



Katie Mair

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE EQUITATION INSTRUCTOR OF THE YEAR

BY SARA PIZZUTO

For a fortunate few, their career paths very clearly play out at a young age. Trainer Katie Mair was a mere 15-years-old when she successfully equitated her saddle seat equitation horse. Though she may not have known it at the time, this was the catalyst of a burgeoning career as a professional horse trainer.

"My mom purchased my saddle seat equitation horse, Ricky, as a green prospect from Pierre Loiselle," Mair said. "I was 15, and Jeff [Weatherly] allowed me to be very involved with his pattern training. I would take him out to a field and we would work on elements without any walls. He was a smart horse, and it paid off. He became pattern perfect in less than a year. Looking back, that may be the defining moment that hooked me, although I didn't realize it at the time."

Since then, Mair has risen to the top of the Morgan breed as not only a capable trainer, but a tremendous equitation instructor. Her riders' widely successful 2020 season featured two prestigious AMHA gold medal victories at the Morgan Grand National. It was these outstanding achievements that helped Katie Mair earn your vote as the People's Choice Equitation Instructor Of The Year.

Mair was fortunate enough to be born into the equine industry, as her parents already owned Morgan horses. At the tender age of four, Mair began taking lessons with Joe and Judy Dunville and later with Lori Marino [Beasley] at CJM Farms. Jeff Weatherly soon assumed head training duties at CJM Farms, with whom Mair credits as being one of her early mentors.



Katie Mair celebrated an unforgettable 2020 show season with her gold medal winning riders Elsa Heinke and Abby Marry along with her precious Corgi mascots.

"That was the beginning of a long relationship that fueled my passion for training and teaching," Mair said. "Jeff is a sweet and charismatic man who, along with Jeff Martin, recognized my passion and helped to develop me as a well-rounded rider."

Throughout her final junior exhibitor year, Mair showed in all three seats with her teammates JLM Rick-O-Shea and Scarbro Shylock as well as other entries that she had the opportunity to catch ride. Weatherly hired Mair to assist him with lessons and training after graduation—a job that she continued with while in college at Michigan State University.

"I always felt such a passion for my job," Mair said. "Jeff gave me so many opportunities that I am now so grateful for. I felt comfortable and at ease at the end of each day, even if it was a physically and mentally demanding one. I loved the reward of teaching a horse something new, breaking a bad habit, or seeing a horse transform both physically and mentally as I worked at it day after day. I also enjoyed working with my students and reaching goals and

dreams with them."

Though Mair had a love for training horses, she had always assumed that she would eventually transition to a job within her field of study at college. However, she followed this passion by opening her own training establishment, Sterling Trainer Center, in Michigan. Here, Mair is charged with the task of developing top horses and riders, with her name being linked to many industry greats. Two of these champions, Elsa Heinke and Abby Marry made their instructor proud with their achievements last season.

Elsa Heinke once again teamed with Queen's Over Ruled for the 2020 season—the mount that carried her to being named the Senior Saddle Seat Equitation World Champion and the UPHA Senior Challenge Cup Reserve World Champion in 2019. Though her junior exhibitor career ended at the conclusion of 2019, Heinke was still eligible to compete in the AMHA Saddle Seat Gold Medal Finals. With the help of Heinke's parents Rex and Kelly, as well as "Ruler's" owner Kerriane Adamek and trainer Tim Roesink, Heinke was able to lease Queen's Over Ruled once again with the hope of achieving her final and biggest goal of winning the saddle seat gold medal.

"With the future of the 2020 Grand National being uncertain, we just worked hard and hoped that things would work out for Elsa to have the opportunity to compete," Mair said. "Elsa is such an incredible rider and person. She is mature, warm, caring, and determined. Elsa has ridden with me for 5 years, and she has always had big dreams."

While Heinke and her mount Queen's Over Ruled were already an established team, Mair introduced a new partnership into the ring last season by way of Abby Marry and CBMF Sinatra GCH. Not only was this team new to each other, but Sinatra was brand new to the equitation ranks. Sally Beebe's horse had only been previously shown in the hunter pleasure ranks prior to being paired with Marry. Mair once again had to use her prime equitating skills, much like she did when she was a teenager.

"What I love about Abby and



Things have come full circle for Katie Mair as she began her own career equitating her horse and showing in equitation. Her dedication to the art of equitation has helped her students achieve their goals including Elsa Heinke's 2020 AMHA Saddle Seat Gold Medal victory.

'Frankie' is that we were able to train Frankie to patterns very much the same way I did with my horse so many years ago," Mair said. "I would teach Frankie certain elements when I rode him, and I would let Abby put those elements together by performing full patterns during her lessons. Abby is a calm rider who doesn't get frustrated so the pairing with 'Frankie' ended up being so perfect."

"In preparation to contend against the world's best, Mair had both Heinke and Marry ride the farm's lesson horses to work on their form and strength and then apply what they learned to their show horses. However, in addition to their physical preparedness, Mair worked with both riders on the mental component of competing.

"Both of them are super strong riders so the biggest challenge in preparation was keeping them focused mentally," Mair said. "Abby would admit that historically, she would forget patterns. Elsa has a history of anxiety, but I do believe we tackled a lot of that in 2019 when she won the Senior Saddle Seat Equitation World Championship. My plan for both girls to address these issues was pretty simple—to spend time embracing the hard work, to practice extremely difficult patterns, and to talk things out."

Heinke and Marry arrived in Oklahoma City in prime shape and with lofty goals to achieve. In the days leading up to their gold medal final offerings, Mair made sure her teams were fully committed to their riding.

"I believe that one of the most important factors in their success was the time we took in OKC to allow them to practice the patterns on their show horses," Mair said. "Although this can be challenging with early mornings or late nights, Elsa and Abby were absolutely on board with this critical part of my plan."

Elsa Heinke and Queen's Over Ruled had a lighter schedule at the Morgan Grand National last season, which ensured plenty of time to practice their medal patterns. They began their week as the Adult Saddle Seat Equitation 18-35 Finals Grand National Champions, before turning their full attention to the saddle seat medal finals. Mair urged Heinke to ride with purpose and precision.

"Elsa was soft and confident in the rail work on Wednesday night," Mair said. "When they excused the riders from the ring to return individually to perform patterns, I knew that Elsa and I were dying inside a little bit. We both knew she and 'Ruler' were capable of nailing the pattern, but we also knew that the saddle seat gold medal finals can be so stressful that riders can forget simple elements. I made her repeat her pattern back to me a few times, reminding her to take it one element at a time and to not rush, essentially to ride each step with purpose. Of course, Elsa did just that and

nailed the pattern. I cried and hugged Jill [Katon] and Elsa, and then we waited for what seemed like an eternity."

In typical medal finals fashion, the results were announced in reverse order. Elsa Heinke and Queen's Over Ruled were ultimately left standing, being crowned the AMHA Saddle Seat Gold Medal



Katie Mair joined AMHA Hunt Seat Equitation Gold Medal winner Abby Marry and AMHA Saddle Seat Gold Medal winner Elsa Heinke before the 2020 Grand National Equitation Parade. It was certainly a memorable moment for the People's Choice Instructor Of The Year.

Finals winners.

"When we realized that Elsa had won, Jill and I ran to the ring and hugged her so hard," Mair said. "I was so proud to watch Elsa accomplish something that meant so much to her. In that moment, she was living her dream."

Abby Marry achieved similar success under the direction of Katie Mair. The AMHA Hunt Seat On The Flat Gold Medal Finals on Saturday afternoon was Marry's final class of the show. Her memorable week had already included two grand national titles and two reserve world championship honors from both the hunt seat equitation and hunter pleasure divisions. However, Mair explained that the hunt seat gold medal finals presented the most challenging pattern for Marry and her newly equituated partner. The pattern contained an element involving a stop, a 90-degree pivot, and a canter on the left lead into a circle, which Mair helped them work through.

"Abby and 'Frankie' had only performed four patterns to this point, and this element really threw them off," Mair said. "We practiced the night before the finals and decided to take one more run at it at 7:00am on the day of the finals. It paid off. I realized that Abby was leaning into the canter start and that made 'Frankie' think he should be going to the right. Once we figure that out, they nailed it. That was a huge yet quiet moment in my career that I will not ever forget."

Marry and CBMF Sinatra GCH executed a flawless pattern, helping them to be named the

AMHA Hunt Seat On The Flat Gold Medal Finals winners, much to the delight of Mair and the entire Sterling Training Center contingency. Mair explained that both Heinke and Marry were able to succeed under her guidance because of their trust in her.

"I believe that Elsa and Abby are both beautiful riders with great horses, but the difference this year was their total faith in my plan," she said. "The absolute most important component to success is the communication and trust between the trainer and the rider. They felt safe, and that made my job so much easier. I never set unrealistic expectations of them, and we always had an open line of communication that was honest and sincere. The girls knew that I was always there for them and that they could talk to me, ask questions, or simply vent if they were frustrated. Both parties must feel that they have a voice and will be heard."

Mair continued that Heinke and Marry's success was also attributed to their fit aboard their equine partners. She explained that one of her biggest pet peeves in equitation competition is when a rider is poorly matched with their horse.

"An equitation rider needs a willing partner and they need to fit each other," she said. "Abby is tall, slim, and long legged. 'Frankie' is tall and big bodied. They are an eye-catching team because they just have that perfect fit. Elsa is petite and slim with a long leg for her height. Ruler is refined and not super tall, but he is deep bodied for his size so this made him the perfect fit for Elsa's delicate frame and long leg."

Not only did Mair's riders excel in the equitation ranks, but they were also top competitors in performance ranks. She explained that for her, form equals function and that her students' equitation skills greatly helped them succeed in the other divisions they competed in.

"Proper leg position is useful to push the horse up to the bridle, and correct form makes the overall picture look more appealing in most cases," Mair said. "I do not teach my equitation riders to pose. I believe that a rider's leg should move when necessary to move the horse into a more appealing frame. Their hands should work the bridle in a gentle and effective way to make the horse softer overall. Their body cannot be rigid or the horse will also be rigid."

Regardless of the division, Katie Mair's success as both an equitation instructor as well as a trainer is the culmination of hard work that began at a young age. Her first attempts at equitating her horse in a field evolved into the success of a myriad of riders on the Morgan breed's biggest stage. Mair's name has long been linked to equitation world champions and she further cemented her status as one of the best by guiding two riders to great heights in 2020.