



# Nikki Rae



# WOODWORTH

As Predicted, She's Setting Records & A Whole Lot More

by Diana Davidson

When she started off setting records during her unparalleled career as a junior rider, many predicted it was just the beginning for Nikki Rae Woodworth. She has been called a natural born rider, and her abilities have helped her to achieve headlines more recently as a trainer. It seems as though she quite literally grew up on the back of a Morgan horse. She could indeed ride a horse before most her age could ride a bike. And by ride, I don't mean with training wheels or someone holding her in the saddle. Nikki could really ride a horse. While she started off her show ring career in leadline, it wasn't long before the mighty mite was showing in walk-trot and again eager to move up to the next level.

"I grew up on a farm and it was also a working show stable. My childhood memories are 99% horses. I started showing when I was three years old. I rode everyday after school, on the weekends and when it wasn't a 'barn' day, I was out on a trail ride. Even my birthday parties as a kid were horse related," Nikki recalls.

"After show season, we would all go on an all day trail ride with our show horses. We would ride them to Dairy Queen for ice cream and go to the lake on the way home and see which horses would swim. I feel very fortunate to have had that aspect of the horse life and not just the show life."

Nikki's equestrian and junior exhibitor career was one for the record books. She is a Triple Crown Saddle Seat Equitation winner and then some. She won the traditional Triple Crown - the AMHA Saddle Seat Medal (1996), UPHA Senior Challenge Cup (1997) and the Senior Saddle Seat Equitation World Championship (1996, 1998). In fact she won every Saddle Seat Equitation World Championship or Finals offered in the years she showed in equitation at the Morgan Grand National.

Nikki started off with her beloved Gradell's Pandora winning the Walk-Trot Saddle Seat Equitation (1990-1991) and added the 1992 Junior Exhibitor English Pleasure 13 & Under World Championship and 1994 Junior Saddle Seat Equitation World Championship. If Pandora and Nikki were the perfect pair, then it would seem impossible to find another horse to be Nikki's next partner. That was until Nikki and Black Gold Windsor were paired. Together they won Nikki's second Junior Saddle Seat Equitation World Championship in 1995 as well as the Junior UPHA Challenge Cup that same year.

Theirs was a partnership for the ages. They had a synchronized yet bold style that earned them unmatched records. They were nearly unstoppable in an era when the Saddle Seat Equitation division was filled with dedicated riders who were up for the challenge of trying to beat the best to be the best. While many, then and now, consider Nikki to be the best, she always rode as hard anyone and was never satisfied with her last ride or her last win.

"Hard work, dedication and horsemanship were three of the most important lessons I learned riding and showing equitation. If



Following their 2015 Park Saddle World Grand Championship victory, Nikki Rae Woodworth and As Predicted GCH were joined by assistant Lupe Deloya for this memorable photo at KGA Morgans. Nikki was excited to recreate an iconic photo of Judy Whitney-Harris following one of her Park Saddle World Grand Championship victories. Woodworth and Harris are the only two women to date who have won both the Park Saddle and Park Harness World Grand Championships.

you don't put the time and effort in, you won't get the results you want. I think that goes with everything in life, but equitation taught me that early on. It also taught me to think on my own. Even though it wasn't all that long ago that I showed in equitation, it was very different than what it is now." Nikki added, "We hardly had patterns posted, let alone a whole booklet that you get at the start of the show! They would tell you the pattern while in the line-up and you had to visualize and think for yourself on how and what you would do to make it perfect. I also rode with my mother who had a string of equitation riders, so I was usually on the bottom of the totem poll when it came time for individual attention.

"The first memory that comes to me as a highlight for equitation was showing my mare, Gradell's Pandora in the Junior Equitation



Nikki Rae Woodworth and Gradell's Pandora were the perfect match as they started off with a pair of Walk-Trot Saddle Seat Equitation world titles and went on to capture the roses in 1992 in Junior Exhibitor English Pleasure 13 & Under followed in 1994 in Junior Saddle Seat Equitation.



In the 77 year history of the New England Morgan Horse Show, Nikki is the only rider to earn the Saddle Seat Equitation Championship three consecutive years. She and Black Gold Windsor set the mark in 1996-1998.

World Championship when I was 12 years old. I had won the Junior Exhibitor English Pleasure 13 and Under World Championship with her the year before and decided to try equitation with her. There were a lot of seasoned equitation horses in that class and the pattern was announced to us in the line-up. I didn't watch anyone else do the pattern because I figured they'd nail it all and I was still working on equitating Pandora. We ended up nailing the pattern and winning the class. Another equitation class that was my favorite was winning the AMHA Saddle Seat Medal unanimously out of 50 riders with my gelding, Black Gold Windsor."

In the long and storied history of the New England Morgan Horse Show, Nikki is the only rider to win the Saddle Seat Equitation Championship three consecutive years - 1996-1998. In addition to being the only rider to win the Walk-Trot, Junior and Senior Saddle Seat Equitation World Championships twice each, Nikki closed out her equitation career with another first. She became the Classic Saddle Seat Equitation World Champion in 1999, the first year it was held. From her first trip to the winner's circle in the leadline class, Nikki won every Saddle Seat Equitation title offered.

Nikki's riding talents earned her respect from her fellow riders and trainers alike. A trip to South Africa in 1999 as part of Team Morgan was one of the amazing opportunities that she enjoyed. Nikki earned countless People's Choice Awards including being named Equitation Rider of the 1990s Decade and Junior Exhibitor of the Century. She was also called upon by many trainers to catch-ride horses in numerous divisions.



Nikki's riding talents earned her some amazing opportunities. In addition to catch-riding many horses and earning numerous People's Choice awards, her trip to South Africa in 1999 as part of Team Morgan was certainly a highlight of her junior exhibitor career.

"As for performance classes, I was very lucky to have a lot of horses to catch-ride and show through the years. There would be too many to list but a favorite of mine would be showing the stallion, Syndicat Jack Daniels in the open park saddle when I was 13 years old at Mass Morgan, and we won!" Nikki fondly recalls.

While her riding talents and command of the show ring were never questioned, Nikki was still hard at work preparing for the next step in her equine education. While many could predict from an early age that Nikki Rae Woodworth would become a horse trainer, that transition is not necessarily quick or seamless.

When asked if she always wanted to be a trainer, Nikki replied, "Yes! After my first day of school and being inside all day, I knew the barn was where I needed to be. I did have a lot of other hobbies and activities I was involved in, but did not have the passion that I had for horses in anything else.

"Even though I grew up in a show barn, I thought it was very important to learn elsewhere after I finished high school. Training horses is one of those things where there is a no right or wrong way to do things (to an extent!)," Nikki added with a smile.

"Any trainer I have watched or even helped out has their own technique, and I found it very educational to learn from each one. The most important thing one can do when getting into this career is work, work and work even more. You have to start off somewhere and if it's feeding, grooming and cleaning stalls 6 days a week for countless hours then that's the best way to start. I



*In 1996, Nikki Rae Woodworth and Black Gold Windsor carried home the AMHA Saddle Seat Gold Medal with a unanimous victory in a field of 50 riders. In 2009, Nikki became the first AMHA Saddle Seat Gold Medal winner to instruct a rider, Rachel Menard, to win this coveted honor. Nikki posed with Rachel under the KGA banner following her 2009 UPHA Senior Challenge Cup win (Nikki also won this title in 1997).*

see people out there that want to be trainers but only want to ride the horses. It is so very important to put in those hours of hard work and learning to care for horses before you start to even think about training."

Nikki is quick to thank the many trainers who have helped and mentored her along the way. "I've been asked this question often and I always go back to Rick Stevens and Stan Bodnar. When I started training on my own, they were both very supportive of me and would offer any help needed. Rick even took a day off to drive up to one of my shows and help me with in hand horses. Growing up at horse shows, I had known Rick my whole life and I used to show in almost all my junior exhibitor classes with Stan's son Whit. I had worked for Merriehill at some horse shows in the past and would occasionally fly out to their farm and work horses with them."

In a 2012 Horse World interview Stan Bodnar said, "I have always been a fan of Nikki's way with a horse. I've had her show some for us in the past. She immediately understands what is wanted and does it. Nikki has a feel for whatever horse she is working with and works it accordingly. Once a year she flies out to visit and we work horses together and learn from each other. She is deserving of the recognition she gets with the job she is doing. She is a good horsewoman and destined to be a great one."

Nikki added, "I learned so much riding with Jan Lukens as well. I only rode there one year, but what I learned was a lifetime of knowledge. I also learned a lot from catch riding other trainers' horses. I rode for many people including, Rick Stevens, The Bodnars,

Peggy Alderman, Phil Fountain, Bernard Parker and Mike Carpenter (who I worked for after high school)." It was during her time at Mike Carpenter's that Nikki started working with some of Maggie Hood's horses.

Maggie too had grown up showing Morgans with her family as her parents laid the foundation at their Kelley Green Acres. Maggie now continues the tradition breeding horses with the KGA prefix at her farm in Mendon, Mass. The farm has grown to fulfill the vision of Maggie and Nikki.

"I was beginning a new chapter in my life. I lost my husband 12 years ago." Hood continued, "I was in my early 40s when I lost my husband, and I had sold the business and my kids went off to school. I had watched Nikki as a junior exhibitor and marveled at her abilities. I met and got to know Nikki mostly when she was at Mike Carpenter's and I had horses there.

"I was interested in building a barn at my house. Nikki helped me with my horses at home. We both believe in the Morgan breed and have a passion for it. She was young and had the talent, and I really wanted to give her the opportunity. I wanted to build the barn and got her input to put the plan in place. We rented stalls for her train until the barn was finished in 2009. Nikki had already assembled some clients along the way.

"Nikki is so hard working and humble. She is clearly in it for the long haul. She has always downplayed her own accomplishments. I try to be at the barn most days and love to watch horses work and am very involved with all of the customers. I am also really enjoying the breeding aspect. I feel it is important to breed and have prospects for

Nikki to bring along. We both really want to have a positive impact on the Morgan breed."

Nikki added, "I started working Maggie's horses out in a field at her house in the years before the barn was built. We took KGA Odyssey to Oklahoma in 2006. We won the Ladies English Pleasure Geldings and sold him that night! I started getting outside clients that year and renting stalls at a nearby barn, Hyland Farm."

The list of horses and riders that represented Nikki and the KGA banner continued to grow as her talents were noticed by more and more people. It seemed only fitting that one of Nikki's first big Oklahoma wins as a trainer came in the equitation division. When Rachel Menard was crowned the 2009 AMHA Saddle Seat Gold Medal winner, Nikki became the first former AMHA Saddle Seat Gold Medal winner to instruct a rider to the same honor. Matched with BJL Ransom, Menard added the UPHA Senior Challenge Cup victory days later. Lauren White was the next to enjoy the thrill of following Nikki's world titled lead and also did so aboard BJL Ransom. She earned the 2013 World Champion Senior Classic Saddle Seat Equitation honors.

Ultra's Proclamation is another horse that brought two young riders equitation success under Nikki's direction. Nena Marlin capped her junior exhibitor career under the KGA banner with tricolors aboard the grand chestnut gelding. Hayley Porter did likewise the following year. Marlin also shared her mount with Nikki as she returned to equitation competition with a much-heralded win in the Connecticut Morgan Trainer's Equitation in 2010.



*Next to her passion for horses, her Bulldogs Gracie and Patty and the New England Patriots are high on her list. Maggie Hood and Nikki shared a photo-op with the Patriots' mascot, while Nikki and her dogs support their favorite team each Sunday, even while in Oklahoma.*



Nikki would return to the Big E coliseum for what she says is her final equitation ride, the 2015 UPHA Chapter 14 Trainer's Equitation Challenge. The great fundraiser was indeed the coup-de-grace as she rode away with the top prize aboard As Predicted GCH.

"The class was open to all breeds and there was so much excitement and anticipation going into the class. It was probably one of the most fun classes ever! Winning unanimous topped it off. That was my last equitation class. I am retired now," Nikki added with a laugh.

Of course that class in April 2015, was just the beginning of an amazing year for As Predicted GCH and Nikki Rae Woodworth. They would cap the year by carrying home the roses with another unanimous win, the Park Saddle World Grand Championship. It was an amazing year for the charismatic performer and his new owner Deborah Hamilton.

Describing Nikki and Maggie as wonderful people who love what they do, Deborah Hamilton said, "From the very start of my relationship with KGA I've admired Nikki's calm, assured way with horses and the respect she commands in a firm, gentle way and the love she has for them. Maggie is always the cheerleader; aware of the atmosphere in the barn and at shows, making it fun and comfortable for anyone there giving support to their horse-crazed friend or family member."

"In my third year of showing, being paired up with a horse like As Predicted is a dream come true," Debbie added. "Never in my wildest dreams as a young girl would I have thought that I would be riding a world champion Morgan horse. But here I am as a 'Master', living that dream!" Hamilton said following her 2015 world championship victory.

When asked about show ring highlights, Nikki is so proud of the horses as well as the amateurs and junior exhibitors she trains and instructs. "Last year at OKC, two of our clients who were paired with new horses and having little to no show experience at the Nationals both won World Championship titles. Debbie Hamilton on As Predicted and Kristin Hilf driving Medomak French Invasion.

"Winning the English Pleasure World Grand Championship with As Predicted in 2012, then turning him into a park horse for his owner at the time Chloe Deeb was also a big highlight. They went on to win back-to-back Junior Exhibitor Park Saddle World Championships in 2013 and 2014. I had the opportunity to show 'Skeeter' to reserve in the open both years. 2015 was amazing as he and Debbie won the masters and we won the Park Saddle World Grand Championship.

"Another special memory is when I had an equitation student (Lauren White) who was having a tough week one year in OKC. She kept working hard and at the end of the week, rode her championship to the best class she ever had and was the unani-

mous Classic Saddle Seat Equitation World Champion."

While Nikki is quick to focus on the achievements of the horses and clients, her own list of records continue to grow. She joined the great Judy Whitney-Harris as the only other woman to win the Park Saddle and Park Harness World Grand Championships. Her victory with As Predicted GCH in 2015 followed her 2011 harness victory with SpringMill Superstition for Sea Grass Farm.

Following SpringMill Superstition's selection as 2011 Horse World People's Choice Horse of the Year, Kurt Hufferd spoke about the horse he started and nicknamed 'Perfect' and the job Nikki had done with him during that season. "I am thrilled at how much 'Perfect' has accomplished already. Watching Nikki develop him even further over the past year was a credit to her ability as a trainer. I knew they both had it in them to win the Open World Championship and I appreciated being able to be a part of it all."

Nikki has great insight into the traits she looks for in matching horses with riders and drivers. "Work ethic and athleticism are the main things I look for. When you have a horse that wants to work, it makes your job a little easier. Also, matching a horse to their rider's capability is a major key. Some people who are more hesitant may do better with a 'push horse' where others like to have something game and challenging."

Longtime client Kathy Dowding had this to say about Nikki picking out her current



From the time she was young, Nikki always had a bond with animals. In addition to the horses, she came home from Gold Cup one year with a llama (it was a memorable ride home!) and made friends with a handsome monkey in Mexico.

horse Winterset Zeus. "I have known Nikki since she was in high school. I was new to horses and in my early 50s. I adore her and watched her grow up and become a wonderful person and trainer. I completely trust Nikki and asked her to help me find a horse.

"When she mentioned Zeus, I remembered him and have loved him since the first time I saw him show with Luman Wadhams as a three-year-old. Nikki is very patient with us KGA masters. I learn something new every time I go into the ring. I listen to her and am able to pick her voice out and listen.

"We went to Gold Cup the first year I owned him and I won. I was so shocked and amazed. I gave Nikki a big hug and kiss before the victory pass and that has become a tradition. I am so happy being at KGA. Nikki is not only my trainer but my friend," Kathy added.

While Kathy has had to sit this year out from showing, she has shared her horse with Gaetana D'Alesio-Spina. As someone who learned so much from the opportunity to catch-ride horses, Nikki as well as Kathy are happy to give Gaetana the opportunity. They enjoyed her victory passes including New England's Ladies Classic Pleasure Saddle Championship. Kathy is now back in the saddle and will be in Oklahoma to cheer on Zeus and Gaetana.

Sharing of horses and knowledge are a continuing theme. Like Maggie Hood and Nikki Rae

Woodworth, Cheryl Sardelli Ricci grew up showing Morgans in New England. After a successful junior exhibitor and amateur career, Cheryl was away from the horses for several years after her marriage and the birth of daughter Victoria.

Once Victoria showed a desire to ride and show, mother and daughter joined back into the Morgan world. Cheryl is quick to credit Nikki, "During show the 2013 show season I stated to become interested in buying myself a horse and getting back into the show ring. I explained to Nikki exactly what I wanted to get. I wanted a horse just like my old driving horse Quail Run Buckaroo, where

he would set up, suck his head back and go. I also wanted a horse with a safe, stable brain, that has all his bolts screwed in tight. Nikki later told me that she thought she had found the perfect horse for me. Then she mentioned Fox Hollow Talk About Me and I instantly fell in love.

"Nikki prepared me the whole winter into show season to go and show at the Grand National. She helped me to regulate his speeds. October 2014 came, and it was time for the Grand National. I could not believe that I was finally here showing after so many years. Nikki prepared me not to get nervous. Then it came time for my championship class and thanks to Nikki and her training of Toby and I, we were called to the World Championship spot in Amateur Masters Pleasure Driving. Words cannot describe how that day felt. It was my first World Champion I had ever won. My thanks go to Nikki for being such a great person, trainer, and teacher, and for preparing me for winning my first World Championship. It was magical."

Victoria Ricci added, "I've been with Nikki since 2013 and she has helped me accomplish a lot. She helps me to be a more confident rider and driver. If I am confused about something, or ask her question



Nikki takes tremendous pride in the achievements of her clients and was most proud of two of her new teams winning world championships in 2015. She posed with Deborah Hamilton and Kristin Hilf following their back-to-back victories in Oklahoma City.



The mother-daughter duo of Cheryl and Victoria Ricci both credit Nikki with helping them to achieve their world championship dreams with Fox Hollow Talk About Me. Nikki posed with Cheryl following her 2014 victory and Victoria in 2015.

she is always happy to help explain it to me so I do understand.

"Some of the biggest highlights in the show ring that Nikki has helped me to achieve have to be my classes in Oklahoma. In 2013 my first year at KGA, Nikki helped me to drive my mare Stardavari to our second Reserve World Champion and Grand National Champion in the Junior Exhibitor Park Harness division. That year she really helped me to sharpen my skills and becoming a better driver.

"In 2014 Nikki prepared Star and I for Oklahoma again and ended up Reserve World Champion in Junior Exhibitor Park Harness and Reserve Grand National in Youth Park Harness. That same year I showed Graywood's Arthur in Junior Exhibitor Classic Driving and was Reserve Grand National and third in the World Championship. I did all this thanks to Nikki.

"In 2015 Nikki taught me and showed me the ropes on how to drive multiple time World Champion Fox Hollow Talk About Me, who is my mom's pleasure driving horse. It all started at New England Morgan Horse Show where we won the Junior Exhibitor Pleasure Driving Championship and qualifying class, and then went on to win the Youth Pleasure Driving. We also won the same three classes in Oklahoma, Grand National and World Champion Junior Exhibitor Pleasure Driving and Youth Pleasure Driving and just like New England Regional all three class were judged unanimously. If it was not for Nikki, I would not have been able to have

the skills and the confidence to drive the horses I did the way I did. Because of her, I won four world titles and four Grand National titles.

Victoria concluded, "My thanks to Nikki for always believing in me and never giving up!"

Nikki gives tremendous thanks to her support team including veterinarians, farriers, caretakers and assistant Lupe Deloya. "We got to know Lupe when we traveled out to OKC when he worked for Rick Stevens, and we stabled together. Lupe worked for us at the show as well as for Rick. When the week was over and we realized what a great worker Lupe was, we asked Rick about hiring help and how he got Lupe to work for him. His response was 'you can't have my

Lupe!' Little did we know, he'd be working for us a few years later. I can't think of anyone else who is more thorough with the care of the horses than Lupe is. I am really hoping to get his daughter, Karely, involved with riding and possibly showing."

Following an amazing 2015 season that culminated with the final spotlight victory pass in the Park Saddle World Grand Championship, Nikki was hard at work preparing for 2016. True to her New England roots, she was back in the barn working as hard as ever while taking some time to cheer on the New England Patriots and enjoy some vacation time. The 2016 season has seen more young horses, young riders and new combinations shine under the KGA banner. In addition, Nikki and As Predicted GCH earned the distinction of being the first in the last 55 years to win the New England Park Saddle Championship three consecutive years. It is only fitting as Nikki is also the only rider to win New England's Saddle Seat Equitation Championship three years in a row.

Continuing to think ahead and plan for the future, Nikki hopes to do her best to ensure a bright future for the Morgan industry. "I would love to get people back into breeding. So much of today's society is about instant gratification and I find it in the horse world as well. I do realize most people want to show their own horses, which is great but maybe have a prospect on the side to bring along also. We bred two of our mares this year and hope to encourage others to take the journey of breeding a mare and producing the next generation."



Nikki Rae Woodworth celebrated her first World Grand Championship in 2011 as she drove three-year-old SpringMill Superstition to the honors. Nikki had tremendous support from fellow horse trainers as she captured the Park Harness World Grand Championship for Sea Grass Farm.