

CH-EQ Callaway's Will Gillen Among Foundation Members Of Saddlebred Record For Equitation Horses

by Sharon Higginbotham

When the ASHA established the Saddlebred Record Champion Program some years ago, it was designed to be an accurate reference of the produce of stallions and mares as well as identification of outstanding performance horses. When a horse has earned enough points in competition and been approved as a champion, CH is permanently affixed to its registered name in all ASR records.

For some time now, the Saddlebred community has felt that the many outstanding horses who have presented the young riders of the saddle seat equitation division should be included in this program along with the other champions of the breed. So, in 2010, the ASHA and Registry approved the addition of an equitation section in the Champion Program. The first horses honored are those champions who have won the Triple Crown (UPHA Senior Challenge Cup Finals, NHS Good Hands Finals, and the USEF Saddle Seat Medal Finals in the same year). Those eight horses were recently honored as the foundation of this division and will have CH-EQ before their names in all ASR records. Of that number, one horse stands out above the rest...Callaway's Will Gillen...who carried Amanda Arrick to the Triple Crown. Over the course of his illustrious equitation career Will Gillen carried riders to 22 World's Champion titles and 14 National Equitation titles. In addition to Arrick's Triple Crown, two other riders won all three National Finals aboard Will Gillen during their careers, but not in the same year.

Callaway's Will Gillen (CH Will Shriver x Callaway's Mollie Gillen) has been described as "the best equitation horse of all time," "the gold standard of equitation horses by which all others are still being judged," and "as great on the rail as any performance horse yet focused enough to do the intricate pattern work of equitation." Certainly, a top-notch equitation mount must possess the unique attributes that consist of adaptability to young riders in various stages of experience, the focus to execute pattern work, and balance and bloom in the show ring. But, what made this horse, in the opinion of many experts, the most unique?

Rob Byers of Premier Stables who first brought him out as an equitation mount says "he was an all around great horse who never did anything bad". Byers saw the horse for the first time at Kansas City where Wyatt DeHart showed him as a junior walk trot mount. He said he saw Wyatt working him early one morning in a back ring, knew nothing about the horse, but knew he had to have him. He had been looking for an equitation horse for young, Jill Brainard. When asked if he had any idea that the horse would be as great as he became, Byers said, "I didn't know that then, but I did know he was the horse we wanted". He called the Brainards that night and said, "I've found your horse". Because the horse was young, Byers did not know if he would have the mind for equitation but he was confident that if not he would be successful in open divisions. He began equitating him over the winter and Will Gillen learned the figure work very easily and truly seemed to enjoy it. Jill "practiced, practiced, practiced" over the winter and when they burst on the scene the following spring, they were the team to beat, winning the Junior Championship at Lexington and World's Championship at Louisville...quite an accomplishment for a 5-year-old and a junior rider.

Byers went on to say that they kept Will Gillen through 3 successful show seasons for Jill and then it was time to pass him on to the next aspiring equitation rider. Byers called him a one of a kind equitation mount because he "sporting a rider so nicely in the ring" and "moved so prettily" at all times with a lofty front end that moved freely out of his shoulders. The long-necked, high-headed 15.3 gelding was so "mounted up in front and expressive"...making an immediate and lasting impression on all who witnessed his performances.



Jill Brainard was the first rider to team Will Gillen in equitation. Their successes were the start of something grand for this great gelding.



Amanda Arrick was the next equitation rider to benefit from the brilliance of Willy, winning the Triple Crown in 1994.

At that time, Lillian Shively was looking for a replacement for Amanda Arrick's equitation mount, Magic Marauder, who had died at Kansas City. After a very brief visit to look at him, the decision was made by the Arricks to purchase him and he moved to DeLovely Farm in Rockport, Indiana, where he remained until his death in September 2010.

From the emotion in Shively's voice as she discussed his many accomplishments, it was quite evident that as a performer he was awesome, versatile, "loved his work", "was always the perfect fit," but more than that, he was loved and appreciated by his four owners over the course of his career at DeLovely, by his trainer Todd Miles, and by instructor Lillian Shively.

In describing "Willy" as "the greatest equitation horse of all time," Shively explained that an equitation mount must be a perfect fit for the rider. She said that what made Willy so unique and one of the nicest things about him was that whether the rider was petite, short, tall, or of whatever stature, Willy presented her perfectly. He achieved a perfect fit not once but five times during his career, carrying Amanda Arrick, Lauren Murrell, and Abby Christofferson to all of the National Finals titles as well as Jill Brainard and Alexandra Flynn to many World's and National Equitation Championships between 1992 and 2004.

Todd Miles, the trainer at DeLovely who prepared Willy for competition, agrees with Shively that what made Willy so unique was that he was as good as any performance horse in the ring and could have been successful in ladies, amateur, or juvenile classes, but his owners wanted to restrict him to equitation competition so as not to overuse him. When asked by a visitor to the farm on one occasion if he thought Willy could win the Juvenile Championship at Louisville, his answer was a heartfelt "Yes!" Miles went on to say that Willy "could make a rider shine". He also said that Willy was "push-button" only if you knew which buttons to push, which made his riders have to really stay focused. He also said that every performance was fresh and exciting and "when you put the ribbon on him, he knew exactly what to do...every victory pass was stunning."

The most touching statement that Shively made about Willy was, "I promised him he would retire at the top." She made good her promise and, in 2004, Willy became one of only two equitation horses ever retired at Louisville. He went home to DeLovely Farm where he had his own barn and pasture and a couple of nice companions. Always personable and partial to treats, he enjoyed his retirement.

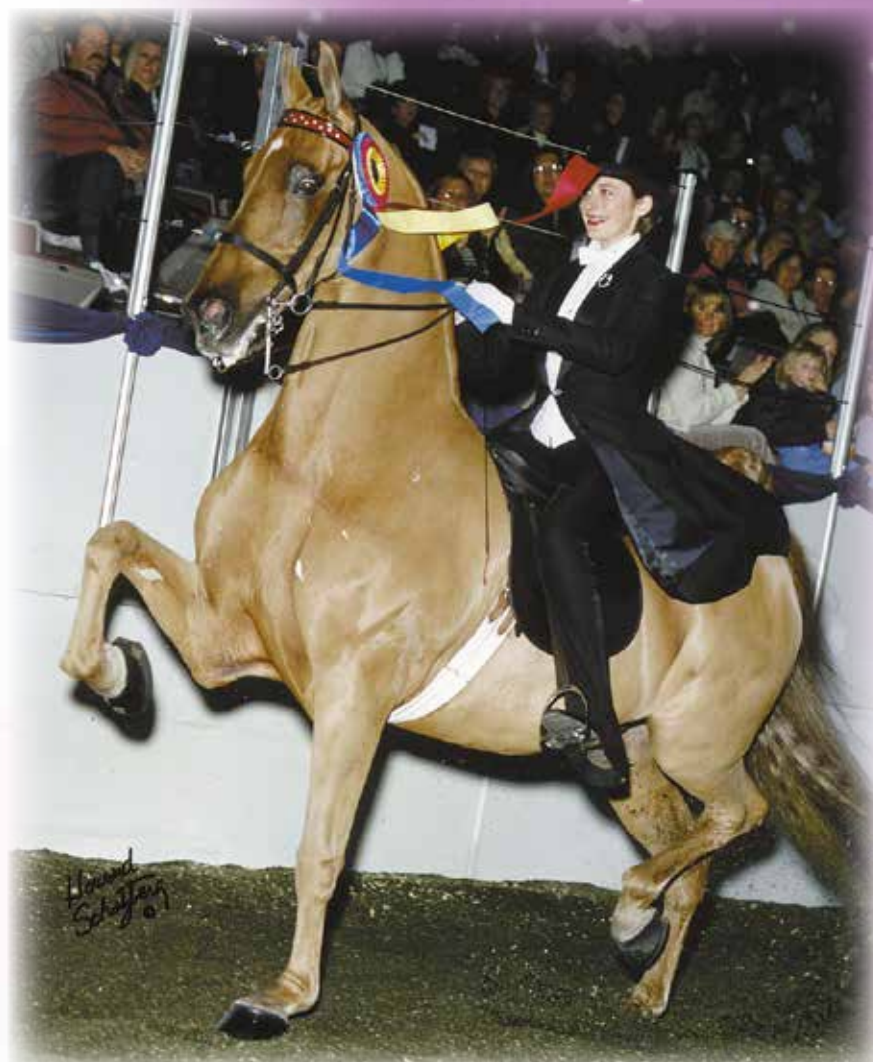
It is, indeed a fitting tribute to this horse that he is named one of the foundation members of the new equitation division of the Saddlebred Record Champion Program. But the greatest tribute of all comes in the words of these three individuals who knew him from the beginning and guided him as he carried five lovely young ladies to the winner's circle time and time again and into the record books of the breed for all time.



The second DeLovely rider to have her time with Will Gillen was Abby Christofferson who won all three National Finals in a two-year span, 1999 and 2000.



DeLovely teammate Lauren Murrell also completed the three National Finals aboard Willy in 1997 and '98.



Alexandra Flynn was the final young lady to have the honor of showing arguably the greatest equitation horse of all time.