

# FUTURE FORUM

## The Up and Coming of Young Trainers

by Leeann Mione

This is another segment in a Saddle Horse Report series featuring the stories of young trainers from across the country. There isn't a school for horse training outside of the "school of hard knocks" so it's interesting to follow the paths taken by these young professionals as they pay their dues in their quest for making a successful career out of their passion for horses.

This week we are featuring Alex Gravett who is owner and trainer of Kismet Farm LLC in Simpsonville, Kentucky. Gravett opened her business in 2014 and she is currently the co-chairman of the UPHA Young Professionals Committee.

**Give us a breakdown of where it all began for you.**

**How did you get involved in horses and at what age?**

ALEX: My mom grew up on a dairy farm in Minnesota and always had horses. I began riding solo around age three on our old quarter horse. It was around age five or so that I began showing Morgans in leadline. I don't remember true structured weekly riding lessons until maybe age seven or eight as I became more serious about showing in walk and trot. I believe I showed at Oklahoma the first time around age eight or nine.

**What made you decide to become a professional trainer?**

ALEX: I wanted the chance to be able to show nice horses for other people but have realized there are many other things involved! Most days, I wouldn't change my decision for anything.

**Have you worked under any other trainers? If so, who?**

ALEX: Yes. I grew up riding most of my juvenile career with Lyle and Colleen Wick, [of Hardwood Creek Farm], and in high school I worked a few summers for them at the barn. During the early years of college, I had a horse with Stan, Mark and Whitney Bodnar at Merriehill Farm and would help them a little at shows but never really worked for them.

While in school at William Woods, I worked one semester for Jimmy Simmons and one semester for Mark and Kelly Hulse. During the summers in college, I worked two summers for Gerry Rushton and Stacy Hennessy and one for Nelson Green.

Following college, I worked for Nelson for another year and a half or so and then for Bill and Kris Knight at Pleasantview Farm until I opened Kismet in the fall of 2014. I believe all of these horses trainers have had some influence on me, some more than others but I feel very fortunate to have been able to have such a variety.

**Who are your role models/mentors? Why?**

ALEX: Training wise, I would say Lyle, Nelson and Bill and Kris have had the biggest influence on how I work horses today. They are all pretty different but I try and use bits and pieces of what I learned from all of them.

I am still closest with Bill and Kris and talk to them regularly about horses I am working. I am also fortunate that Mike Spencer keeps one horse at my barn and I have learned a lot from him recently, especially about gaiting a colt. He is very different than anyone I have worked for so it has been really fun to learn from him.

I also rely on both my parents for business advice. They have both run their own businesses off and on in both the construction and horse industries so they provide a great deal of insight.

**What is your favorite thing about being a trainer?**

ALEX: I love watching the entire package come together, whether it be a horse and rider team or a young horse coming into their own. Sometimes it takes patience and time, both of which can be hard, especially if a client is putting on the pressure to get their horse or kid to a show. But when it does all come together it is the best feeling!

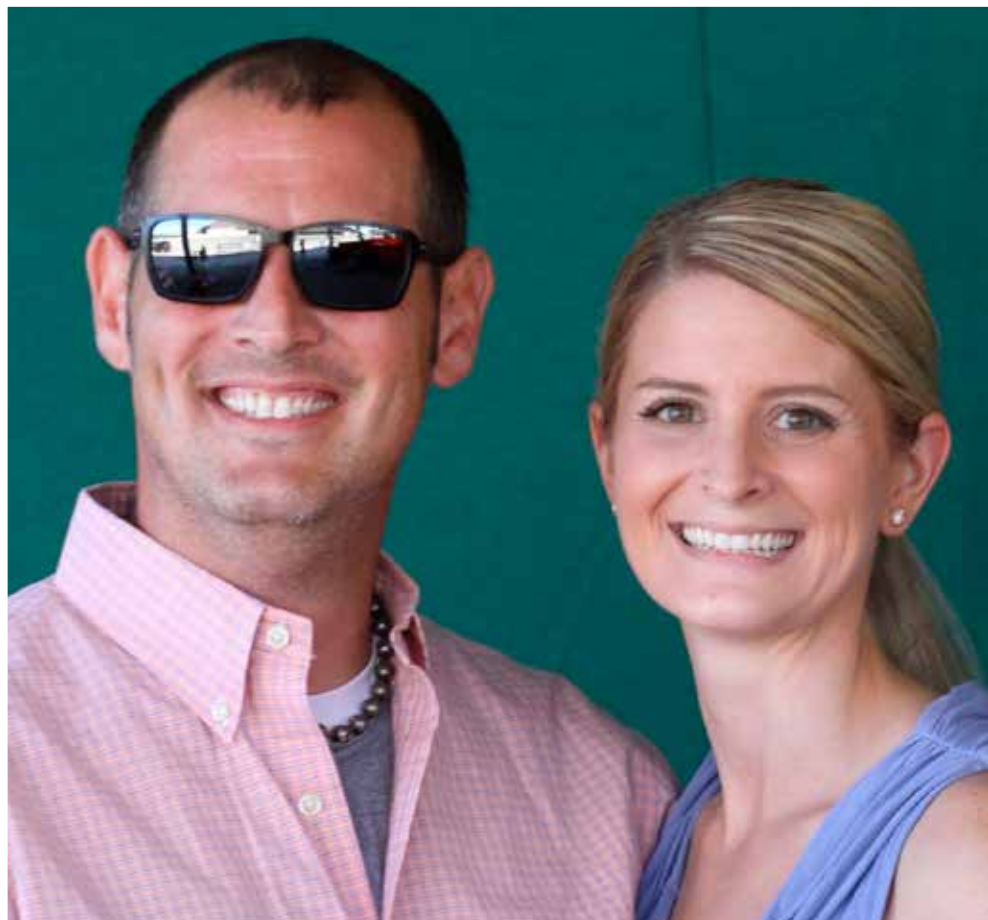
**What is the hardest thing about being a trainer?**

ALEX: Can I say dealing with the people? LOL. In all reality, balancing it all takes its toll but strangely, I thrive on it. Keeping the horses, clients, employees and my husband Stephen all happy is a true balancing act all while keeping bookwork up to date and the barn running smoothly. Some days, weeks, months are definitely tougher than others but it does keep me on my toes!

**What advice do you have for the younger generation who have their eyes set on becoming horse trainers?**

ALEX: I have had several younger people work for me over the six years I have been in business and I think the biggest thing I have learned they need to be mentored on is that this business is a lot of work. There are not many vacation days, the hours are long, it's really more of a lifestyle than just a job.

To be successful, you must be willing to sacrifice and sacrifice a lot. There are many things I feel like I have given up to get to where I am at age 35 - I wouldn't change that, but you definitely have to decide where your priorities lie.



Also, the other big thing is they have to learn to deal with people. We are not in the horse business; we are in the people business. It cannot all be done over text, DM or email (do younger kids even email?). Being able to talk to a parent about where their child is in his or her riding or call a client to tell them their horse has sustained a significant injury takes practice, diplomacy and confident speaking skills. Sometimes, I am still not good at it.

I also think the younger generation needs to understand how important it is to get involved with the associations. Most of these operate because of volunteers. As the national co-chair of the UPHA Young Professionals Committee for over two years now, it is amazing how difficult it is to get people involved.

We are all in this together people. Someday the leadership will be up to us and younger people should take an interest in getting to know how things work. There are many ways to become involved at the local level with UPHA, ASHA and AMHA. If anyone has an interest or questions on how to do so, please contact me.

**What do you think is essential for the industry to focus on to ensure its success?**

ALEX: Whew, this is a loaded question! I think our industry is at a very pivotal point right now with many things. I think we need more young people willing to teach. It is almost impossible to find anyone who is willing to teach.

Without riding lessons we have no client base for the future. I understand the desire to only want to train but you still have to know how to train your amateur riders to ride and show their horses so why not learn by teaching up/down lessons?

We are no longer in an industry where clients purchase horses for trainers to show as a general rule. Those days are over. If you can't communicate what you are doing to get a horse to perform, it's really hard to teach someone else to ride it.

On the flip side, we need more people to breed so we have a product to sell to the clients we are bringing into the industry. I think the days of the large breeding farms are also over but, even if people urge clients who own a mare to breed one or two babies per year, that helps. These two pieces must work hand in hand - it's basic supply and demand economics.

I also think diversification is key. We can't be afraid to take on a Morgan, Friesian, Dutch harness horse, whatever someone will send for training. Some of the best stock portfolios are the ones with diversification and I think that is key to a successful business too.

Although there are other issues out there within our industry (lack of attendance at shows, the rising cost of everything, lack of smaller circuit shows, middle market horses are the toughest to sell, the list goes on), I think if we can work towards more lessons, more clients, more horses, some of the other problems will work themselves out over time.

We have some fantastic leaders within UPHA, ASHA, AMHA etc. right now so I firmly believe things will move in a positive direction. They have to. I tell people all the time, it takes a village and we are blessed to have a great one!