

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 Chris Bernard who is the trainer, along with owner and trainer Kathleen Peeples at Waterford Farm in Oxford, New Jersey.

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

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

CHRIS: I grew up on Black Lake Run Farm which was my family's farm in Philadelphia. My mom, Maria Bernard ran the facility, and had me riding horses and cleaning stalls since I could walk. Her love of Morgan Horses got me involved in this breed at a young age. I taught my first pony, Skippy, to drive when I was just 7 years old. And began showing Morgans shortly after.

What made you decide to become a professional trainer?

CHRIS: Growing up in this industry, working at training stables since I was 10 years old, I knew early on this was what I wanted to spend my life doing. I worked other non-horse jobs, but always came back to the horses. So when I had a chance to train professionally, I made the decision to devote the rest of my life to the horses and this business.

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

CHRIS: My first job was working for Mason Training Stables in Lehigh, PA. From ages 10-14 I did any job they threw at me, from cleaning buggies to helping groom horses. This was actually the time that some people may remember me as "Buggy Boy". I would go around at shows, proudly handing out my business cards and cleaning carts for countless trainers.

One of my customers, Waterford Farm, turned out to be my next employer. When I was 15, I started grooming for them every summer, traveling to shows. After a few years working horses on my own, I took a full time training position at Waterford Farm with Kathy Peeples in 2016.

Who are your role models/mentors? Why?

CHRIS: My biggest role models and mentors are Lynn and Kathy Peeples. From breeding, to starting colts, to working with a challenging horse, Lynn is a master at all aspects of horsemanship. His non-stop mentality and attention to detail shows through on every horse he works. From a horse's training, to the brass on their harness he has done it all to perfection. I've always admired the passion that he shows for the horses, and could listen to him talk about "the great ones" for hours.

Kathy's knowledge of the horse business is everything from vet care, to the bookwork and everything in between. She's taught me a lot about the value of consistency in both training horses and running a business. The strength she showed after her cancer diagnosis, coming to the barn every day and still working horses even after a chemo treatment shows how determined she is. It's motivation to keep going even during the most difficult times.

What is your favorite thing about being a trainer?

CHRIS: Being with the horses every day, and making connections with them from day one in their training. From teaching them to be brushed, to breaking them to harness I enjoy every part of the process. The feeling of accomplishment, when a colt I just met a few months ago is wearing a blue ribbon for the first time is a huge part of it for me. Being



photo by Howie Schatzberg

with them every step of the way, working through their quirks and pushing them to reach their potential.

One of my favorite experiences as a trainer so far was when I showed Cherrydale Casanova to his first World Championship win in Park Harness.

What is the hardest thing about being a trainer?

CHRIS: The horses become family for us, and dealing with the death of a horse has to be the hardest part. While it's never easy to lose a horse, for me it was hardest to lose a young horse who was robbed the opportunity to reach their potential, and their chance to trot through an in-gate. Days like those are ones we hope to never have, but also make me appreciate my time with each horse I work with even more.

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

CHRIS: There's so much you can learn from watching and listening to other trainers. That was where it all started for me. Studying what they do and how they do it, and incorporating it into your own style of training.

Not every trainer starts out working the best horses of the breed, but trying to make each horse the best it can be will get you ahead every time. Each horse is going to be different, and taking your time is key. But if you stay patient and determined, the end result will be all you ever dreamed of as that young kid watching your role model work a horse.

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

CHRIS: I think the biggest thing for me would be to consolidate the number of shows during the season. Have it so the numbers of horses at the shows go up, and that the classes are full and competitive. Instead of having a show every other week, make shows something to look forward to.