

Cowboy Dressage

A talented Arabian and a determined cowgirl splinter the stereotype of what it is to be a reining horse.

By Tracy Williams

A ribbon of mockery whispers through the crowd as the silver-gray stallion ambles into the ring, his classic dished face betraying an old Egyptian Arabian ancestry – a face that has fated him to battle tides of prejudice as he recomposes the definition of reining horse. The whispers recede into silence as he begins to move; as he spins and slides across the ring, applause finally shatters the silence.

C.N. Ibn Laurence, better known as JoJo, and his advocate, owner and rider, Mary Lou Raulerson, pay no mind to the mockers; their sliding stops and spins coupled with JoJo's sweet spirit negate the need to defend his classic Arabian features. There is no point in battling the scorn with words; JoJo's talent and disposition naturally sear Arabian stereotypes, allowing the pair to take the reining world by storm. JoJo and Mary Lou's focus on friendship is the key to their success both in and out of the show ring.

A Horse Apart

Sixteen-year-old JoJo, last foal of Laurence and El Reata Jossie, began his reining career at 10 years old, although his success suggests he is bolstered by more years of preparation. He had no formal training prior to this other than completing a colt-starting clinic with natural horsemanship trainer Ray Hunt. Instead, he served as Mary Lou's companion and trail horse. "He wasn't even broke good, but we rode him anyway," she says with a reminiscent chuckle.

Mary Lou gave 10-year-old JoJo a 90 day trial with local reining trainer, Jon Ingram, but he warned her not to build castles in the air of future reining glory. "[Arabians] are either the worst or the best," he cautioned. Mary Lou kept tabs on JoJo's progress, and with each check she was half-expecting to load him up and bring him home for a different career track. After 90 days, Ingram dispelled any lingering fears. "Don't bring your trailer," he said confidently. "This is a really good one."

The World of Arabian Reining

In a discipline that esteems Quarter Horse build, talent and personality, an Arabian is seldom welcomed into the club in the Eastern United States. "You can basically draw a line down the country along the Mississippi," says Eleanor Hamilton, president of the Arabian Reining Horse Association. In light of this, Hamilton and the association actively seek to build up Arabian credibility as reiners. In addition to supporting shows with

sponsorships and donations, the association is encouraging reining classes at the local level and promoting reining clinics across the East. On a larger scale, they are organizing half-Arab and pure-Arab futurities with tempting cash prizes and endorsing ARHA judges to become certified with the National Reining Horse Association. Hamilton sees the industry starting to respond. "People are starting to develop breeding programs designed to produce reining horses, whether they are half-Arabs or purebreds," she says. With breeders intelligently designing their horses to succeed and with the ARHA's backing, breed barriers may crumble.

Horses like JoJo make the ARHA's task a little easier, although he and Mary Lou have fought their own battles with Arabian prejudice. "They all figured he'd go in the ring, throw up his tail and run off," she says of their early showing days. But JoJo is a living testament to the unimportance of breed. "If a horse is built like an athlete, they should be able to do anything," Mary Lou says. "You just have to find out what they like to do." Whether it's reining or any other discipline, the deciding factor on success should be the talent of the contestant, not the bloodline.

JoJo and Mary Lou perform their first sliding stop at the 2003 Scottsdale show.

Although JoJo began training in Florida, his Arabian ancestry soon became a conflict of interest. Ingram was primarily a Quarter Horse trainer, which left him and Mary Lou pursuing different show circuits. To continue the discipline, Mary Lou shipped JoJo to the West to work with LaRae Fletcher Powell, reining trainer in Washington, then to trainer John O'Hara in Texas. Mary Lou credits JoJo's success to the part each trainer played in crafting his finished form. "Everybody added something to him," she says. While JoJo excelled, the distance kept the two apart sometimes until the day before a show. Fortunately, JoJo's willing personality and natural talent eased them both into the show ring despite the lack of practice time. Years of companionship outside the ring made acquiring new skills a smooth transition. For example, Mary Lou didn't learn the epitome of reining riding – the sliding stop – until the day before a show. Armed with confidence in her mount and a little instruction from her trainer, she was eager to learn. "I ran down there, stuck my feet out, sat down hard in the saddle, said whoa, and I heard (my trainer) from the other end of the ring: 'Holy cow! I thought you said you'd never stopped before!'" she recalls with a laugh over the successful venture. Each new reining skill was simply a polishing touch on their foundational relationship.

Although distance strained Mary Lou and JoJo, their show ring victories swelled. His résumé for 2003 and 2004 catalogues an illustrious record of awards: RegionXII Amateur Reining Champion, U.S. Arabian National Top

Ten and AOTR Reining Champion, and the Scottsdale Arabian Show Open Top Ten and AOTR Top Ten. He is sure to add more accolades to the list when he returns to the show ring, but in the meantime, JoJo has been busy in the breeding shed. In 2004 and 2005, he sired four and two foals respectively, and seven foals are expected this spring. On February 11, the first of this season's crop awoke, blinking in the new sunshine – a filly stunningly reminiscent of JoJo when he was a newborn. Mary Lou expects JoJo will return to the reining pen in 2006 – as soon as she finds a trainer who doesn't require another westward journey.

Although JoJo is a talented athlete, his true greatness lies in his innate sweetness.

Unlike some performance horses whose athleticism is sullied by vicious tempers, JoJo's reining and breeding talents are secondary to his personality. "His gentle disposition has won the hearts of everyone that has handled him. He is a sweet, sweet stallion," Mary Lou says. This innate sweetness is more than just chance; it is a product of a life spent with Mary Lou.

The Woman Behind the Horse

It isn't often that an interview is an introduction into a family, where a series of questions becomes an immersion in the life and culture of a subject. But on Mary Lou Raulerson's sun-sprinkled farm, her pastures of Arabs and half-Arabs are merely an extended family, and Mary Lou welcomed me with a personalized introduction to each one. Her sharp wit and ever-ready smile escorted me through her pastures as yearlings, broodmares and everything in between flocked to her, nuzzling her short gray hair, sidling as close as possible to solicit a good scratch. "I don't care if I get dirty; I can wash," Mary Lou crooned to one mare as she rubbed her withers. "I can make you happy."

The environment she has created is as close as possible to what evolution would dictate – life in the outdoors, plenty of forage, room to roam, run and roll in the mud. She clears a wide path from the spoiled show horse. "I don't like those hothouse flowers," she says with a wrinkle of distaste. Nonetheless her horses are a fine-tuned balance. They are strengthened by freedom to be horses, yet they bubble over with personality – each diverse yet each reminiscent of Mary Lou's engaging character. She has meddled just enough to build relationships.

Born and raised in south Florida, Mary Lou came to Sumterville after a 33-year career teaching high school and middle school art and science classes. Despite that chunk of time in the classroom, Mary Lou isn't satisfied; her inquisitive mind is ever-ready to store new information, and

she is now auditing the Equine Studies program at Central Florida Community College.

True to his laid-back personality, JoJo is unperturbed although buried in a pile of colorful ribbons.

Her life has been entangled in horses since she was a little fourth grader. “I came home from school dragging a horse I’d bought for \$20,” she remembers. These early days surrounded her with Saddlebreds and Quarter Horses, but after boarding at an Arabian barn, she was magnetized by a new breed. As she watched these Arabians perform a myriad of disciplines without a moment’s pause in between them, she was captivated. “I liked that idea,” she remembers thinking. “I can do everything; I can have one horse and do it all.” They are now forever intertwined.

Above All a Friendship

My jacket, face and notebook all bore traces of the wet, whiskered muzzles I had just met – each seemed to be trying to chronicle its individual influence on Mary Lou’s world in my retelling of their story. But last on our farm tour, we reached JoJo, and he swallowed the rest. Leaning on a sun-warmed fence, I watched the pair from the sidelines, as they stood in the pasture, talking to each other, comparing notes on the day, speaking and listening in turn using whatever communication life has gifted them with.

Although JoJo is both a successful reiner and an ambassador for the Arabian breed, he is first and foremost a friend Mary Lou has known since the moment he opened his eyes. “I bred him,” she says. “This colt was born in my arms.” And years of companionable trail riding and the life of a pasture pet before his career began has cultivated an easy friendship, tempered with mutual respect – the reason behind JoJo’s return to the East. Perhaps such a move has put his career on hold, but Mary Lou is more driven by her animals’ welfare than their success. “He was seriously depressed,” she said of JoJo’s first experience away from home. “I hate having him gone, and he likes having me around. He thinks the right thing is for him to live right here.” As long as they are together, the rest is secondary.

As the interview drew to a close, I mentally recalled JoJo’s long list of qualities. With so many to choose from, what has captivated Mary Lou? Is it his ability to slide across a ring, his versatility or his gentle and willing disposition? Not quite. Her steady stream of conversation paused for a moment as she contemplated the question. Placing her hand on JoJo’s silvery neck, she turned to me with sincere eyes. “How often do you get a

horse that loves you back?"

Nothing but Seminole

Mary Lou began feeding Seminole feeds in the early 80s. Through the years she has occasionally sampled other products, but the switch never lasts long. "I've tried other things, but I always come back to Seminole," she says. "They just look better." She carefully reads feed tags and ingredient lists and appreciates the quality and variety of Seminole's products. "If you can't find what you need (at Seminole), it doesn't exist," she says.

JoJo thrives on Ultra Dynamix supplemented with Ultra Bloom and Equalizer. In addition, Mary Lou feeds Alfa Balancer and Grass Balancer Minerals, Seminole MSN and the Mare and Foal formula to her varied herds of horses.

To read more about JoJo and view pictures of his offspring, visit www.marylouraulersonarabians.com.