenging and different school horses. These horses are my partners teaching the riders to ride all kinds of situations and behaviors. I love our group lessons with challenging horses to help bridge the gap of horsemanship and ringsmanship. When you have to keep a horse together and move around the arena all the while having 15 to 20 riders in the ring, it truly challenges you but prepares you

for top competition and the ever changing behavior of riding a thousand pound animal.”

Many of High Caliber's exhibitors immerse themselves in all things horse related during show season. Evan said that in addition to their riding lessons, their clients improve by watching their stablemates ride.

“You learn so much by watching, not just riding,” he said. “It's watching other people ride, it's being around the horses, listening to other people's lessons, watching us work the show horses, and understanding the entire process for most people that's helpful. Most of the people that are attracted to High Caliber love the whole process.”

Some of the High Caliber show exhibitors are a direct product of their large and extensive academy and riding program. This program, led by Meredith Ross, Jeanine Lovell, Lauren Blue and Abby Peterson, focuses not only on teaching basic riding skills, but on working towards personal goals.

“We talk a lot about attainable goals,” Mary said. “May it be entering the ring better, keeping a good pace, or not feeling left behind while showing their horse-simple goals that we can talk about after the ride. We also work hard to understand that our biggest competitor is ourselves. We are all built differently as well as think and move at different paces. There is not a 'perfect' position or ride. There is the best position for your body type to be the most effective. The goal is to know who we truly are and to push to be the best version of yourself partnering with your horse.”

McGee Bosworth is one of the many High Caliber exhibitors that grew up in the barn, alongside Mary and Evan. Under their guidance, Bosworth has earned world's titles aboard such show ring notables as CH Sunken Treasure, CH I'm Something Wicked, CH Let's Talk, CH Moonlight Memories. This season, Bosworth has taken on the challenge of teaming with a variety of young horses including The Dream Police and Undulata's Fannie May, all with Evan, Mary, and Kelly by her side. McGee's mother Julie explained that with their instruction, McGee's riding has progressed in stages.

“They taught her to ride, then they taught her to ride more



Even the smallest of the small are successful at High Caliber. Friends and competitors, Kennedy Blue and Kendyl Martin each took top prizes at JD Massey 7 and 8 year-old walk/trot academy classes.



Assistant trainer Kelly Lockhart was super proud of Olivia Horan's accomplishments with CH Really Really Red. The team finished their two years in the junior exhibitor country pleasure ranks with multiple world's and national titles.



Friendship is just as important as family at High Caliber and can be seen as riders are there for each other for support even if they show against each other like Corbin Bumgarner and Lily Kate Wilson.



Ellis and EJ have begun their riding career early as Mary hopes they will learn important life lessons through riding.



High Caliber has put together an incredible team of instructors, including Abby Peterson, Lauren Blue, Jeanine Lovell and Meredith Ross, that average over 300 lessons a week.



High Caliber Adult Camp is one of Mary's favorite events of the year. It draws riders from near and far for a weekend of not only riding but also team building, friendship and fun.



It was quite the celebration when CH Iconium a.k.a "Ike" retired at the NC State Championship. Ike was joined by Mary and Evan after Vickie Byrd had her final performance aboard him. Ike was one of Byrd's most thrilling horses to show over the years.

strategically and show and now they're teaching her to ride young, less finished horses," Julie said. "They allow her to stretch her skill set by challenging her. We call that adding tools to her toolbox. Mary knows instinctively when to push her or when to prop her up. Mary and McGee have blind faith and trust in each other. If Mary says McGee can do it, then they find a way to do it - whatever it is. That doesn't mean the road is without ups and downs, it means together they find a way despite the ups and downs."

McGee Bosworth has made countless green shaving victory passes in the hallowed grounds of Freedom Hall, she has been crowned the national champion at the American Royal, and she has had the unique opportunity of retiring two of her beloved show horses in Louisville. However, it is the life lessons that she has learned through her time at High Caliber that her family was quick to mention as most memorable. Mary Orr has become renowned for working on her riders' personal development just as much as their riding skills. The exhibitors under her direction leave High Caliber not only as better riders, but as better people.

"I think that all of my favorite memories revolve around moments when things felt insurmountable but still they found a way," Julie said. "I'm not even talking necessarily about wins. I guess what I'm really talking about is grit, resilience and perseverance. Those are traits McGee has developed and practiced while riding with Mary and Evan at High Caliber Stables. Those traits will serve her well in life and that's been the big goal all along."

McGee has since graduated from college and begun working in New York City. While she is still showing, she explained that she has taken what she has learned at High Caliber and applied it to her professional career.

"Mary, Evan and Kelly have helped me in more ways than I can possibly explain," she said. "In both horses and in life, they have taught me to be tough, to be a hard worker, to be diligent, to be humble, to be gracious, to be curious, to be willing, and most importantly, to believe that I can do and be anything I set my mind to. It is an absolute privilege to have coaches who believe in you, push you and challenge you to do more each and every day. Riding at High Caliber Stables has no doubt set me up for success in every aspect of my life."

Both McGee and Julie Bosworth agreed that a large part of McGee's success both in the saddle and in her personal life is due in part to the familial atmosphere at High Caliber. McGee explained that both Mary and Vickie Byrd came to not only her high school graduation, but to her college graduation ceremony as well.

"Mary and Vickie sat right alongside my parents," she said. "To me, I think there's no better illustration of the fact that they're my family. High Caliber Stables is most definitely a family. We love like a family loves. We fight like a family fights. But, at the end of the day, we are all so close and supportive in all aspects of life, riding and not. I believe that is a very rare and special aspect of having horses at High Caliber Stables."

"Mary, Evan, Vickie Byrd, Pablo and the entire High Caliber family have helped us raise McGee," Julie added. "We all 'ride the roller coaster' of highs and lows

together. McGee is an only child but all the kids, of all ages, have taught her to be part of a big family. And the adults have been the very best of role models. We consider Mary and Evan to be a real part of the parenting team and we hope to be the same for their children EJ and Ellis."

Mary and Evan's two young children, EJ and Ellis, are fortunate to grow up in a supportive community like High Caliber. Though still young, they have begun to learn to ride thanks to Meredith Ross. Mary hopes that through their riding, they, like all High Caliber exhibitors, learn important life lessons.

"They are already learning the 'basics' of paying attention to their teacher, taking care of their horse and saying thank you," Mary said. "No matter what they do, those are important things to learn."

Both Ellis and EJ have a positive environment at High Caliber Stables in which to learn and grow thanks to the efforts of their parents. The Orr's talents as horse trainers coupled with their rapport with their students and their strong desire for them to reach their personal goals have enabled High Caliber Stables to be one of the premiere destinations for American Saddlebred enthusiasts. What began with High Caliber, Mary's horse, has turned into a thriving facility featuring high caliber equine performers, high quality exhibitors, and a team of highly competent professionals focused on promoting the future of their horses and the future of their breed.

