

MARK AND TONI UTOFT

Great Things Ahead

By Erica Faulkner

Strength does not come from winning. Your struggles develop your strengths. When you go through hardships and decide not to surrender, that is strength."

— Mahatma Gandhi

The best is yet to come for Mark and Toni Knight-Utoft, owners and trainers of Utoft Stables. After a decade of training horses for Deborah Jahn and Seven Oaks Stables, Mark and Toni made the decision to open their own facility this year. Each of them have a long history in the saddle horse industry; Toni growing up in a family with a long history of Saddlebred trainers, and Mark learning to ride young stock at an early age.

Their story starts long before the decision to open a public barn. Toni, daughter of Maria Knight and Gary Shipman, was born in Roanoke Virginia. The well-known and successful trainer, Lee Shipman, is Toni's grandfather. "I am really proud of my Papa. Besides Mitch Clark, he was the youngest man to win the gaited stake at Louisville 24 years old, with Planview's Julia." When she was six years old, Bill Knight, husband to Maria, adopted her as his own. Bill and Maria experienced much success throughout their years together, traveling all over the country working for a variety of stables and eventually opening their own farm, Lighthorse Stables. As Toni said, "I didn't really grow up in Roanoke. I grew up everywhere, like some kind of army brat."

From Roanoke, it was off to Plano, Texas where her parents accepted a job working for Dale Milligan Stables. "I was probably about four years old when I started riding." Toni's first ride that she can recall was at Dale Milligan Stables on a horse named Gilbert.

Toni has been in love with horses all her life, telling everyone she could that one day she was going to be a horse trainer like her Mom and Dad. "I idolized them," said Toni. However, her parents made sure that Toni experienced life outside of horses, insisting that she get a college education in something that was not horse related. A plan B incase Toni ever wanted to change her mind and

pursue something outside of the industry. She attended the University of Kentucky and graduated with a degree in print journalism. However, her desire to be a horse trainer far outweighed her interest in journalism, so she pushed forward and followed her childhood dream.

Toni took a lot of victory passes in her childhood years, winning walk and trot classes and equitation classes at all the major shows. In 1994, she was named the UPHA Pleasure Equitation Reserve National Champion. The list of her accomplishments is great, however, her greatest accomplishment in her young adult years was that of the success she had with the bay mare, CH Lightnin' Lil.

CH Lightnin' Lil started her career at Lighthorse Stables, with Maria. In 2000, she won the UPHA Three-Gaited Park Pleasure Classic at Midwest Charity, the ASHA Three-Year-Old Park Pleasure Futurity class at Louisville (Maria's first personal blue ribbon ride at the World Championships) and ASHA Three-Year-Old Park Pleasure Sweepstakes, all with Maria up. The

mare was quickly making a name for herself, when the unthinkable happened.

It was during the Morgan Grand National Horse Show, where Maria was judging, that she passed away. A tragic loss for the horse show community, and for Toni especially. It was now up to Toni to show the mare at Kansas City that year and fill the shoes that her mother had left. It was the last leg of the triple crown for the mare. Stepping up to the challenge in the face of tragedy, Toni showed the horse to a memorable and emotional win in the UPHA Three-Gaited Park Pleasure Championship.

The passing of Maria was a shock to the industry, and for Toni, it was devastating. It was the start of what was to be a couple years of change and challenge, and Toni's connection with the mare was just what she needed to help her get through the tough times.

"I identified with her personality," said Toni. "After my mom died, I was a young single woman who was trying to be tough and independent and wild. But really, I was just a sad, scared



Toni aboard CH Lightnin' Lil, winning the UPHA Three-Gaited Park Pleasure Championship at the American Royal in 2000. This win was the final leg on the three-year-old triple crown. Toni's mother Maria Knight had previously shown this mare to great success, making this win a special one for Toni.



Mark made a name for himself in the horse show community with his standout performances with CH Manila Thrilla. They won the Junior Three-Gaited 15.2 and Under Stake class at the World's Championship Horse Show in 2003.



Mark Utoft aboard Tonosama, a horse he campaigned to much success in the park pleasure division. He won the UPHA Park Pleasure Classic at the American Royal in 2003 with this horse, before taking off his mane and moving to the three-gaited division.

little girl under that fiery curly hair!" Not unlike Lil, who put on a tough front but as Toni says, "was sweet under that tough exterior."

Lil and Toni also had a common denominator. Both had lost their mothers. When Lil was just a baby, her mother was in a freak accident and was killed by lightning. Thus, her name, CH Lightnin' Lil.

"We both were trying to be so tough, to appear like we didn't need help," said Toni. "I trusted her and she trusted me." It was this trust and commitment that eventually led to the mare winning at Louisville again, this time in the adult three-gaited show pleasure division with owner Nicole Beltz. The win was very emotional for Toni.

"My mom had won her first world's championship blue with this mare, and when she won in show pleasure, it was the first Louisville blue for a horse I trained. And to top it off, it was Nicole's first win on the green shavings as well."

Watching her best friend Nicole Beltz leave freedom hall as the champion that year, was a moment that Toni will never forget.

"The Beltz family followed me after Lighthorse Stables got sold," said Toni. Out on her own for the first time, Toni tried renting stalls and working her own string. "It was just was not working at the time. I went to work for Jo Cornell for a summer and the Beltz's moved with me. They were my family. My support."

The Beltz family followed their trusted trainer again, when she went to work at Biggins Stables. "I worked with John and Reneé for two and a half

years," said Toni. "This is where my life finally started to look up."

Toni says it was this time at Biggins that helped her to refocus and get back on track as a professional horse trainer, but also credits this time as a time of personal growth. "I felt like I was part of a family again, for which I had been desperately searching."

Reneé was instrumental in the success that Toni experienced with CH Lightnin' Lil. "It had been many years since she had won the three-year-old triple crown." And as Toni said, "Reneé taught me how to put Lil back together again."

"The mare was special," said Toni. "She was fiery and smart. You had to do things her way." Today the mare is 19 and retired at Nicole Beltz's home.

This horse is just one example from Toni's past. Champagne Sue, a punchy three-gaited pony, CH Sammyshine, a well-known five-gaited pony, CH Trust In Love, a grand walk trot mare, are just some of the horses that touched Toni's young life.

Mark led a very different life growing up. His parents, Dennis Utoft and Dianna Hartman, held jobs completely unrelated to horses. "My father was a dairy farmer and my mother a nurse," said Mark, explaining he stumbled into the horse business.



Toni and her husband Mark, after a win with Marty McFly. Toni showed this horse to the win in the Parade Horse Open class at the American Royal in 2014, and the championship win in 2013. Mark also showed this horse in the park pleasure division, winning the Open Park Pleasure qualifier at the American Royal in 2011, out of 17 horses.

"I needed a summer job. My options were a fast food joint or Gib Holingsworth's farm down the road." Mark didn't have a desire to work horses at that time, however it was not long before he fell in love with all the horses had to offer.

"I remember my first ride," said Mark. "I was 17, and it was on an un-broke colt on a long-line,



Mark aboard Love 'Ya Man, a top three-gaited horse that Mark and Toni are training and showing for owners Megan and Stephen Dragich. This horse is out the mare CH Trust In Love, another champion that emerged from Mark and Toni's training barn.



Mark showed Seven Oaks Heir Show to the blue in many three-gaited classes over the last three years. The highlight being their win in the All American Cup Three-Year-Old Three-Gaited class at the All American Classic in 2015.

in a western saddle." Holingsworth saw the talent in Mark, and continued to put him on young stock. "He said I had good balance. He started having me ride more and more."

Mark was fortunate, in that during his time with Holingsworth, a variety of troubled horses came through the door, teaching Mark the unique craft that is involved with working a challenging horse, or fixing a problem that is deemed unfixable.

"Gib taught me a lot about true horsemanship. People would send him horses with bad habits and I learned a lot about how to fix certain issues."

Although Mark originally had plans to be a vet and not a horse trainer, he said he "was too impatient to do all of that school." And so, a career with horses just seemed the next logical step for a man with such a natural balance and ability with a horse.



Mark aboard the five-gaited star, Call Me King, at the FASH Horse Show, were they were named the Five-Gaited Jackpot Reserve Grand Champions. Diana Schaefer owns this horse, and today she is successfully campaigning him in the amateur five-gaited division.

Mark went on to work for Holingsworth for eight and a half years, followed by two years with James Nichols and four and a half years with Bob Ruxer. While working for Ruxer, Mark debuted the renowned walk trot horse, CH Manila Thrilla.

It was in 2002 at the Shelbyville Horse Show that Mark made his first show ring appearance with the horse, winning the Three-Year-Old Fine Harness class. Then, in 2003, Mark showed the young horse to double wins, once in the Junior Three-Gaited Stake at Shelbyville, and then the green shavings in the Junior Three-Gaited Over 15.2 class.

The success Mark experienced with this horse, helped put him on the map as a top trainer. CH Manila Thrilla was eventually sold to Theresa Vonderschmitt and he went on to win nearly every class he entered, including the Three-Gaited World's Grand Championship, which he won twice.

Mark also has a lengthy list of quality horses he has trained and presented in the show ring. Tonosama, CH My Special Sultan, What's The Deal, CH The Muffin Man, and Worthy Of March Madness are just some of the horses that mark has had a hand with.

It was only a matter of time before Toni and Mark's paths crossed. The Beltz family not only acted as second family to Toni during her years of emotional struggle, but they also acted, inadvertently, as matchmakers.

"Mark and I met when I was at Biggins," said Toni. "The Beltz's had two colts that needed to be started and Biggins did not have room. So, John sent them to Mark." Toni said John kept encouraging her to go out with Mark. Mark eventually stepped up to the plate and asked the young red-head out on a date. And well, the rest is history.

Toni remembers her first impression of Mark. "I actually thought he was kind of a jerk. Because he was so quiet." But over time Toni got to know him on a deeper level, and came to realize that the quiet and shy man that she knew in the beginning, was not who Mark truly was.

"He was only quiet and shy on the surface." Mark says his first impression of Toni, was that she had a big personality, a statement that most people in the industry would agree with. Toni also had some reservations about the fact that he had a child.

"I would not say I considered myself stepmother material since all of my kids have four paws." However, Toni has become a wonderful stepmom to Mark's daughter Emma.

Emma is Mark's pride and joy. As he says the day she graduated high school, is one of the most memorable days in his life. Emma has certainly acquired the horse bug from Mark, and is a successful rider herself.

"I don't really get nervous when she shows," Mark said. "I coach her like any other student and I am happy when she has a good ride."

She can be found hanging out and helping at the farm when needed, but as Mark says, she has never been required to work there, as he encourages his daughter to pursue other activities. Emma is a talented photographer, with 2017 being the year she got her first job as an official show photographer, at the Mid-States Horse and Pony Show. This fall, she will attend the Milwaukee Institute Of Art and Design for a four year program for photography.

Mark and Toni dated for exactly a year before Mark popped the question. They were married on Sept. 13 2008 at Hoppy Bennett's Undulata Farm in Shelbyville, Kentucky.

"Hoppy made a promise to my Mom that I could someday have my wedding there. He generously kept his word."

It was the wedding every girl dreams of. "It was so magical, truly our dream wedding."

Before their marriage, the two moved in together and went to work for Deborah Jahn and Seven Oaks Stables. "Mark was running his own barn, and I had been working for Biggins. And the opportunity came up to work for Deborah. And it just made sense at the time.

While at Seven Oaks Stables, the duo put numerous winners into the ring including Marty McFly, Seven Oaks Heir Show, Roselane's Top Contender, Walterway's Believe In Me, Cool Steel, Walterway's Saucie Sadie, Seven Oaks Spider Man, Last Cat Standing, Mystery Talk, and Coco Loco, among others.

Along with breaking the colts and campaigning Jahn's show string, they also handled the breeding operation at Seven Oaks Stables, as well as ran a successful lesson program, and handled about 15 outside clients as well. Seven Oaks Stables was a booming operation that kept them busy and on the go.

After a decade with Seven Oaks Stables, it was time for them to spread their wings and open their own training facility.

"Going out on our own was just a huge step further in our commitment to each other, not only as partners in marriage, but in business too," said Toni. "Buying this farm has been very exciting, but very scary."

She admits that change is not her forte. "I don't normally handle it well, even when it's a positive change or a move forward. I tend to live in the past" However, all things must come to an end, as she says, "it's the only way you can ever start a new beginning." And thus, Mark Utoft Stables was born.

Situated on 13 acres in Belvidere, Illinois, Mark Utoft Stables is already becoming a household name in the industry. The farm is an old homestead that was built in 1895, with the original part of the barn being an old dairy barn with a large hayloft. The arena was built in 1991,

and additional stalls were constructed off the arena. The house is a log style home, with a wood burning, stone fire-place that goes up through all three levels of the home.

Mark Utoft Stables focuses on developing show stock, but Mark and Toni also have a small breeding program at the farm as well. With two broodmares on the property, they are looking to the future with excitement as they wait for their first foals to mature.

"We have a filly this year by Diabolical, and out of a Desert's Supreme Admiral and Champagne Fizz Mare," said Toni. They also have a surrogate in foal to Trust Fund. Their mare, Second Star To The Right is the mother.

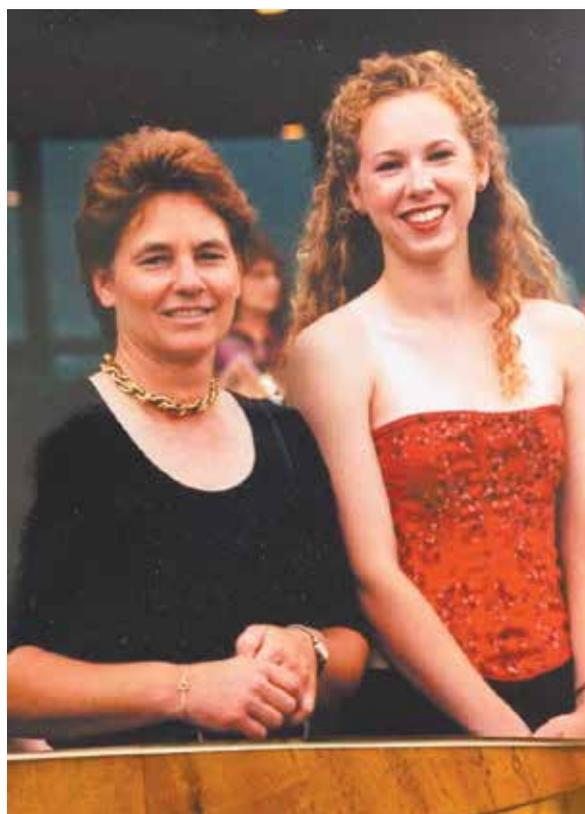
Mark and Toni have spent years learning horsemanship from some of the best in the industry. As Toni says, Bill Knight taught her an easy way to keep things in perspective when working a horse: "keep it simple stupid."

Maria Knight recognized her daughters talent and many times let her figure things out on her own, but always reminded her to take her time and be persistent. Mark, with years of experience learned from industry greats and his natural talent with young horses, completes a team that is becoming a strong force to be reckoned with.

It is evident that these two are on the road to success with their new endeavor. Top notch horse trainers, with a love for industry, and some 'big personality' to go along with, the Utoft's are on their way to following in the footsteps of some of the great trainers of our past.



Positive Proof with owner Karen Wilson aboard. This horse is one of Toni's all-time favorites, and she and Mark directed him to numerous wins in the five-gaited country pleasure division, including an undefeated start to the 2017 season.



Toni Knight-Utoft and her mother Maria Knight, share a moment.



CH Trust In Love is just one of the many horses that Toni Knight worked with. photo by Young