

Super Indeed

Rugged Lark, the world's most famous Superhorse stallion, is an American icon.

By Summer Best

It's a sticky summer morning, but Carol Harris and Rugged Lark don't seem to notice as they walk breezily up the driveway to Bo-Bett Farm. Carol smiles at her world-famous stallion. He's an impressive study – gleaming coat, outstanding conformation, talented, smart and kind. As he steps lightly on the pavement, he carries his ears perked forward, giving a dignified sideways glance to check out his mares and foals. Together, Carol and “Lark” depict purpose, style and charisma.

“I always knew Lark was different,” Carol says. “He's taught me so much. He's one of those horses that learns his job, and you just leave him alone. Let him do everything right the first time.”rugged lark

Rugged Lark, born at Carol's Bo-Bett Farm in 1981, was bred and owned by a family from Illinois until Carol purchased him as a yearling – with hopes that he'd mature into a top breeding stallion for Bo-Bett. Today, it seems as if Carol has had her eye on him for a lifetime, and the bay son of Thoroughbred Really Rugged has far exceeded her earliest expectations. She enjoys telling of his awards, like how he was the world's first two-time AQHA Superhorse in 1987, and the first Superhorse to sire a Superhorse when his son, The Lark Ascending took the title in 1991. She doesn't mind recounting all the wins, describing his glory days in the show-ring spotlight, days when he performed bridleless exhibitions around the country, days when he performed at the Olympics in Atlanta, and more.

“I never get tired of watching him,” she says, inserting a video into the VCR in Lark's sparkling trophy room at Bo-Bett. An image of Lark appears on the television screen, where, in 1997, he performed his farewell performance at the AQHA World Championship Show.

“ Every time I watch it, I see something different,” Carol says of the video. “I learn something new.”

But as much as she loves to remember Lark's shiny moments in front of thousands of fans, cameras and peers, Carol never considers resting on her laurels. The way she sees it, Bo-Bett's prominence in the horse industry doesn't hinge on yesterday's stardom. Every day at the farm offers opportunities for improvement.

What drives her to be such a success?

“ I don't really think of it as being driven,” Carol says, remembering the

myriad magazine, newspaper and television interviews that have focused on her prestige in years past. "I love this business because I believe in what I'm doing, and I love what I'm learning. I find new ways to do things all the time."

Carol aspires to continue the tradition for which Lark is famous: partnerships of trust, respect and dignity between humans and their horses.

"When Lark was little, he taught me to respect him and to listen to him," she says. "With him, it didn't take long to realize that you cannot accomplish a lot of training by using intimidation. There's a better way."

Heart for a Horse

Carol's eyes sparkle when she describes seeing a trainer with a soft hand and a heart for horses.

"You can tell they care. They take the time the horses deserve. They listen and feel what the horse is trying to tell them," she says.

On the other hand, she fears the industry is falling victim to trends that take joy and sensitivity out of animal ownership and focus too much on making money.

Lark's Stats

"What's sad today is seeing how many people around horses don't even like them," she says.

"We tend to want to compete too soon, break them too soon and win too soon. I don't think people spend enough time on the ground, doing the steps you have to take. You should work first to have good ground manners on every horse."

To prove her point, Carol walks into the barn, unties Lark and clips his entire face and ears as the 21-year-old stallion stands quietly in the center aisle. A few minutes later, she walks him outside, asks him to bow like a gentleman, sit down, lie down and pose for photographs. The entire time, Lark proves his trust and respect for Carol, responding on cue and paying attention to her only (and, of course, the horse she sneaks him occasionally). In the past, Carol and Lark have entertained fans by dressing up in sequins and tuxedos, respectively, as they sipped champagne and toasted good days.

"Your horse should want to spend time with you," she explains. "They should come to you in the stall with their ears forward. They should come out on a slack lead. They have to respect you as much as you respect them."

Carol, whose integrity in the horse business brings so much respect to the table that, in 1997, she was inducted into the AQHA Hall of Fame, isn't afraid to share her views – even when they are unpopular.

“If someone asks me how I feel about something in the industry, they're going to get an honest answer,” she says. “I try not to volunteer it as much as I used to, but if they ask me, they'd better be prepared. I'll tell them what I really think.”

For example, she has a bone to pick with riders and handlers who intimidate and mistreat their horses.

“I feel badly that the horses – and many Quarter Horses – have gotten to where only the wealthiest can show and compete,” she says. “It's a trend that keeps going further and further that way, and we've almost forgotten to concentrate on the horses. Now, you go to big shows, and it's almost like a truck show, a trailer show and a competition to see who has the most expensive clothes.”

It's a movement Harris works hard to reverse. By inviting visitors to see Rugged Lark at Bo-Bett year-round, and by continuing Lark's guest appearances at community and equine-related events, access to her superstar stallion is not limited to the rich and famous. She never tires of seeing people from all walks of life enjoy the horse for what he is. She doesn't complain when they walk up her driveway and want “just one more chance” to pet Lark on the neck or a moment to rub the itchy spot on his belly.

“I know these people. I've seen these people,” she says. “These are the people who truly love horses. These are the people that Lark loves, too.” rugged lark

Years of Knowledge

Carol, now 79, is still the think tank behind major decisions at Bo-Bett, and breeding has become one of her preeminent talents. Her expert eye is trained to distinguish outstanding conformation, and she's particularly intuitive when it comes to recognizing disposition, movement and trainability. Mostly, she says humbly, it comes down to luck.

“I think some people are destined to be successful at breeding. They have a feel for it – a knack for it. Others study genetics thoroughly, but I don't,” she laughs. “When you ask people about bloodlines, they have all sorts of opinions, and they're all different. Mostly, I pay attention to my horses. I go more by individuals.”

Every spring, Bo-Bett breeds 25-30 mares of its own, and Rugged Lark stands to 50-60 mares.

“ I don’t breed all my mares to Lark, because I’ve got some Lark daughters,” Carol explains. “The nice thing is that I have Thoroughbred mares to breed to Lark for hunters, and then cowpony-type mares that I breed to him, which go on to become reiners or ropers or other athletes. They can do it all.”

Youngsters usually live at Bo-Bett until they are 2, after which Carol sends them to a local trainer she trusts to instill strong foundation work.

“ From there, they go to a hunter trainer or a western trainer, or they’re sold,” she says. “Most of them are sold from right here on the farm. I’m very careful about where they go. They need to go to the best homes. I try very, very hard to get them to the right homes.”

His progeny prove that he’s not only an outstanding performer, but also a remarkable sire. Carol is serious about matching foals with the perfect owners, and the Lark lines of success prove it. In 1991, Lark’s son, The Lark Ascending, was named Superhorse at the AQHA World Show, which made him the first Superhorse to be sired by a Superhorse. Then, in 1993, son Regal Lark was named reserve Superhorse, followed by another Superhorse win by Look Whos Larkin in 1999.

Out of 19 foal crops, Lark has sired 478 registered American Quarter Horses and 13 American Paint Horses. Of the 478, 11 have become AQHA world champions and nine have been named reserve world champions. His foals have garnered more than 11,200 points in AQHA-approved competition.

But they don’t stop there. Lark foals have soared in top USA Equestrian events as hunter-jumpers and dressage horses, and also within western sanctioned events, like the National Reining Horse Association, where his get have earned more than \$95,000. They’ve also picked up checks exceeding \$16,576 within the National Snaffle Bit Association, and more than \$4,440 in National Reined Cow Horse Association-approved competition.

Who’s Retired?

Today, Lark has quite the dream job.

Mornings and afternoons, he enjoys grazing on lush green grass and entertaining visitors as they arrive at Bo-Bett Farm for their chance to pose with him for photographs. And, of course, there are his mares to look over.

But that’s not all. Since his retirement from the show arena in 1987, the

year he acquired his second AQHA Superhorse title, Lark has made dozens of guest appearances at premier events. With trainer Lynn Palm Pittion-Rosillon, of Ocala and Bessemer, Michigan, he has performed his world-renowned bridleless exhibitions around the country at events such as the All American Quarter Horse Congress, the National Horse Show, the Washington International Horse Show, the United States Equestrian Team's Festival of Champions, the Annual Shrine Rodeo, the Annual Florida Agricultural Festival, the United States Dressage Federation and the AQHA World Championship Show. In 1995, he was named Quarter Horse Ambassador for the United States Equestrian Team, and in 1996, he was presented the Silver Spur Award by the AQHA. The same year, Lark was invited to perform for people from all over the world at the Olympic games in Atlanta.

In 1997, Lark set out on his Farewell Tour, performing at prestigious shows such as the Devon Horse Show, Equitana USA, The Hampton Classic, the All American Quarter Horse Congress and the AQHA World Championship Show.

In 2002, Rugged Lark and Carol Harris will be honored again with the unveiling of a life-sized bronze of the two of them, which will be placed permanently at the AQHA Heritage Center and Museum in Amarillo, Texas.

Throughout his career, 21-year-old Rugged Lark has kept fit, happy and healthy on a diet of the freshest water and forage available, combined with Seminole Gold Chance 14 horse feed. Learn more about Rugged Lark by visiting www.bobettfarm.com, or call 352-591-1020 to order his hardcover, 192-page book, America's Super Horse, the Story of Rugged Lark, by Rebekah Witter.