

Kent Swalla:

He Accentuates the Positive

BY ANN BULLARD

Nice guys ... finish first. At least that's the case with Missouri's Kent Swalla. Known as Skip to his friends, he has been a Saddle Horse fanatic ever since he was introduced to them while taking a lesson near his Iowa home. He was 11-years-old. In the 30+ years since then, he has become a highly-respected horseman, instructor, judge, loving husband, loyal friend – and world class character.

Skip's professional credentials are beyond dispute. His horses and riders have succeeded on every Saddle Horse stage, from the smallest local show to world's and international competition. He has counseled and mentored young people who today are among the young trainers and instructors to be watched. And his judging has brought accolades from those who have shown before him.

And he's had some interesting adventures along the way.

Newton, Iowa, would be considered a small city today. When Skip was growing up there, tiny might best be the description. His high school days revolved around school, working two jobs and riding whenever possible.

"Kent was so focused with horses when he was growing up," his mother, Sandra, said. "We had Quarter Horses and, later, an Arabian. When he was about 11, I took the Arabian to a [Saddlebred] stable about five miles from home. He pretty much took lessons on the Arabian, but when he got to ride a Saddlebred, that did it. That was the horse he wanted."

The Arabian did give Skip some challenges.

"It was good at dumping him every once in a while," Sandra said. "He told me, 'I'm never riding that again.' A few days later, he asked if he could take another lesson."

Linda Lust, who ran that barn, taught him well. While Skip started riding western, he soon transitioned to saddle seat and, in time, equitation. He developed a passion for that phase of the sport that he passes on to his riders today.

"We showed on the local circuit. We'd be at one fairgrounds on Friday and another on Saturday. I showed all over Iowa, at some shows in Springfield and the American Royal until I was 17."

"Mom did everything she could to have something for me to show," Skip said. "If we didn't have the horse for me, my Mother would lease one."

Skip learned and honed his pre-show organization skills while at Lust's. He bore responsibility for getting tack boxes and everything else ready for shows. He ensured that everything was washed and clipped. He began the habit of compiling lists at an early age.

Sandra says Skip "learned a lot by watching [his trainer and other exhibitors.] He's very aware of what's going on. He studied and showed equitation at a time when boys didn't really show eq."

"He never got a free ride but was hands-on all the time. It gave him a stable foundation and appreciation of what it takes to run a barn."

Skip did have some other interests. Sandra says he 'dabbled' in art and won an art award while in school. Still horses remained his focus. In summers, he would ride his bike to the barn and Sandra would pick him and his bike up on her way home from work.

The late Danny Breakbill judged Skip at one of the area shows. He offered the young man the opportunity to work with the late Sondra Moll at her Emerald View Farm in O'Fallon, MO. Skip's plans to attend college in Missouri initially went on hold – and later into the proverbial trash can. He had found his calling.

"I stayed there until they had to move after the flood of 1993," Skip said. "We had to relocate 100 head of horses off the farm. The late Jimmy Miller and



Kent and Stacey give back to the industry in many ways.



The Glendale Stables crew enjoys themselves wherever they go.



Skip rode his mother's Arabian, Prince Rigil when he was 10-years-old.



Skip started Gary Dickherber's champion pony, Rolls Royce, when working for Miller. Gary drove him to the UPHA Hackney Pony Pleasure Driving Classic Grand Championship in 1999.

a number of other locals came to help. Jimmy drove in to get the last of the horses out.

"The water was so deep you couldn't see the two miles from the barn to the road. We ran the pasture horses up a chute into the arena and onto stock trailers. On the last trip, we pulled Sondra's Lincoln with a U-Haul truck that had all her belongings we could squeeze in it. A week later, after they released the farm, we drove a boat into the arena back door and docked at the hayloft. Pretty much everything was submerged."

Moll elected to move her operation to Florida. However, Skip stayed in Missouri to work for Mike Roberts.

Longtime Saddlebred and Hackney exhibitor Gary Dickherber and Sondra were close friends. His niece, Stacey Prinser, was a horse-crazy teenager.

"I took Stacey to Sondra's for lessons," Gary recalled. "She showed Academy; then she met Skip and it went from there."

Actually Gary introduced the two at the Boone County Fair. A year later, Skip proposed.

"After they married, Skip worked briefly for Jimmy Miller before returning to Columbia to work for Roberts. I stayed with Jimmy for a short time; 10-years ago, I moved everything to Glendale," Gary explained.

Skip and Stacey have been at their present location through several ownerships. In 2006, the couple purchased the farm and continue operations as Glendale Stables, LLC.

Stacey is as close to a perfect wife for Skip as one can be. She is an excellent whip, showing both Hackney ponies and Saddlebreds. She has been quite successful with the fine harness gelding she and her uncle own jointly. Arc's I Can Teach You To Tango won a Louisville blue as a three-year-old with Steve Crabtree on the lines. Stacey has earned nice ribbons with their loving chestnut gelding from Missouri to Kentucky and points beyond. She also has enjoyed ribbon-winning drives with Dark Knight (road pony) and Extremely Invincible (Hackney).

Professionally, Stacey is a successful realtor. At home, she provides strong support for the barn family, from helping promote Glendale Stables and its clientele to welcoming riding students to their home when they are in Columbia to practice.

The exact origin of Swalla being nicknamed Skip is lost in Missouri horse lore. He does recall that a groom, Leeann Adams' son Mike Kelly, came up with the moniker. It's the name he's known by to everyone except his mom.

Stacey says Skip's motto is "Work hard, play harder. He's serious, but not too serious and is very much a control freak. He has his hand on everything and even does his own paperwork.

"Teaching is his passion, and he loves to judge. When we do have downtime, we enjoy just staying home and hanging out with friends. He loves to do lawn work and to mow. My lines aren't straight enough for him."

Horse people know Skip, the extrovert. Stacey says he "takes a bit of time to warm up to those he doesn't know. Once you're his friend, you're his friend for life."



Stacey showed GLS I'm a Pepper at the 1995 Chapter 5 show.

Janet Danuser became a client during the Mike Roberts days. She is one of his original customers.

"He's just a really good person; he and Stacey are fun to be with. If he had a fault, it would be that he cares too much. He makes it fun – and I learn.

"He and Stacey are very careful about what customers are in the barn; they want to keep a good group of customers. I have horses because I love to ride and I love horses. If I say I'm not going to too many shows, it doesn't bother Skippy. The days I have left to show are getting shorter, but he isn't judgmental about it. He is happy to have me at the barn – and at shows when I can go. I consider him a good friend."

When Jane Costello was looking for a trainer 10-years-ago, her husband asked veteran Missouri horseman and their former trainer, the late R.S. Palmer about Skip.

"My husband told him, 'I know Kent can ride but I want to know what kind of horseman he is. The response: he's a good horseman now, and is going to get better,'" Jane said.

Today, the Costellos have the show pleasure horse Miss Jersey Shore at Glendale. They also have partnerships with the Swallas on other horses.

In addition to Skip's training abilities, Jane Costello praised his personality. He's affable and a good sportsman. And he's great at matching clients to horses that will work for them."



A young Skip was ready to show a road pony for the late Jimmy Miller.



Skip, Kristen Cater and Don Judd judged the Blue Ridge Classic in 2012.



Skip puts the finishing touches on one of his Academy riders.



Skip and his team found Kevin at the Illinois State Fair in 2014. Glendale's newest mascot already has traveled half-way across the country.



2014 UPHA Young Trainers Erin and Reese Richey joined Skip, the 2014 Equitation Instructor of the Year, and Stacey at the National Convention.

Even more important, “He and Stacey are extremely ethical in the way they run things.”

“Skip has a good mix in his barn, and he wants it to stay that way. I don’t want to say he is picky, but if he thinks someone might not fit it, he won’t bring them in. He simply will tell them he doesn’t think Glendale is a good fit for them.”

One of Costello’s lasting memories is of the first time she showed under the Glendale banner. “We came in dead last. His first words: I’m so proud of you. With Skip, it’s more about the ride than the ribbon.

“He tells us, ‘I want it to be fun. If you’re not having fun, then you need to do something different. You’re paying too much money for it not to be fun.’”

Chris Willis is a comparative newcomer to the Glendale team. However, his knowledge of Skip goes back almost 35 years. A little over a year ago, he brought his three-gaited gelding, Callaway’s Take A Stand, to Skip.

“When we were kids we competed against each other,” Chris says, adding the two grew up on opposite sides of the state of Iowa. “I knew of him, but had never met him.

“Skip has done an outstanding job with my horse,” he said, adding “he is the epitome of organization and composure. If he’s having a bad day while I’m there, I’ve never known it. He always is in control whether at the barn or a show. He’s a well-prepared, happy and positive person.”

Brooke Boyer has been making headlines since she became part of the Glendale family in 2010. For almost five years, Brooke and her mother have made the drive from Johnston, Iowa to Columbia, for Brooke to ride.

Why Glendale?

“We were at a show with a trainer who was a friend of Kent’s,” Kim Boyer said. “He walked by and saw Brooke getting ready. He suggested she get her suit fixed and raise her number, and, even though he had a rider in the ring, coached her from the rail. He just was being kind.

“When that barn didn’t have an equitation program, we began looking for options,” she continued. “We went to visit Glendale; Kent spent an entire day with us and put Brooke on a horse. Stacey and his assistant stayed with us in the barn and answered our every

question. Brooke looked at me in front of Skip and said ‘this is it.’ We’ve had that connection ever since.”

Three weeks after Brooke making the move, they headed to Midwest. Kim described the first class as “not great.” The second, she won.

“Brooke was in middle school when she began riding with Kent. When she got into high school, we wanted her to have as normal an experience as possible. Many weekends, after she went to a Friday night party, we were on the road at 5 a.m. on Saturday. In the summers, she would stay with Kent and Stacey for a couple of weeks at a time.”

It paid off. That year, Brooke was reserve in the UPHA Junior Challenge Cup National Championship. Since then she has garnered numerous blues and tricolors – and made the trip to South Africa to be part of the winning United States World Cup Saddle Seat Equitation Three-Gaited Team.

That trip is one of Kim Boyer’s favorite memories. “Kent and Stacey went with us on their own time and their own money.”

Gabbi Snyder has had more to conquer than simply riding a horse. Her mother, Juanita, explained the vision challenges her 13-year-old daughter faces ... and particularly as she wishes to show equitation.

“It’s difficult for Gabbi to see what she is doing,” Juanita said. “Riding is a bit harder for her than for some. She had ridden other places and was about to quit. We said, ‘Why not try Glendale.’”

Rather than give in to Gabbi’s challenges, Skip has helped her find ways around them.

“He told her, ‘We know what you can’t do. Let’s figure out a different way for you to use [visual] points in equitation. This is how you can pick your points and do a circle [correctly.] We’ll find ways to make you successful even though you don’t see things the way others see them.

“He has helped her confidence tremendously. If she felt she couldn’t do something he thinks she can, she thinks ‘I think I should be able to do it. I can do things other kids can do.’”

Last year’s Lexington Junior League Horse Show is a highlight for Juanita Snyder. “In the Pleasure Equitation qualifier, she couldn’t find her pattern spots. When she messed up, he didn’t tear her down. Instead, Kent told her, ‘You rode really well; you just got flustered and lost your place. Let’s figure out what you did right, not what you did wrong.’”

She came back to win the Pleasure Equitation 13 and Under Championship – unanimously.

“So many people who have watched her struggle have asked me, ‘Have you ever wished you had a normal kid. Normal is so over-rated,’ Juanita said.

“Kent has been a Godsend. He’s so much more than a horse trainer; in many ways, he’s a therapist. He makes everyone he works with feel like they can achieve anything.”

Of course, Glendale Stables is more than its head trainer. Linsay Bernard is Kent’s assistant trainer and instructor; Maria Portra is the assistant instructor.



Stacey enjoys showing her fine harness horse, Arc’s I Can Teach You To Tango.



Skip and Stacey joined their long-time friend, Lisa Hillmer and daughter Madison Taylor Pope at St. Louis Charity in 2008.



The Swallas vacationed in Curacao with a group of their friends.



Kim Boyer, Stacey, Kent and Brooke Boyer enjoyed their trip to South Africa where Brooke was a member of the winning U.S. World Cup Saddle Seat Equitation Three-Gaited Team.



The Swalla 'children': Gracie, Ike & Sophie. Ike rarely is far from Skip's side.

A New Hampshire native, Linsay began her riding career with Morgans. She got to know the Swallas while at William Woods and helped them at some shows during her senior year. After working elsewhere for a time, she joined the Glendale team in 2012. Her personality and Skip's mesh well.

"We go back and forth, feeding off each other," Linsay said, adding they work horses similarly. "He will tell me one thing and I will know exactly what he wants me to do."

Linsay and Skip found the newest Glendale mascot at the Illinois State Fair last year. They spotted 'Kevin' at a booth and decided he had to be part of the stable family. The Facebook sensation is a well-traveled bird.

"At Louisville, people would 'steal' and hide him; Rich (Campbell) sent a picture and ransom note," Linsay said, laughing at the memory. "After Louisville, Kevin traveled to New Hampshire with the Caters. From there, he went to the Morgan Grand Nationals and home with the Lowrys to Illinois. Finally, Kevin rejoined his family at The American Royal where the tuxedoed bird was featured along with the orchestra.

Linsay says Skip knows "when to have fun and when to mean business. He's very willing to help everyone. He doesn't take all the nice horses to work himself, but gives Marla and me the opportunity to

work several. He likes to sit back and see what other people can do."

Skip talked about his business philosophy. "I have to live with what I tell a client. I invest in them as much as I do my horses. I get attached to them as much as their owners do."

Investing in people is something Skip does on many levels. He is heavily committed to his friends and to the young trainers-to-be who work with him while attending William Woods University. Avery Bul and Scooter Scheurich each 'helped' Skip during their college years. Today Scooter is a trainer and Avery instructor at Barbe Smith's Cascade Stables. Barbe is one of Skip's closest friends.

"We bonded when we ran into each other at shows; we became close friends pretty instantly. In the days when I had four or five kids in the Finals, he was the first to pitch in to help me," Barbe said.

She has a repository of Kent Swalla stories – ranging from horse show antics to Mardi Gras madness. This year was the first such celebration he has missed in years. Jury duty took precedence.

Skip and Stacey also are heavily invested in the barn's four-legged mascots. You rarely see him without his sidekick, Ike.

"He is the best dog I've had in my entire life," Skip said. "He was abandoned and left to die when we rescued him at a show one year. I said I'd take him. Stacey said not to so I hid him until she went to bed. She was mad for a while but now he's as close to her as he is to me."

If you want to know something about people in this industry, ask their fellow trainer/friends. Kristen and David Cater are high on that list.

"Skip is a wonderful person, one of our closest friends in the industry," Kristen said. "He's hard-working, ambitious and one of the most loyal people I've ever met. A lot of people come and go in your life; he is the type to be there forever. He wants to help all his friends.

"Stacey is the most put-together person I've ever met. She looks perfect, her house is perfect, her make-up is perfect and she always has a smile on her face.

"The two of them are wonderful together," she continued. "People tease us about the similarities between me and Skip and David and Stacey, which ones are intense and which are laid back. The intense one needs someone to be a sounding board. She definitely is that. As he says, she keeps him sane.

There are other similarities as well. Both couples give back to the industry they love. Skip is a valued judge who has officiated at shows from the smallest local one to the Saddlebred and Morgan world championships. He serves on the UPHA Equitation committee and, with Missy Hughes Smith, as coach for the U.S. Young Riders Team.

The mark of a great trainer, a great coach, is being able to give his students something to smile about. No matter how many challenges one of his riders faces, Skip Swalla has a way of leaving his riders looking forward to the next ride.



Skip has been a fixture on Cascade Stables' Mardi Gras team.