



A master of harness horses, Stevens' final World Champion was SYP High Definition who won the Park Harness title in 2009.



Stonecroft Trilogy was another multi-titled world champion who benefited from Stevens' knowledge.

Remembering



The team of Rick Stevens, HVK Courageous Flaire and Heidi Kunkel will never be forgotten. They accounted for three world championships in harness and under saddle.

BY BOB FUNKHOUSER

"He loved, loved, loved the horses," said longtime friend and client Heidi Kunkel of the late Rick Stevens.

Stevens recently lost his courageous battle with cancer. He was 52.

From the time he was a kid right up until his final days on this earth, Stevens was consumed with horses. It all began with his mom and dad, Dick and Lucy Stevens.

"Horses were our dad's passion and our mom's fear," said Rick's sister Angela Carote. "Rick's persistence and begging my dad is what got us into horses. As my dad said, 'we started with two old nags that were ready for the glue factory.' Rick got a chubby, hairy Palomino and I got a black, skinny Standardbred. Dad told us that if we took the responsibility to care for these two we would go on to bigger and better things."

Horses did remain a part of their lives, Angela enjoying them for pleasure and trail riding, Rick as a trainer of World Champions. Rick's initials were the same as his dad's (CRS) and therefore CRS Morgans was born when they gravitated to the breed that Rick saw and admired on the New England circuit. One of their top horses was CRS Celebrity.

Stevens' habit of being a perfectionist started with that chubby Palomino and carried him all the way to the winner's circle of the Morgan Grand National many times over. According to his sister, Stevens would take care of that Palomino like she was a superstar.

"He was that way about everything to do with horses, every little detail," said Carote. "We had a lot of fun growing up."

Stevens showed Western on the local New England circuit and did so well other kids wanted to borrow and show his horse. He was a star in both Western Pleasure and Western Seat Equitation. It was also during this time that he struck up a friendship with a girl who showed saddle seat.

"I was 12 or 13 and Rick was 14 or 15 and we would hang out all the time," said Heidi Kunkel. "He told me he wanted to learn to ride saddle seat so I invited him to the barn where I was riding with Carolyn Mills and he started taking lessons. He was terrible at first but his love for the horses and determination took over and he worked his way up."

"He went to work for Meg Preston and then took a job in Oklahoma for a while. When he came back East, I was at Troutbrook Farm then and we started seeing each other again on the same circuit. Rick was always on the rail for me. Not long after that I took several years off from the horses but when I came back I ran into Rick and said something like, 'it might be nice to get a horse again.' Well, Rick was great at spending your money without you even knowing it. That next week Rick invited Laura Valerio and me to go on a road trip to look at a few horses. We went to a few barns and saw several horses and finally I asked him, 'What are we looking for?' He responded, 'You.' I didn't realize that I was looking for a horse but on that trip we bought Outrageous Courageous as a weanling from Peggy Alderman. Then we bought JW Faire Play and eventually HVK Courageous Flaire."

Of course, the rest was history. Kunkel and Courageous won the Amateur Park Harness World Championship and then two Amateur Park Saddle World Championships before retiring him. Before their time together was over Stevens and



At the 2010 Morgan Grand National Stevens presented the trophy in the Park Harness World Championship to Stan Bodnar as Stevens had won it the year before.

Rick

Kunkel would also have the 2000 Park Harness World Champion and 2005 English Pleasure World Champion in Stonecroft Byzantine and the 2009 Park Harness World Champion SYP High Definition. Their successes as an owner/trainer team were simply amazing.

Kunkel credits that success to Stevens being such a perfectionist. When he realized that training Morgans was what he wanted to do, he went at it full steam ahead.

"He was actually a pain in the butt because he was such a perfectionist," explained Kunkel. "We used to make fun of him because he was so nit picky about everything he did, but that's what made Rick who he was."

"He could be an ass at the horse shows. We were there to be competitive and have fun. He was there to do his job. Sometimes the pressure of shows turned him into a beast. We still loved him because we knew he was so focused on making our horses the best they could possibly be. He was a very happy man when we were winning."

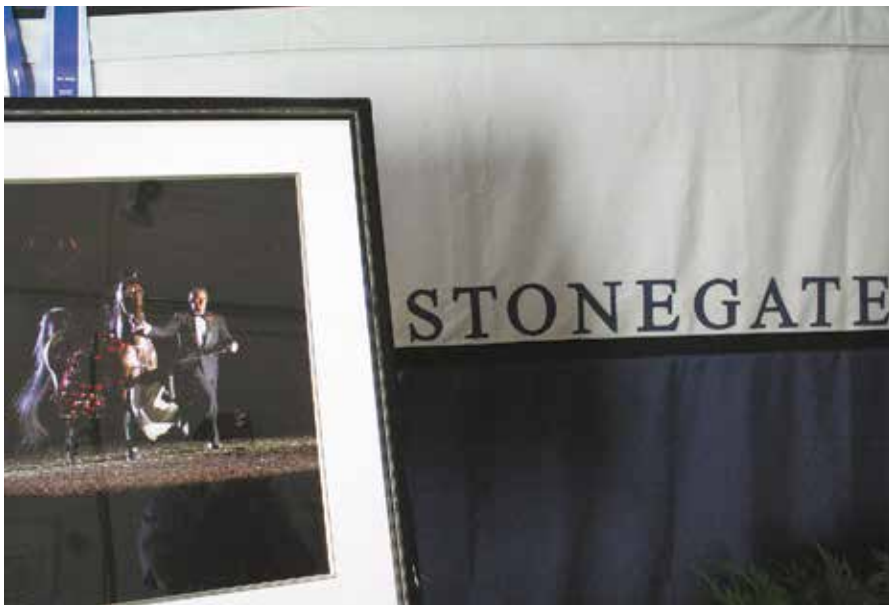
Another person who played a major role in Stevens' life was Laura (Valerio) MacKinnon.

"Rick and I met in 1983 when I had just graduated from college," said MacKinnon. "I had wanted a horse all of my childhood but my parents always said, no, no, no. They were building this big house when I came home from school and the contractor was a man named Dick Stevens. Somehow we started talking about horses one day and I told him I had always wanted a horse and was looking for one. He told me about his son and before you knew it he sold me an untrained stallion and a mare."

"I was always very interested in genealogy and the more research I did, I fell



Known to be meticulous about the way he presented and turned horses out, Stevens had many in hand triumphs. He led Man About Town LPS to the 1997 World Champion Stallion title.



The Stonegate tack room curtains and a picture of Stevens leading HVK Courageous Flaire during his retirement ceremony were hung for the last time at this year's Morgan Grand National.

in love with Waseeka's In Command. I wanted a stallion with those lines so, Rick bought me HRH Image Command as a yearling and we sold him as a two or three-year-old. I had several horses in training with him over the years as well as some partnership investments. We bought Brief Encounter together and sold him. I also met Heidi [Kunkel] through Rick and we became inseparable.

"What I remember most about Rick is that he was always funny and carefree. He was a serious horseman but always enjoyed life. As a trainer I most admired his horses' headsets and great mouths. He was also great about developing a horse's back end. Most all of his horses had great, balanced trots. He was meticulous about everything he did. He loved the horses and they loved him back. His patience and attention to detail is also what made him so successful with in hand horses.

"The funniest thing about Rick is each year after Oklahoma he would always come home and say he was burnt out, that he needed a hobby or something. A couple of weeks would go by and he would be over it and back in the barn hard at it. Everything about his life had to do with horses. Even on his vacations he would spend the time going to visit different barns looking for horses. This past year when he really didn't feel well he would say, 'I need to work horses.'"

Roxanne Sardelli became another part of the equation. For many years at horse shows across the country you could find Stevens with the "Three Musketeers," (Heidi, Laura and Roxanne). For Sardelli, Stevens had such greats as Shaker's Pedro, Stonecroft Shalimar, Cy-Don's Mr. Super and Crinoline's Regal Flaire, among others.

"Rick was the funniest person with the most infectious laugh I've ever heard," said Sardelli. "Like most of us, Rick had his issues, but he would lay his life down for a friend. He was the first one there for you in a crisis.

"As a trainer he was phenomenal when it came to understanding form to function and why horses did what they did. He was so brilliant with every aspect of

a horse and he had a gift for teaching. I think because he understood form to function so well he was able to relay information to his amateurs that made sense to them. We could understand why and what he was asking for. Although he was known as a harness man, Rick was also a great rider. Showing under saddle was harder for him because he didn't do a lot of it, but he was a great rider.

"One of the things that most people didn't know about Rick was how sensitive and caring he was. He was emotional like his father, but he hid it well. What most people saw was the funny Rick or the hard ass Rick, but he was extremely sensitive."

Because he was such a loyal friend to those around him, Stevens' illness and eventual death was hard to

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take, however, the three amigos and the horses were there for him. Even when the treatments and cancer were pulling him down, his thoughts were to be with the horses.

Just the day before he went into hospice and he was so feeble he made sure he went to the barn to do what he loved most, drive a horse.

"We got him in the buggy and he drove the hair off of my four-year-old," said Heidi Kunkel. "He was so weak, but the look on his face meant everything to us knowing he got to drive one last time."

From the days of a Western Palomino to many trips down Oklahoma's victory lane, Stevens led the life many only dream of. He had a great time with his friends and horses, the two things that mattered most to him.

In addition to the above mentioned stars, Stevens also developed, showed and/or sold such greats as Stonecroft Trilogy, Man About Town LPS, Royal Crown Cavalier, Winterset Thyme N Agin, KD Hot To Trot, Starboard's Blitz Krieg, KDS Star Wars, Whispering Material Girl, KD Electra, CN The Commanding Touch, Stonecroft Intuition, Cartier, FRF Seattle Reign, Sarde's Samurai, Narragansett Spirit, Meet Joe Black, Intrepid Behold, A Man's Man, Treble's Pomp & Byzazz, Stonecroft Triumphant and Sarde's Surreal, among others.

From Stonegate Farm in Rhode Island where Stevens spent many years developing most of the above champions he also developed horsemen. Roxanne Sardelli credited Stevens with being a great teacher and that also included teaching aspiring trainers. His knowledge and work ethic was passed on to Shawn Amazeen, Jaisen von Ballmoos and Anne Benson, among others.

The Morgan world and Stevens' friends will never be quite the same without the laugh, intensity, compassion and horsemanship he was known for, however, all were made better because of his time with us.



Stonecroft Byzantine was a World Champion in Park Harness and English Pleasure for Stevens and Heidi Kunkel.