

# WGC Bloodlines in the Sport Saddlebred

BY JULIE LYNN ANDREW



Photo by Judith S. Buck

Freelance Agent ridden by Kathy Priest at a combined training event in 1985.

At this time of year, more than any other, breeders consider what it really takes to build the perfect beast; an American Saddlebred who will bring home the glory from the World's Championship Horse Show. Years of planning, careful study of the bloodlines, superb training, and the essential ingredient – luck – all factor into the equation. You need an athlete, but in our breed they need one special requisite quality. Today's show ring paradigm requires a horse that sets up in a very special way.

As trainer, breeder, and judge of World's Champions Melissa Moore states, "They have to have a headset." The perfect headset is the Holy Grail of the show horse world. If a horse has the head set and can raise up from his withers, and turn over in his poll, he can be a show horse. It is simply a question of finding the correct, suitable section for competition. Judy Werner, whose Redwing Farm breeding program combines the best of her first and second generation efforts, in WC Designed, says she asks the question, "where can they put their head?" early on in the process of determining which of her young stock will easily fit the show ring mold. WC Designed is by Callaway Hill's Farm's WC Caramac, out of Redwing Farm's wonderful producer, Sultan's Dianna.

Werner says she is looking for "a balanced athletic individual, who is knock-down gorgeous." Carl Fischer, whose Meadow Lake breeding program has produced horses like WGC<sup>CH</sup>Onion, and has emphasized the value of mares from families that produce powerhouses, states, "I like a powerful back end, with bend in the hock joints. A horse with sloppy hocks does not have the push and drive we need. I also want a horse who is brisk off of their hocks." For the best of the horses competing in other, non-traditional Saddlebred disciplines, these words ring true, as well.

Other qualities are essential, and many of these are also shared with horses that succeed in disciplines such as Dressage. These include structural elements such as a correct back, proper leg conformation, the ability to take a great step behind, drive off of their hocks, and good range of motion in their shoulders. In addition, the gameness exhibited by



Photo by Linda Cawthon

Harry Callahan competed in the Prix St. George classes at the Kentucky Horse Park in 2006.

show horses is also important in all other disciplines. No Dressage rider wants to have a horse do 10 of the 15 consecutive one-tempi flying changes of lead necessary at the Grand Prix level, and quit. They, too, need an athlete who can be game enough to get through a classically challenging test — with brilliance. The lofty movement which is natural to our horses has become the defining factor at the international level in Dressage. And the great hock action that produces powerhouses is needed in all competitive horses, no matter which show ring or which discipline.

When breeding for that Louisville winner, the smart breeders aren't reinventing the wheel; they look at what has come before. In 2008, as in years before, the breeder who was overwhelmingly driving the competition was once again Callaway Hills. Through horses who were born on those hallowed hills, to those produced from the stallions and mares bred there, there is no denying that this program is integral to the success of the show horses in rings across the country. The green shavings seem to invite these horses to perform at levels that set new standards in the breed. Twice as many horses directly from this

program won classes as the next breeder; almost three times as many started in classes, and almost twice as many actually placed. That is true dominance.

The descendants of WGC<sup>CH</sup>Wing Commander are essential to the pedigree of that most sought after of show horses - the five gaited horse, and also in many of the best prospects for other disciplines. In fact, Wing figures prominently in the papers of twenty of the top thirty sires of winners at Louisville for 2008. Still representative in large degree is the beautiful stallion WC Valley View Supreme. Of course, his heir at Ruxer Farms, Supreme Sultan, is the source of many of these lines, through sons like Worthy Son, Sultan's Santana, Santana's Charm, and a host of fabulous mares, including Sultan's Dianna and Sultan's Gold Star. The Valley View Supreme sons Status Symbol, Supreme Spirit, Longview Supreme, and the Valley View Supreme daughter, Sweet Sharon Supreme, all represent the family with great individuals still making themselves known. Stonewall Supreme, a stallion that might never have been left entire in today's world, to leave any legacy, has left an enormous footprint, largely through daughters like WGC

<sup>CH</sup>Supreme Airs, <sup>CH</sup>Stonewall's Sound of Music, and Dixie Duchess. Power and pretty are carefully combined to create today's winning competition horses, no matter the venue.

The "golden cross" of Wing Commander and Supreme Sultan blood also figures prominently in the breeding of Borealis, the record setting sport Saddlebred stallion. His sire, Undulata's Man of the Hour, WGC <sup>CH</sup>Man on the Town, out of the Supreme Sultan daughter, Top Billing, is a product of the Undulata Farm breeding program. Undulata's owner, Edward "Hoppy" Bennett, is also the breeder of the gorgeous Undulata's Nutcracker, another son of the Callaway cornerstone, WC Caramac. Borealis is out of a WGC <sup>CH</sup>Captive Spirit mare, whose dam is by Sultan's Great Day, bringing in the Stonewall Supreme influence. This combination created an athlete whose conformation is remarkably similar to the best European warmbloods.

In European warmblood breeding programs, the paradigm has also shifted dramatically in the past twenty years, and most dramatically in the last decade. The breeding programs have always been targeted at the production of athletes for the Olympic disciplines, with an emphasis on Dressage and Jumping. But the horses are now being bred both for rideability and blood. The "stump pulling" warmbloods, with their large, homely faces, enormous height, and big, flat feet, are mostly gone now. In their place is a new, light horse. According to Chrissa Hoffman, the brilliant USDF Gold Medalist, and trainer of the American Saddlebred Dressage icon, Harry Callahan, "the programs are breeding more refinement, more thoroughbred, lighter builds, and, they are hotter." Horses like the incredibly gifted Moorland's Totillas, and the brilliant grey mare with the busy tail, Blu Hors Matine, are setting new standards. According to Hoffman, they have "greater range of motion" than those horses that were formerly the top echelon. In American Saddlebred terms, these horses are oily movers who can trot over level, and do it either in place or extending across the arena. Harry's sire, the Supreme Sultan son WC Supreme Heir, leads most lists as a sire



Photo by Terri Washburn

Angela Sommers rides Outside The Line in his first Hunter Country Pleasure class at Summerfest in Cannon Falls, Minnesota.

of World's Champion show horses. Harry's dam, Make My Day, was sired by The New York Times, representing the WGC <sup>CH</sup>Wing Commander line.

Callaway Hills doyenne Betty Weldon had but one goal when she started her breeding program in earnest: she was going to prove that WGC <sup>CH</sup>Will Shriver was the best stallion ever. Today, a case could be made that she did attain her goal. The current mistress of Callaway Hills, Tony Weldon, has a goal, as well. She wants to reduce and refine her program from her mother's numbers, and produce a very special group of young superstars. Tony has gleaned breeding tips from the best, and

offers, "We were told that you should always breed the best to the best, or to look at what the best is that the mare has produced, when looking for the next great show horse or stallion," Tony shares, "but if we had done only that, there would never have been a WC Caramac, or a WC Callaway's Blue Norther." It is not hard to realize how much the poorer our breed and the show rings would be without these legends. "I am looking at a nuclear program. We know what works, and we need to keep doing it," she states.

Tony's mother's program was expansive, "Mom had the luxury to experiment. In today's market, we need to

produce World's Champions." Tony shares Betty's sentiment that World's Champions come in all divisions and disciplines. In 1981, one of Betty Weldon's experiments was to ship the then three-year-old Freelance Agent, by her World's Champion sire Kate's Scoop, out of the Callaway's Johnny Gillen mare, Connie Gillen, to England, to be trained to be a Three Day Event horse. Jane Starkey, a top competitor, and reserve Olympic rider for England, found the horse to be "a quick learner, with a big heart — and he loves to jump." In comparing the American Saddlebred to her English Thoroughbreds, she opined that, "they are more intelligent, and learn faster."

In today's Callaway Hills breeding program, Tony has superior prospects to offer both the talented Amateur-Owner/Trainer and the most ambitious Louisville competitors. She is sending her gifted

young stock (and stallions) out to compete, and prove their worth, and they are still winning. Proving the athleticism and great minds from this program away from the traditional show rings is

Outside the Line, owned by Kim and Derrick Moore. By WC Callaway's Wish Me Will, and out of a WGC <sup>CH</sup>Man on the Town mare, "Atlas" fox hunts, competes as a Dressage horse, and has just begun to visit the hunter pleasure ring.

Bob Ruxer, whose wisdom is informed by a lifetime of breeding and showing American Saddlebreds, offers, "Horses need jobs, just like people, and while some don't have the attributes of a 'show horse' that just means he's meant for another division, and we're now seeing those divisions gaining popularity. So, that makes these horses 'show horses' also. Tradition is so

engrained in all of us. Yes, I never dreamed of showing horses under western or hunt seat tack as we see today." The stallion, WC sire Our Charm, owned by Dr. Nancy Trent, is a sire of top show horses, as well as being the sire of the up and coming hunt seat competitor, Good Deal, owned by Kimberly Moore. Good Deal's dam is the WC <sup>CH</sup>King of Highpoint daughter, Highpoint's Queen Mary. Other useful horses like the pleasure mare, Mirrored Beauty, who is out of WC Hayfield's Bold Night's final foal, Best for Last, and is owned by Sara Selvaggio. Trent's lovely stallion combines the Sultan line, through the dynamic Santana's Charm, and is out of a Will Shriver mare. Other wonderful Supreme Sultan sired stallions include Sultan's Great Day, combining Supreme Sultan, and Stonewall Supreme, who has produced brilliant show horses, like WC Winter Day, as

well as fabulous western horses, like the venerable and celebrated A Magic Surprise.

The beginnings of the Western Country Pleasure and Shatner classes had

some Ruxer influence as well. "I'll never forget years ago when we brought a colt in out of the field to start. I called our staff out to see, and jokingly said that he looks more like a cowboy horse and the poor guy will just spend his life trying to do something he wasn't engineered for, and bring disappointment to whoever would own him. One of our staff said 'Well, heck, let's have some fun—let him be a cowboy horse if that's what he needs to be.' Off he went to a western trainer in Illinois, and the next year William Shatner, who was just beginning with Saddlebreds, asked me about what we did with all our horses, as far

as finding homes for them. I jokingly told him about my western horse and how I had no idea what I was going to do with him. But Shatner had an idea, and you know the rest of the story. That horse was TJ, and the Shatner competition was created."

Ruxer is enthusiastic about the quality of today's Saddlebred western pleasure horses, as well, "Now just look how our Saddlebreds have improved over the years in this section. Those horses are true athletes, probably more identifiable to the general public than our super show stars, and that's a pretty big pill for me to swallow, but it is the truth. More people identify with that kind of horse.

"Then we find there's another untapped market for the hunt type Saddlebred, each year that's getting better and better, albeit slowly. But truth be known some of these horses can do things even our big time show horses can't do," Bob states, "While I will always be partial to the traditional Saddlebred classes, I certainly appreciate what this unique breed can do if only given the chance. There's no doubt in my mind the Saddlebred will one day make its mark in the Dressage world also, if enough are willing to make the most of what we already have."

What are the physical requirements for all these competition worlds, from a structural viewpoint? Dr. Chris Uhlinger, an Equine Veterinarian practicing in North Carolina, and an avid event and pleasure rider with her American Saddlebreds, explains, "It's important to consider structure (underlying conformation) as well as posture (how the horse carries himself) in the selection of an individual as a show horse or sport horse prospect. Working against the horse's natural structure and posture will prolong the training period and almost certainly cause gait, training and lameness issues."

Uhlinger continued, "For example, the head up, knees up, level croup posture desirable in a show horse is more easily obtained in a horse with a 'double hinge' or swan neck. These horses have a deep curve at the base of the neck where it exits the shoulder. This allows them to hold their necks perpendicular to the ground. In addition, they have a



Photo by Julie Lynn Andrew

Notable Saddlebred stallion Borealis, whose bloodline includes <sup>CH</sup>Captive Spirit and <sup>CH</sup>Man On The Town.

deep curve at the top of the neck (turn over) that allows them to tuck their chins to their chest. The extreme high headed position causes the back to flatten or ventroflex (bend downwards). The best of these horses can maintain good hind leg activity and gait quality despite the strain on the back required by this posture.”

The Olympic disciplines require an alternate type of conformation, “The engagement needed for sport horse and general riding horse work require a different posture. These horses must stretch forward through the head, neck, back, and loin so that the entire top line is dorsiflexed (bent slightly upward). This allows the hind legs to swing up under the horse’s center of mass. This is easiest for horses with a less extreme neck conformation, such as that found in riding horses of all types, including the older type American Saddlebreds. These horses have a shallower curve where the neck exits the shoulder and a moderate curve at the top of the neck.”

We can best serve our young horses, Dr. Uhlinger says, by identifying what they can do best, and sending them in that direction as early as possible. “Difficulties arise when horses of one natural posture are forced into the frame required by the ‘other’ posture. There is no question that ‘double-hinged’ horses can and do perform in sport horse venues; many of the warmblood jumpers are swan-necked and rather flat-backed.” There is risk for these horses, in asking those who are not inherently designed for the work, “because this posture makes hind leg engagement difficult, these horses over extend their hind legs and are prone to damage to the sacroiliac joint and hocks. Equally, the horses with more moderate curves in their neck have difficulties when forced into ‘swan’ or high-headed position. This situation is seen both in forward-headed Saddlebred checked up into swan position and in low-necked, straight-necked types forced into a more up-headed Dressage or jumper posture. In both cases, the horses are at risk of damage to the lumbrosacral joint. Horses ridden in this posture at the rack, or racing trot, may develop shear injuries in the sacroiliac joint. This is often manifested in a dete-

rioration of gait quality in the hind end, and ultimately lameness issues.”

In seeking the highest and best use for a horse, trainers are often forced to work within what they know, preparing a colt for the show horse world, and the result can be horses who “aren’t good in the bridle.” As Dr. Uhlinger explains, perhaps these horses simply are not part of that elite group of horses whose ability to wear themselves in today’s show ring posture – the vertical neckset – makes things easy. This can manifest itself most obviously in the hitching and hopping we see in a horse’s hind end. The issue is in the front end; the proof is in the hindquarters.

Obviously, we need to create programs that support the breeders’ efforts to utilize great bloodlines, and maximize their benefit. No small part of this is accomplished by ascertaining a horse’s path, as early as possible. Chrissa Hoffman suggests, “Don’t start them as a show horse unless they look like they can do it,” as this may make it easier to market the prospect to a more appropriate venue, more easily. “The American Saddlebred’s ‘upheadedness’ (compared to many warmbloods), lightness off of their feet, and natural self-carriage” lend themselves to being potential Dressage competitors. While warmbloods offer “range of motion, natural suspension, and are bred for sport,” it is Chrissa’s opinion that they can be “less rideable for Amateurs.” As this is the market with the ability to purchase, maintain, and compete with these horses, this is where our marketing efforts need to be focused.

Bob Ruxer asks, “How do we do it? It will take an effort from the breeders, the horse show managers, and the pro-

fessional trainers. Breeders need to realize that they won’t survive — even the top ones — if the unexplored markets aren’t developed. That means we need to create a stage for the other disciplines to be displayed. As the academy programs have been included in most shows today, ensuring riders for the future, we need to include the hunters and western factions. Of course it’s small now, but we have to start somewhere. That’s where the show managers need to step up and provide that stage. Albeit slowly, those divisions get traction and we’ll see some stars developing. As that happens we’ll see an emerging

market. And finally, each and every professional trainer out there will need to embrace the other disciplines...until the professionals can look at the other disciplines and start promoting them as ‘look here, this is one fine hunter or one super western horse,’ we just can’t grow as a breed. If it takes another ring at a show to accommodate this, so be it. It needs to be done, and that means now, before it’s too late. We can all be satisfied



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with tradition, the way things have always been, and we can stand on the sidelines and watch our breed deteriorate to a rarity...or we can broaden our horizons and spread our wings and see it grow. The choice is ours. The opportunity is there if we all pull together in the same direction, and rest assured that if we don’t, there are other breeds that will. We can stand back and just let things go, and see what happens, then ask ourselves when we’re no longer a sustainable commodity, ‘What happened?’” as