

SOUTHEAST

# Individual Attention

*John and Jill Stephens don't try to make horses better but, instead, seek the best in each horse*

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BY DEIRDRE B. BILES

John and Jill Stephens are very matter of fact about what they do. They don't glamorize their work, which involves preparing horses for racing and/or juvenile auctions. But they know their role in the Thoroughbred industry is important because it provides young animals with a solid foundation of basic skills that will help them excel in the sale ring or on the racetrack.

"Our philosophy is we don't make any of our horses better than what they are; their natural talent is already there," said John, an Arizona native who will celebrate his 49th birthday in April. "But if we have 100 horses on our farm, our job is to get all 100 horses to the racetrack or the sale in sound order so they can succeed at whatever level their ability lies."

Jill, who was born in Wisconsin 40 years ago, described their job this way: "Good horses are good horses no matter what. Bad horses are bad horses no matter what. But there are a lot of in-between ones that might not get to the racetrack if they don't get a little extra attention. We create an environment where we can individualize training programs and nurture them a little bit. If we think a horse needs a pony for a little while longer, we can do that. If we think a horse needs to be ridden in the field longer, we can do that, too."

While the Stephenses are modest about their contributions to the development of young horses, the long list of accomplished performers that have completed their schooling with the couple shows the husband-and-wife team has a special talent for working with budding equine athletes.

Graduates of their program include 2009 Garden City Stakes (gr. IT) winner Miss World; 2009 Apple Blossom (gr. I) and Go for Wand (gr. I) Handicap winner Seventh Street; 2009 Breeders' Cup Dirt Mile (gr. I) winner Furthest Land; 2008 NetJets King's Bishop Stakes (gr. I) winner Visionaire; and 2008 Frank E. Kilore Mile Handicap (gr. IT) winner Ever a Friend. Among the other graduates are 2007 Del Mar Oaks (gr. IT) winner Rutherienne; 2006 Kentucky Derby Presented By Yum! Brands (gr. I) winner Barbaro; and 2003 Diana Handicap (gr. IT) and 2001 Garden City Breeders' Cup Handicap (gr. IT) winner Voodoo Dancer.

"The thing I remember about Barbaro was his intelligence," Jill said. "You could see it every time he walked onto the track. Things were easy for him, and he was a very fast learner. He just had a presence about him. Seventh Street was a little edgy and very smart, and she always seemed to be special. She was one of those horses that, when we bought her at the sale (for \$100,000 at Keeneland in September 2006 as a yearling), we couldn't wait to get her home."



JOE DIORIO

Kentucky Derby winner Barbaro was prepared for racing by Jill and John Stephens

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# 2010 Leading Sires in Florida

State sire lists updated daily online.  
Go to <http://breeding.bloodhorse.com/sirelists.asp>

For stallions that stand, will stand, or stood (deceased) in Florida (exported stallions are excluded), and have runners in North America. Listed below are all available statistics for the Northern Hemisphere through March 3, 2010. As supplied to The Blood-Horse by The Jockey Club Information Systems Inc., earnings exclude monies from Japan and Hong Kong. Current year stakes winners include all N.H.-foaled stakes winners worldwide and any S.H.-foaled horses that won a N.H. stakes. \*Foal counts include Southern Hemisphere. Cumulative stakes winners includes all progeny. (A ♯ indicates a sire represented by his first crop to race).

Rank	Stallion (Foaling Year, Sire), Farm Standing	2010 Stud Fee	Rnrs/Wnrs	Stakes Wnrs/Wns	Rstrct SW/ BT SW	(Chief Earner, Earnings)	2010 Earnings	Cumulative			
								Foals	Stks Wnrs	*A-E Index	*Comp Index
1	GRAEME HALL (97, Dehere), Winding Oaks Farm	\$5,000	83/28	3/3	1/3	(Poovey, \$61,100)	\$572,611	*254	14	1.57	1.45
2	FULL MANDATE (99, A.P. Indy), Hartley/De Renzo Thoroughbreds	\$5,000	80/20	1/1	0/1	(Ron the Greek, \$63,000)	\$413,343	*273	2	0.81	1.08
3	MONTBROOK (90, Buckaroo), Ocala Stud Farm	\$7,500	58/9	1/2	0/1	(Amen Hallelujah, \$180,000)	\$411,220	688	46	1.59	1.59
4	WILDCAT HEIR (00, Forest Wildcat), Journeyman Stud	\$8,000	44/14	2/2	1/2	(Richiegirgonewild, \$60,390)	\$398,750	167	4	1.25	1.52
5	PUT IT BACK (98, Honour and Glory), Bridlewood Farm	\$7,000	68/12	0/0	0/0	(Frosty Secret, \$80,600)	\$368,895	*355	14	1.58	1.34
6	DOUBLE HONOR (95, Gone West), Get Away Farm	\$3,500	55/10	1/1	1/1	(Jet Propulsion, \$180,000)	\$342,251	469	18	1.21	1.28
7	D'WILDCAT (98, Forest Wildcat), Vinery	\$10,000	37/16	2/2	0/2	(D' Funnybone, \$90,000)	\$330,613	158	5	1.75	1.42
8	UNTUTTABLE (96, Unbridled), Stonehedge Farm South	\$2,500	38/9	1/1	1/1	(This Ones for Phil, \$110,000)	\$279,840	169	8	1.15	1.38
9	B L'S APPEAL (97, Valid Appeal), Randolph Thoroughbreds	\$2,500	44/17	0/0	0/0	(Givonna Alyssa, \$25,580)	\$261,504	159	2	1.11	1.27
10	CITY PLACE (00, Storm Cat), Hartley/De Renzo Thoroughbreds	\$5,000	31/11	1/1	0/1	(Central City, \$52,800)	\$249,107	98	2	1.34	1.06

\*A-E and COMPARABLE INDEX: The lifetime Average-Earnings Index indicates how much purse money the progeny of one sire has earned, on the average, in relation to the average earnings of all runners in the same years; average earnings of all runners in any year is represented by an index of 1.00. The Comparable Index indicates the average earnings of progeny produced from mares bred to one sire, when these same mares were bred to other sires. Only 32% of all sires have a lifetime AEI higher than their mares Comparable Index.

The couple's base is Stephens Thoroughbreds, a 105-acre training operation near Morriston, Fla. Facilities there include three barns with 70 stalls and 32 paddocks. With several partners, the Stephenses own a six-furlong training track, which has a sand and clay surface, on a separate 55-acre property. The Stephenses also are involved in Vision Sales (which sets up pinhooking partnerships) and Vision Racing with Brandon and Diannah Perry, who operate Paragon Farms in Kentucky.

The couples met, John said, when Diannah Perry decided to save a horse that was scheduled to be slaughtered. After doing some research, she discovered her rescued equine was a stakes-winning Thoroughbred named Glok, who had been bred and raced by Allen Paulson. Believing the gelding could return to competition, Perry contacted Paulson, who agreed to be a partner, and John joined in the venture, offering to train Glok for an ownership interest. Glok, who had finished second in the 1998 Knickerbocker Handicap (gr. IIT) and third in the 1997 Secretariat Stakes (gr. IT) and two other graded events, started five more times, picking up a victory in a nine-furlong

grass event at Monmouth Park in 2002.

"They're both hands-on people, and they're hard-working and honest," said Diannah Perry of the Stephenses. "They're also very knowledgeable horsemen."

Added Brandon Perry: "You just mesh with some people, and I think we mesh with John and Jill. We have the same thought processes and ideas. We don't agree on everything, but we can talk through all the things we don't agree on, and it's been a great working relationship. The nice thing about it is we do different things. They (the Stephenses) break the 2-year-olds. We breed mares, raise babies, and sell yearlings."

The Pamplemousse, an \$80,000 yearling, was sold by Stephens Thoroughbreds, as agent for Vision Sales, for \$150,000 to Alex Solis Thoroughbreds at the 2008 Ocala Breeders' Sales Co. March select sale of 2-year-olds in training. In 2009 the colt captured the San Rafael (gr. III) and Sham (gr. III) Stakes. Visionaire, a \$300,000 Vision Sales yearling purchase, ended up in the Vision Racing program and became a grade I winner.

"They (the Stephenses) always put the horse first," Brandon Perry said. "If a horse needs an extra 30 days before going to a

sale, they don't push it; they always take the safest route. And I think that makes a difference in the horses we offer because they come out of a sale and perform."

The Stephenses have been married since 1988, and their shared interest in horses helped bring them together.

John, who enjoyed competing in rodeo events such as team roping and calf roping, started working in the Thoroughbred business as a teenager living in Arizona.

"When I was 16 years old, I bought a truck, and I needed to a job to pay for gas to go in the truck," he said. "I bagged groceries for about \$2 an hour, and then I met a guy, John McCaslin, who trained Thoroughbreds and who would spend the winters in Arizona and stay in Pennsylvania the rest of the year. He said, 'Hey, could you come clean some stalls,' and I went to his farm one day. It took me two hours, and he paid me \$20. I started doing more and more work for him, and then I went to Scottsdale Community College for a semester. But after tasting the horse business, school was just too slow for me."

John eventually accompanied McCaslin to Pennsylvania, where he groomed and galloped horses. His early years in the Thoroughbred business also included stints with trainer W.D. Anderson and equine veterinarians Ed Devine and Keith Evringham. Devine's patients included five-time (1960-64) Horse of the Year Kelso and 1980 Horse of the Year Spectacular Bid.

Jill grew up in the Thoroughbred industry as the daughter of Joe and Kaye Prough, who each had a trainer's license. Joe Prough currently works as a farrier at Penn National.

Jill's uncle, Clyde Rice, is a well-known Florida pinhooker, and his wife, Jean, and their four children, Bryan, Curt, Wayne, and Linda, have all participated in the Thoroughbred business. Last year Linda Rice became the first female to win a training title at Saratoga.

"Everybody was at the racetrack; every-

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body worked in the barn; and everybody learned to gallop horses," said Jill, who managed to find time to earn a nursing degree while taking care of and schooling Thoroughbreds.

John and Jill met at Penn National, and Jill's connection to Clyde Rice brought them to Florida for a while. They also spent a short time in California, where Jill worked as an exercise rider for Hall-of-Fame trainer Charlie Whittingham and John worked for trainer Steve Young.

"I wasn't with Charlie a long time, but there were things that did stand out, and one was that he was awfully kind," Jill said. "He showed me that no matter how important you are, you can still be nice. He was just so pleasant every day. He definitely trained his horses by how they felt on a particular day and that has remained with me all these years. He would say, 'How is she doing today, darling?' Then, based on your answer and what he saw, he would tell you if you were going to breeze or gallop. I always really liked that it wasn't a set schedule, and that's something that I took from him and always remembered."

Wanting to raise a family, the couple returned to Florida, where John got a job managing a farm and Jill pursued her interest in nursing. They had a son, Wyatt, and after about seven years of looking after broodmares and their foals, John became the farm trainer at Live Oak Stud. While there, he met trainer Christophe Clement, who helped John go out on his own and set up a breaking-and-training business in the late 1990s.

"He's a wonderful horseman," said John of Clement. "He's one of those guys who is always at the barn; he's very diligent. He saw that I knew what I was talking about and what I was doing, and he set us up with horses and clients."

John's operation started at Classic Mile but soon needed more room, so he leased two barns at Barry and Tiki Berkelhammer's AbraCadabra Farms.

"Then, with the help of some clients that Christophe had gotten us—Peter Karches and Charlie and Susan Harris—we bought the farm in Morrissant that we're at now," John said.

Jill eventually left nursing and returned full-time to the Thoroughbred business.

"As the business started to grow, it just made more sense for me to devote my time and attention to the horses," she said. "I keep my nursing license active, and I look at graduate programs, just thinking about the future. But it really takes both of us to run this."

Jill oversees the breaking and early training of about 120 horses each year. During that time the number of people who work with the animals is limited. Jill and Emily Dawson introduce the horses to tack, lunge them, drive them, and get on their backs for the first time.

"By limiting the number of people who have access to the horses early in their training," Jill said, "you're helping them by having consistent discipline and consistent exposure to new things, and that makes it easier for them to learn."

"We introduce things a little at a time," she continued. "We start with something simple, and then each day we add something else. The first day I work with them, I just brush them, do something familiar. And then I'll add something unfamiliar like the headstall (the part of the bridle that fits over the horse's head). One day we'll go out and lunge. The next day they might lunge again, which is familiar, but then we'll go back in the stall and get a saddle, which is new. The biggest thing is building confidence, which helps them enjoy what they're doing."

When Jill and Emily are finished with the groundwork, they turn over the horses to Gabriel DeJesus, who rides each one for about two weeks before other people are allowed to get aboard.

"When we pass them on to other riders, we know what to expect," Jill said. "We know each horse's temperament so we can be proactive and help the riders avoid any issues. The biggest thing is safety, but this way we also end up with very nice, confident horses."

When the horses are ready for the training track, John is in charge.

"I like working with them after they've progressed along a little bit," he said. "When they first go out to the track, they just go for a walk with the pony. And then, after they've walked around for a couple of days and seen everything, we break them into a jog. After going to the track for a week or so, we take them back to the field for a day or two to kind of break things up and do something different. You change things up because you want to get a horse looking to you for guidance. You want them to be paying attention, so you show them new things and keep it interesting for them."

Before the horses leave Stephens Thoroughbreds, "we get quite a few miles into them," John said. "We get them up to open gallops and then move on to breezing them. You work with each trainer and get his babies to where he wants them to be when they are ready to come to him. Some trainers like their horses really far along, and some of them don't want as much done with them at the farm. It varies."

According to John, "working together when you're married can be very difficult." But the Stephenses have created a solid alliance by dividing the training duties, with Jill laying the foundation and John building on that groundwork. They and their staff also take care of older horses that need a break from racing or ones that need some time to recuperate from injuries sustained in the rigors of the racing world.

"John is the dot maker," Jill said. "He goes around creating things to do, and I go around and connect all the dots. When horses need to be broken, I train them. Then, when John is training them later on, I'll start galloping them a little bit. When John has to leave for a sale, I'll direct things, and if an assistant is missing, I'll work in the barn. I have somebody who comes in and pays the bills, but I'm in charge of the office. I do all the communicating with clients and whatever else there is that needs to be done." ■

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