

UPHA Hall of Fame Induction Speech Junior Ray

When I was asked to write and present the Award for tonight's inductee into the UPHA National Hall of Fame, the sentiments that were expressed to me about said honoree included such characterizations as "fiercely loyal", "patient", "quintessential perfectionist", "underspoken", and definitely "not one to toot his own horn".

But the thing that stands out in my mind about this person is that he represents and that he embodies a fading generation of horsemen and women who were content to be "the employed" rather than "the employer", though no less respected, called upon for advice, and certainly no less talented.

Amongst the list of qualifications for eligibility for induction into the UPHA Tom Moore Hall of Fame, this person must have derived his or her livelihood from the profession of training show horses or ponies. Well, if you know Joliet, Illinois' own Junior Ray, then you know that he qualifies there.

Junior began grooming horses when he was about 14 years old, leaving his home in Charlotte, North Carolina during the summer months to work at the Armstrong Family's ABC Farm in Canada. He worked there for about 2 to 3 years.

It was as a very young man in his late teens that Junior moved to Illinois where he has spent the bulk of his career and where he eventually married his wife of more than 40 years, Louise, and together they started a family, fathering five boys.

And, as I said earlier in my introduction of Junior, he has never had his own barn. But, if working for the best in the business is any proof of his knowing where to go to learn the craft of horsemanship, well, then Junior is deserving of an Academy Award because he has worked for the best. And I don't think any of them would tell you any different than him being that loyal, perfectionist and a definite talent with horses in his own right.

The first of his Illini employment gigs was working with Chris Reardon's Pine Tree Farm in McHenry, IL at the facility that is now occupied by Richard Obenauf Stables. Along with Chris Reardon, he worked with the stock of Judy Marks, including the flashy five gaited gelding, Pinetree Genius, Dream Waltz who won the World's Grand Championship Gaited Stake in 1956 at Louisville, CH The Pheasant, and CH The Thunderbird.

After he left Pinetree Stables, our honoree went to work for Ross Drake for one summer before going on to work for the man after whom this award is named, UPHA's founding "first couple", Tom & Donna Moore. Horses such as WGC CH Miss Helen, WC CH Bo Jangles, WC Jimmy Joe, CH Ensign's Sashay, and so many others.

Marty Mueller was the next to hire Junior, when Tom & Donna made the move from Red Gate Road in St. Charles, to Richmond, IL to Ed Jenner's well-chronicled Knolland Farm, as the trek up to Richmond was just too much for Junior who had a bride and young children at the time. Though, he was only in Marty's employ for a very short time, but Junior remembers being extremely fortunate to work around such horses as CH James L and Mr. Lightfoot. Junior says of his time working for Marty, "I learned how to put a mouth on a horse, but it was Tom who taught me different ways of getting along with a horse that was a little on the difficult side."

Little did Junior know that his next stop professionally was going to be one that would eventually stay part of him and where he and Louise and his family would become part of the extended family of 2006 Hall of Fame inductees, Richard & Jeanette Durant. Sometime around 1963, Junior took a job working for Dick Durant at Mr. Silverman's Delaine Farm in Morton Grove, IL. Junior was quick to say that the the one horse that particularly stands out in his mind from those years was CH Delaine's Winged Victory, owned by Jane Mueller and shown by Jane to a World's Champion title in 1970 in the Ladies Mare Gaited class.

Junior also moonlighted working part-time after he was done working for Dick at Delaine he'd drive from Morton Grove out to what was then the country in Lemont and help out Jeanette who was at the time working for Bob & Lorraine Mocny at their Rolling Meadows Farm. When Dick & Jeanette purchased a farm on Bell Road just a couple miles from the Mocny's and built a barn, and they combined forces there at Bell View Acres in 1965, it was obvious to them both after a very short while that Junior had to come to work with them or as Jeanette says, "Dick and I were going to kill one another." To which she added, "They say you're only as successful in business as is determined by the people you have working with you towards the same common goals. Dick and I both hold him in the highest regard and there is something about him that horses just sense, to say nothing of how Junior has always insisted and shown so many of our staff and apprentices how to properly turn out a horse. She laughs, "I've trusted this man with my life in more situations than I care to admit and he has never once let me down."

So, for the last 42 plus years, Junior Ray has been a name associated in the same breath as Dick & Jeanette Durant of whom Dick Durant says of his longtime friend and colleague, "Junior has been beside us through the good times and the bad. Every champion gaited stake, to equitation rider, to amateur or youth, as well as many youngsters that Junior worked himself in the back barn quietly bringing them along, neither Jeanette nor I could imagine this trip without him at our side." Of the many champions that the trio of horse professionals have produced, they include the likes of WC Aristocratic Fanfare, Northern Creation, Broadway Casanova, Bartles & Jaymes, CH Evan's Stonewall Peavine, WC Sultan's Maytime, Better Late, Mama's Boy, Legal Tender, Call Me Sir, Knightsbridge, WC Reassessment, WC Music Note, WC In Your Dreams, WC Perdita Rose, Popeye, Oskee Wow Wow, Sunshine Way, Keep the Secret, Indiana Wildcat, Trustworthy, Reprise, Delightful Santana, Finesterre's Escapade, Love Note, Great Gusto, WC The Red Knight, Evening in New York, Mister Dawn, Commander Bond, Challenging Lil, Prime Candidate, Galahad's Puppeteer, CH Blue Chipper, Peerless, Champagne Jam, Atlantic Fleet, CH High Noon, Cedar Creek's Mr. Go, Clark Gable, Warchant, Mandarin Rose, Society's Shooting Star, Cary Grant, Mr. Gary Cooper, Walt Disney, Mountjoy's Superstar, Sweet Sixteen, Cherokee Country Boy, Timberlane Supreme, Twentieth Century Limited, The Wizard LF, and the 2005 and 2007 World's Champion Gentleman's Fine Harness horse Simbara's Exclamation are believe it or not less than 1/8 of the grand horses that the Durant's and Junior have worked over these last many years. They are just a few of the more memorable ones! To say nothing of how proud he was to assist his son Tony to win his 1st personal World's Championship in 2000 with CH Steel In Love in the Three Year old Fine Harness Mare Stake.

Relationships, such as the one shared by the Durant's and Junior and their longtime clients many of whom (such as Jane Mueller, Dr. J.R. Gallagher, Jane Mueller, Barbara Friedman and Family, the Antalek's, the Wirtzes, the Oselka's, the Teaches, more specifically to this point) they have had for more than 20 and in some cases closer to 30 or 40 years as customers, are rare in the scope of life itself. In just the daily routine, we hear of divorce rates rising, families not speaking, and other various issues plaguing society. Yet, to see such a legitimate and prosperous and time-weathered partnership such as is shared by these people lends itself to the fact that not only do the Durant's care, as does Junior, but so to do they care about each other and the people who make it all possible.

Two customers shared stories about Junior with me that seemed fitting for the purposes of this evening's presentation. Carole Bart, former owner of The Lady Prefers (dam of CH Our Canary Diamond), Call Me Sir and Cherokee Country Boy, all horses that Junior worked, some more than others, for her says

of Junior, “Junior knows when the light bulb goes on and he tries to let you figure it out on your own. He is a great teacher. He will give you 110% of his time and energy, but you first have to show him you are not only going to give him 30% of your effort.”

Barbara Friedman says of Junior, “All of us at Bell View Acres have respected and appreciated Junior for his many talents as a horseman, but what is most unique about Junior is that he is first and foremost the consummate gentleman. If he doesn’t command the respect of his peers and therein being a deserving candidate for induction into the Hall of Fame right beside the men and women whom he worked so diligently for, then there lives not a person who of such description.”

Junior has served as mentor for many one-time young horse professionals, including Greg O’Kelley, Ryan Rongers, Robert Griffin, Lynn Durant, and his own son, Tony, who operates his own public training stable having followed in his father’s footsteps into the show horse training field.

In classic Junior Ray fashion, when we asked him who his favorite horses were over the long road, Junior just got a grin on his face, and smiled with his classic grin and said, “There’s no way to really narrow it down...all the horses have taught me something.”

Ladies & Gentlemen, please join me in welcoming and therein helping me to “toot his horn” the newest member of the UPHA Tom Moore Hall of Fame, Junior Ray.

-written and presented by Brendan Heintz-