

A Family Affair

Owner Profile: Paula and David Mueller

By Mary Forney

For Dolan Mueller's fourth birthday party, his parents – Paula and David – arranged to have pony rides in the backyard. After the two ponies arrived, the little party guests had to take turns on one pony because they couldn't get Dolan off the other. Although no one in the family had any previous riding experience, it was the beginning of a love affair with horses that would eventually involve them all.

Dolan was first to take riding lessons and get a horse of his own. Paula followed, then David and daughter Tori too. Their growing passion for Western Pleasure horses led them into the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) show circuit, which they followed across the country, showing their horses in riding and harness events, and winning many ribbons and trophies – including 10th place in the AQHA World Show in Oklahoma City, with David's mare, Cupcake.

On a recent fall day at Los Angeles Equestrian Center – where they stable their riding horses with trainer Mike Dunn – the Muellers spent an idyllic morning working with their horses. After grooming, brushing, saddling, and haltering them, Paula and David rode in an arena while Dolan and Tori worked Dolan's horse, Roanie, with a lunge line. Afterwards, sitting in the shade along a shedrow, the family excitedly recalled their experiences.

Born and raised in Visalia, California, David attended the Big Fresno Fair when he was growing up. Paula is



Dolan and Tori Mueller

Although they have been involved with Quarter Horses since 1998, the Muellers are relative newcomers to the Thoroughbred business; they bought their first racehorse in 2003. Despite their “novice” status as Thoroughbred owners, they have accomplished something that takes most owners many years – winning stakes races at some of the country’s leading racetracks.

a fourth-generation Texan from Wichita Falls, the first of her relatives to move out of that state. She had never been to the races until she met David. But, like everything else they are involved in, the Muellers put their hearts and souls into their new passion. They began by sponsoring a race at the Fresno Fair each year, presenting the trophy, and inviting their employees out for a day at the races.

Although they have been involved with Quarter Horses since 1998, the Muellers are relative newcomers to the Thoroughbred business; they bought their first racehorse in 2003. Despite their “novice” status as Thoroughbred owners, they have accomplished something that takes most owners many years – winning stakes races at some of the country’s leading racetracks.

With trainer Ben Cecil, the Muellers campaign such good horses as Genre – Cinema Breeders’ Cup Handicap winner, and Prenuptial – winner of the Generous Portion Stakes. But, as they are mindful to point out, the Muellers have had their share of setbacks as well.

“We just got in it to have fun and win some races,” said David, “but we quickly found out how hard it is.” It’s not that the Muellers didn’t do their homework. They went to the racetracks and talked to many owners, made phone calls, got recommendations, visited training operations on the backstretch, and eventually selected their first trainer. The first racehorse they bought, Twentyforkaratlady, never won for them, and is now consigned to the Barretts October Mixed Sale as a broodmare prospect. A year and a half and two more horses later, they still had not won a race.

With persistence, things eventually began to change for them. David spotted a mare he liked, Arbun, who had been running on the grass in claiming races at Hollywood Park. Over the preceding several months, the Muellers had befriended trainer Ben Cecil, then approached him about claiming the mare. Together, the new team claimed Arbun for \$40,000, and were soon rewarded with their first win, in July 2005 at Del Mar – a



David and Paula Mueller

win the Muellers still recall as their favorite.

The following year, the couple decided to accompany Cecil to Newmarket, England, to the Tattersall’s Autumn sale of horses in training. “We left the day before my birthday,” said Paula. “Ben, David, and I flew over and were there for the entire October Sale at Newmarket. We went over for a filly – that’s what we had our heart set on. But there was a colt we sort of liked, Genre.” Because Paula gets “overly enthusiastic” in the bidding process, Ben and David made her go outside when Genre was on the auction block. “When I came back in, David said ‘Happy birthday! We just bought that colt.’”

Genre made five starts for them, earning \$97,398, before encountering a run of misfortunes. “He went to Virginia for a million dollar race, got there and got a fever,” Paula explained. “He went that whole way just for a plane ride.” Then, while stabled at Del Mar, he developed an unusual reaction to mosquito bites, which knocked him out of the Del Mar Derby.

“We finally said, ‘Let’s just give him some time off – give him a break,’” said David. “We’re not the kind of owners who have just got to race, until the horse just wears out,” Paula added. “He had worked hard for us. We felt we owed him some vacation time.”

The Muellers believe their racing success has come, in part, because they set reasonable goals. As David related, “Paula said, ‘Instead of setting a goal to win the Derby, how about we have a horse to race on Derby Day?’ And a year later, we did!” Lock and Key, a filly they purchased at Tattersalls, ran fifth in the Filly and Mare Distaff on the turf at Churchill Downs on Kentucky Derby Day this past May.

They also have a well-thought-out plan for their racing operation. According to David, “We are buying mainly fillies and mares that we can race for a while then sell as broodmare prospects. From a business standpoint, that makes the most sense right now.”



The Muellers believe their racing success has come, in part, because they set reasonable goals. As David related, “Paula said, ‘Instead of setting a goal to win the Derby, how about we have a horse to race on Derby Day?’ And a year later, we did!”

No strangers to the business world, the Muellers’ Valley Staffing Services – with 30 employees in five branches in the central San Joaquin Valley – was rated 158th among America’s fastest-growing private companies according to Inc. 500. The company supplies temporary employees in the areas of clerical, light industry, accounting, bookkeeping, and other fields.

Fifteen years ago, they were both working for Kelly Staffing – David in California, and Paula in Texas – when they met at a manager’s conference in Boca Raton, Florida. David convinced her to come to California, where they settled in Huntington Beach, taking jobs with competing staffing firms. After six months, they decided to pool their talents and start their own company.

It was the summer of 1991, when they quit their jobs, moved to Visalia, moved in with David’s grandmother, found a little two-room office for \$600 a month, and signed a six-month lease. “Then he looked at me and said, ‘Let’s see how good you are!’” said Paula. With their combined industry experience and drive, they were profitable in two months, and have never looked back.

The Muellers’ commitment to their community is equally impressive. With seemingly boundless energy, Paula has chaired a long list of charity and fund raising events for such causes as breast cancer research, domestic violence awareness, and the March of Dimes. Known in Visalia as the “first couple of the Fourth of July,” the Muellers led the effort to revive an

Independence Day celebration in their adopted hometown. The city had abandoned the event several years before because of budgetary constraints. Paula chaired an organizing committee, recruited sponsors, and planned a day that included a fire department open house, public safety demonstrations, an ice cream “freeze-off,” a craft fair, concession stands, and the grand finale – a ground and aerial fireworks show in the local stadium. Their Valley Staffing funded the entire cost of the fireworks for five years, after which time the event was turned over to the city and the school district. All proceeds went to the Visalia Unified School District.

These days, more and more of their time is consumed by their horses. On a typical weekend, the family drives from Visalia down to Santa Anita or Hollywood Park to see their racehorses in the morning workouts (often leaving the house at 3:30 a.m.), then heads for the Equestrian Center to ride. And if they have a horse in a race, it makes the trip even more special. Even Dolan and Tori – who orbit happily around their parents like a couple of satellites – seem to thoroughly enjoy all the horse activities.

“Ben enjoys having his owners come out,” said Paula of trainer Cecil. “And the kids can go, because they’re comfortable around horses and know where they should and shouldn’t be.” It’s definitely a family affair, and hopefully one that will foster a new generation of dedicated Thoroughbred owners.

Photography by Joe Forney