

# Marilyn MACFARLANE



Multi-Faceted,  
Multi-Talented,  
Multi-Phenomenal

BY BOB FUNKHOUSER | PHOTO BY ERIN RUDDER PHOTOGRAPHY

**I**conic...Independent...Strong-Willed...Principled...Compassionate...Determined...Fair...Creative...Fun-Loving

Some of those closest to the late Marilyn Macfarlane painted a picture of the woman who from an early age knew what she wanted and jumped right into the male-dominated world of training horses, making a career, which included more than 300 world's and national titleholders in the performance, roadster, and equitation divisions.

However, the story of the fiery redhead is not the titles and accolades, it's the path she took to get there and the reason why she did this to begin with, the LOVE of the horse.

She arrived in this world on November 18, 1945, the daughter of Ralph and Christine Martin of Charleston, West Virginia. After her first pony ride, horses became a focus. First it was the standard of the day - a Shetland pony. Then, on a trip to a local stable with her Girl Scout troop, she was exposed to her first American Saddlebred and it was all over from there.

Lessons at the local Coonskin Stables led to a lot of creative and persuasive sales jobs to her father who eventually broke down and bought her first horse, Red Velvet. "Red Velvet was a three-year-old wild thing no child should have come in contact with," Macfarlane described in an earlier Horse World interview.

The story goes that she bugged her father so much to go the stable, which was just up the mountain from their home, that he agreed to let her drive the family station wagon (even though she was still underage) as long as her mother didn't find out. She found a way to make things work when it came to horses and Red Velvet was one of several horses to spend 30-some years with Macfarlane because of her ultimate care.

It wasn't long before the 16-year-old equestrienne, with encouragement from her father, was teaching lessons to local riders from her own Breezy Knoll Stables and that money helped pay the way to ride two seasons with the legendary Helen Crabtree with her dad making the drive from West Virginia to Kentucky nearly every Saturday.

"I knew she had a lot of talent from the beginning," said Mrs. Crabtree in that Horse World feature. "She had no expensive horses, nor a lot of money behind her. She simply made the most of what she had and learned from everything she ever got on. Even at that time, Marilyn had a lesson program going in West Virginia. She wanted to learn how to teach and really soaked up what I was talking about. Then we would sit and discuss the philosophy of teaching and training. That was of great importance to her, because she knew exactly what she wanted, even at that early age."

In addition to riding with Crabtree and giving lessons at her Breezy Knoll Stables, she graduated from Morris Harvey College with a B.A. in Education. Rachel Wolford was one of Marilyn Martin's early students in Charleston. She also accompanied her to Rossville, Georgia, when Martin was offered an opportunity to work at John L. Hutchinson's Happy Valley Stables alongside greats like Sam Brannon, Lloyd Teater, David Kerger, and Eddie B. Womble.

The Valley was a great experience for the aspiring horsewoman who won her first personal reserve world's championship while there, in addition to instructing Debbie Cowan to a Louisville equitation win and training performance world's champions for the Cowan family. After building some of her own clientele at The Valley, she left for Kentucky in 1974, leasing stalls at Charlie Smith's before eventually

Marilyn Macfarlane left behind a large family of friends and former students who have been forever changed because of their time with the Lady of Walnut Way.



Kristen Stivers (l) presented Marilyn with the 2012 UPHA Helen K. Crabtree Instructor Hall of Fame award, one of several honors she earned throughout her career. This one was especially meaningful as Marilyn rode with Crabtree as a youth.



From the time she could sit on a pony, the Charleston, West Virginia native knew she wanted horses to be a part of her life.



Not only did Marilyn ride with Helen Crabtree, she later did clinics and other events with the iconic trainer/instructor.



Presented by Polly Holm (front left), Marilyn was the recipient of the Audrey Gutridge Award, which recognizes outstanding women in the show horse world. She was accompanied by (L-R) Randi Stuart Wightman, Steve Macfarlane, Rachel Vetter, and Nancy McConnell.



Always stunningly turned out, Marilyn enjoyed 22 great years together in the horse industry with husband, the late Steve Macfarlane. He passed away January 11, 2006.

buying her own property, which became known as Walnut Way Farm.

Making brave moves throughout her career, Macfarlane, on the recommendation of Mrs. Crabtree to the Farm Bureau, was the first single woman in Shelby County to acquire a bank loan for a farm. With a lot of work, she turned a 10-stall dairy barn and a worn 100-year-old home with several acres into a showplace, with her elegant touch and eye for beauty everywhere.

"We'd work horses all day and then go to the barn, hammer nails and build stalls," recalled Rachel (Wolford) Vetter from the Horse World interview. "I was a teenager and she was in her 20s; I remember wanting to go to bed so badly, but I'd never tell her."

Vetter recently told the story of how she started with Macfarlane back when she was a Martin in Charleston. "I didn't want to ride. My mother took me to the barn for riding lessons because she didn't believe in baby sitters. Marilyn's philosophy from the start was that students would get their own horses ready and she expected me to go into a stall with a horse named Tiger and get him ready. I was just leaning up against the barn and Marilyn came up to me and asked why I wasn't in the stall getting my horse ready. I told her I didn't want to ride and she looked right at me and said, 'Guess what? You're going to ride.'

"I've spent the next 55 years learning you don't say no to Marilyn."

Hands on with their horses was a staple of Macfarlane's teaching philosophy and that went for the rider whose family barely had enough



Many of her former students say Marilyn was like a mom to them. She is pictured here with Susi (Rambler) Day aboard CH Coaltown Prince, along with Jana Weir and Cathy Coniglio.



A compassionate animal lover is one of several descriptions fitting Marilyn. Horses (of all kinds), dogs, and swans were among God's creatures who felt her kindness.

money to take lessons to the rider whose family owned multiple world's champions. She didn't differentiate.

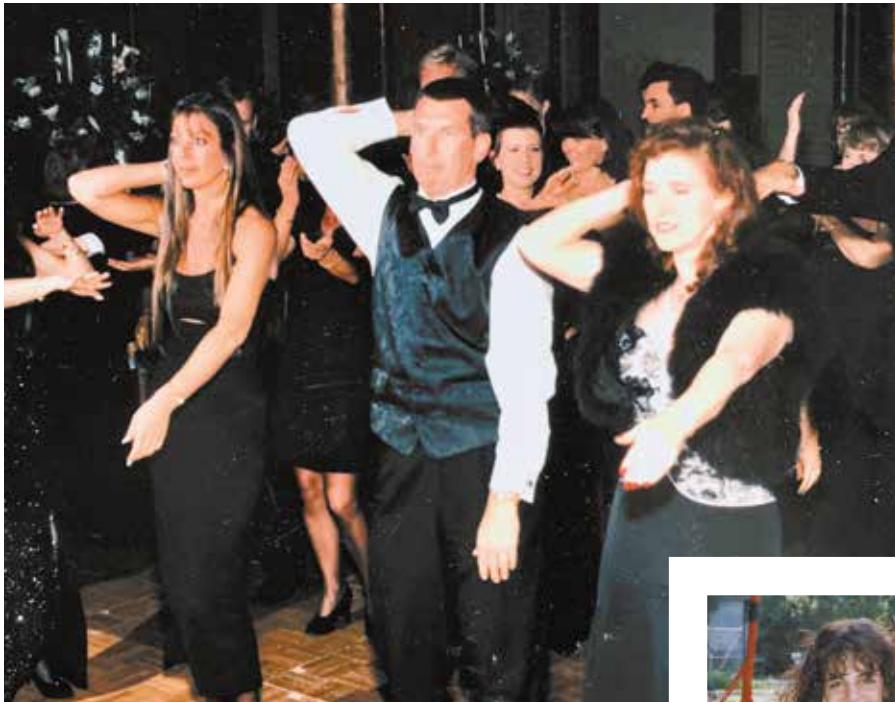
"She also impressed upon us that we 'ride for the ride, not the win,'" said Vetter. "She was just as happy if we got a low ribbon as long as we improved upon one thing. After you showed you started rubbing your horse out and she asked, 'What is the best thing we did and what was the worst thing we did and how do we improve?'

Susi (Rambler) Day moved to Walnut Way from Florida with good friend Erin Rudder when she was about 13. "My love for the horse came before the horse show and her philosophy was a perfect match for me," explained Day. "Ultimately the horse and their needs come first. Marilyn created a formula for her business with that philosophy and like Mrs. Crabtree, she taught you the proper way to ride. Because she was such a role model for me we've taken that philosophy and applied it to our own business."

"She was willing to say what needed to be said and didn't sugarcoat it, which commanded the respect of her riders. You wanted to do well for her. She was like a second mom to many of us. That was threatening to some parents but it's why we worked so hard for her."

The Rambler family and Macfarlane had many great times together. Among them was campaigning Susi's beloved world's champion CH Coaltown Prince.

"God had a different plan for Marilyn," added Erin Rudder. "She never had her own children but she had thousands of students who became her



Fun-loving Marilyn never saw a dance floor she didn't like. Alongside Cheryl Friedman and Brad Seacrist, she was cutting a rug at Bret and Susi Day's wedding.

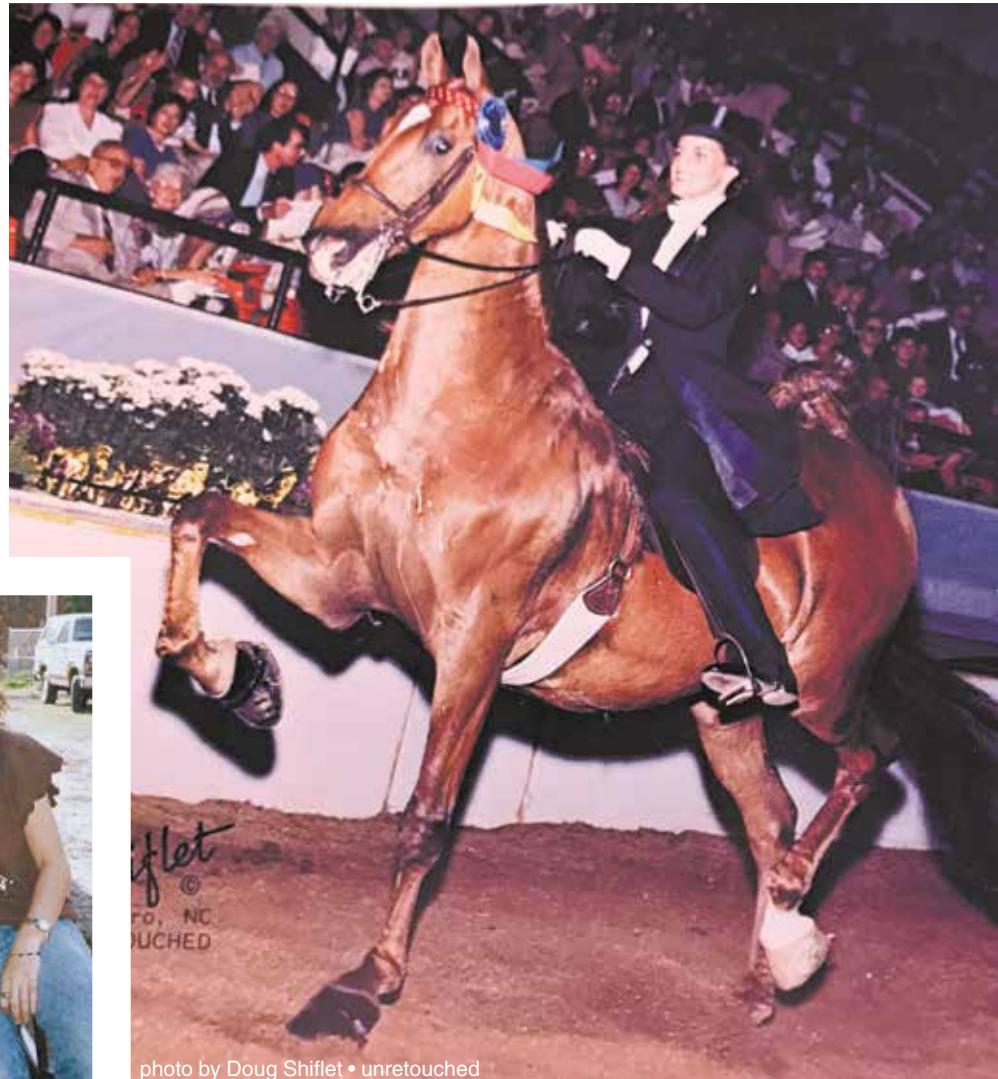


photo by Doug Shiflet • unretouched

What a team determined team Marilyn and Erin Rudder made. They worked on Erin's dad to acquire and keep for more than one season, the great, but tough, CH Burning Tree's Starcrost. In 1984 and '85, they represented Walnut Way with 15 Saddle Seat Equitation Championships as well as the '84 World's Champion of Champions Senior Saddle Seat Equitation title.



She didn't show as much as some trainers but when she did, Marilyn made it count. In 1998, aboard CH Attache's Three Of A Kind, she brought down the house at Lexington Junior League.

children. She made time for everyone; made you feel important no matter who you were.

"She was my second mom. I had lost mine at 14 and Marilyn took me under her wings. She was a strong, independent woman. I didn't have a female figure in my life, she was it."

Rudder, like all Walnut Way riders, has many great stories reflecting her love and appreciation for Macfarlane. "When I found out Joy Schaefer was selling Burning Tree's Starcrost I just had to have him. I talked to Marilyn about it and she said he would be tough to equitate but she was game to try. We both worked on my dad and he finally gave in and said we had one year and then we were selling him.

"After Madison Square Garden that year I had back surgery and was supposed to show Starcrost for the first time at Miami in the spring. I rode him for the first time the night before my class. We went undefeated that year until we got to Kansas City and Madison Square Garden where he was a bear.

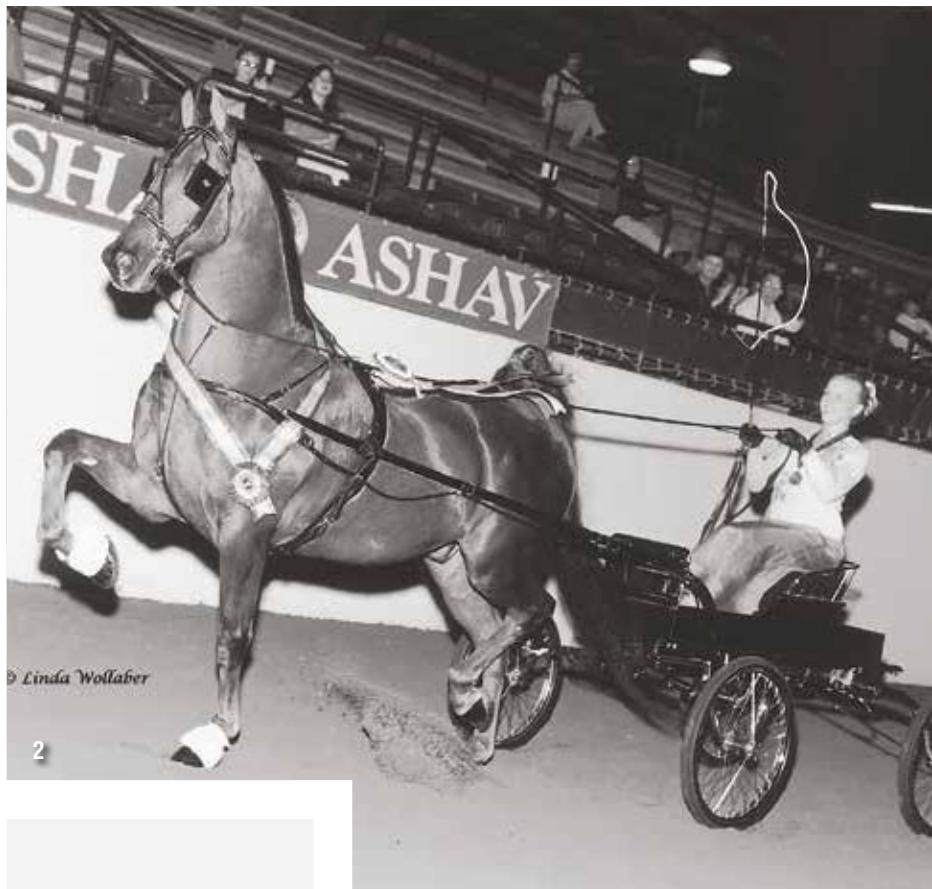
"I begged my dad for just one more year telling him we could do this. He made me sign a contract and it had all kinds of stipulations like good grades when my grades were crap. Marilyn stayed on my butt and I got all Bs, which was amazing for me.

"She had to be very creative with Starcrost's bits. He was very tricky in the bridle and she developed a couple of different bits that worked. She also made us work very hard. Her lessons were so hard, but they were creative and fun. She

made you want more. I remember that second year we were in New York for the Good Hands Finals and we had an appointment to go riding in Central Park on the day of the Finals. When I got up it was raining, which I didn't mind, thinking we wouldn't go riding. We went anyway and when I got to my horse there weren't any stirrups on the saddle. I looked at the guy and asked where the stirrups were. He looked at Marilyn who just smiled at me and said, 'They didn't forget the stirrups.' I thought, 'Great, here I am in the middle of New York City riding in the rain with no stirrups.' We rode in Central Park for an hour. That's what I loved about her; she made you physically and mentally tough. It was always, 'You can do this.'

These were just a few of the thoughts and stories of Marilyn Macfarlane, the trainer/instructor. There was also Marilyn Macfarlane, the wife. On a trip to the west coast to visit Avis Girdler, she was introduced to Steve Macfarlane, an accomplished horseman in his own right. They would eventually marry and Walnut Way East and Walnut Way West were established. They had a great time showing road horses, ponies, and eventually Friesians before Steve was taken from this earth too early.

It was during their time together that Marilyn became the first woman to win the Roadster To Bike World's Grand Championship, a title she won with their beloved Shining Brightly. She was somewhat of a contradiction in the roadster ring. While showing Hackneys and driving teams she was always so elegant and proper. When she donned the silks, get out of her way!



**1&2** Rachel Wolford was Marilyn's first world's champion, winning senior world's champion of champions title in 1976. Her daughter Dana Vetter (pictured driving Banter) and son Cory would benefit from Marilyn's instruction years later.

**3** Friesians became one of Marilyn's passions in the latter part of her career. She was instrumental in getting classes at American Saddlebred shows, in addition to competing in high-end driving competitions at places like Devon and the Royal Winter Fair, as well as enjoying them around the farm in the snow.

**4** The elegance of Marilyn was well-suited for a viceroy and stunning Hackney Pony. Fancy Ribbons (pictured) was one of several Hackney stars she owned, trained, and exhibited.

**5** Marilyn and Braveheart dominated the roadster division for several seasons in the mid-2000s, including this world's champion ladies performance in 2004 and a couple of reserve world's grand champion titles.



# I knew SHE HAD A LOT OF talent FROM THE beginning

**6** Marilyn and Steve both had great success with the legendary Shining Brightly who Marilyn drove to the 1994 World's Grand Champion Roadster To Bike title, in addition to the world's champion stallion/gelding and UPHA Open Road Horse Of The Year honors. That gave the great speedster 15 world's championships and 10 UPHA Horse Of The Year titles.

**7** Many young girls came to Marilyn for training and instruction and left Walnut Way as strong-willed, independent women who always stayed in touch with their mentor. (L-R) Jana Weir, Erin Rudder, Angela Graham Ballard, Rachel Vetter, and Susi Day are among many who are grateful for the lessons learned from their teacher (3rd from left).

"She was madly in love when they started dating," said Erin Rudder. "She just adored Steve. Because of him she got into driving. There were a lot of fun times. And then she's the one who started me driving. I was scared to death but now I'm driving two and four-horse teams."

Macfarlane was a winner of the Audrey Gutridge Award, which recognizes females who have made a major impact in the American Saddlebred world. In her words she was a feminine feminist and she taught those values to the young women she trained.

"She taught us what to accept and not accept in our life as a woman," said Susi Day. "There were so many areas of the industry that she made sure women were included. For instance, early in her career she was offered several jobs judging, but only the equitation division as that's where women judges were mostly used years ago. She turned those down. She only took jobs where she could judge the performance and equitation divisions. She didn't want women to be stereotyped as only equitation judges."

A few things people might not know about Macfarlane is that she was a great whistler. "She sounded like a song bird," said Rudder. Writing poetry and stories was something else the Lady of Walnut Way was very good at. Her hand-written pieces are epic.

Always giving back to the industry that was so good to her, Macfarlane was one of the early promoters of the Winter Tournament program and taking American Saddlebreds to malls to give the breed exposure. She was a well-known clinician and also created many, many camps at Walnut Way over the years for both youth and adults.

Erin Rudder remembers one of those camps. "It was probably two in the morning and several of us girls were cutting up and being noisy in our bunks so all of a sudden Marilyn is standing there in her house coat holding a broom. She said, 'Okay, if we have this much energy we're going to clean the house and for

the next two hours we cleaned her house. We got back to bed about 4:30 and then she got us up an hour later to go to the barn."

Respect. It was taught by example. "Marilyn never asked us to do something she didn't do," added Rachel Vetter.

With Vetter, Macfarlane started Walnut Way Weddings as another side bar to her busy life. They converted an old tobacco barn into a wedding venue, which has received nationwide accolades.

Back to her lifelong profession, the list of world's and national champions horses, ponies and riders is too extensive to put together without leaving someone out. However, as the above students have all said, she treated everyone the same, no matter how big or small the parent's checkbook was. She was simply a well principled leader who commanded and got the best from all her students.

You don't replace the Marilyn Macfarlanes of the world but it was her wish for the Walnut Way legacy to live on. The farm will continue with George Schmid.

"It was her desire for it to continue," said Vetter. "We want this legacy to continue. The plan was all along to beat this."

Back in '89 she was diagnosed and wasn't given a bright outlook but she refused to succumb to the disease. "She had been cancer free for 28 years," said Vetter. "We didn't see this coming. I'm going to really miss her strength and our late night phone calls."

Macfarlane left this world on her own terms, knowing the people she loved would take good care of what she had spent a lifetime building. And for all of those young ladies and women who picked up a horse brush for the first time or were given a life lesson that is still with you, know this, Marilyn still has that twinkle in her eye and says to you all, "Atta Girl."

Editor's Note: Marilyn's life will be celebrated with a "Hats off to Marilyn" at Walnut Way Farm, Simpsonville, Kentucky, on October 4, 2020 at 3:00 p.m.



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