

Make That Dr. Mom and Pop

BY LENNY SHULMAN

Mom and Pop Thoroughbred farms have largely gone the way of Mom and Pop groceries, Mom and Pop hardware stores, Mom and Pop anything—squeezed out by mega-stores, shopping malls, and corporate agri-business. The sheer volume of work involved in foaling, prepping yearlings for sale, and building and maintaining fences and barns, would surely discourage most anyone from embarking on this line of work by themselves. Especially two people smart enough to know better.

Meet Jim and Pam Robinson, both 51, Mom and Pop of Brandywine Farm near Paris, Ky. Pop is a retired electrical engineer with GTE. Mom, with a combined Ph.D./M.D. in her jeans pocket, held one of the most prestigious sports medicine jobs in the world, directing numerous research and graduate programs at the University of North Carolina. While there, she instigated a study of jockey injuries in the United States that could go a long way toward preventing riding fatalities in the future.

How did all this academia give way to mucking stalls and building a broodmare band? In a few words, a passion for horses and a willingness to do long, hard work. The Robinsons departed Ohio for North Carolina in the '70s with three pleasure horses in tow. Settling outside Chapel Hill in Hillsborough, they bought their initial Brandywine—75 acres, just five of which were cleared. The couple went to Maryland for a December sale. "We saw a mare with her head sticking out of the stall and thought she looked pretty—it was real scientific," laughed Pam. "So we

bought her, and that was the start of everything. That was Granny Reeves, who's now 23 and out in that field," she said, pointing to part of the 100-acre Bourbon County spread. "She's carrying her last foal now. I promised her after this one she gets to retire. She has a fantastic Sir Cat colt who's going in the September Keeneland sale."

After standing stallions for other folks in North Carolina, the Robinsons bought My Favorite Moment, a Timeless Moment horse, in 1989. He had equaled the track record at Hollywood Park, going six furlongs in 1:08 $\frac{3}{4}$, and set the track mark at Los Alamitos going the same distance in the same time. They supported him by purchasing a dozen mares, then dispersing the foals to sales in Arkansas, Maryland, Florida, and Kentucky. At one point they had five stallions and bred 100 outside mares.

"I don't know how we did it, actually," stated Jim. "We used to sleep in the barn, do the foaling, and then go to our jobs in the morning. We were cutting down trees with chainsaws, clearing land, selling firewood to pay for fence posts. I guess you could say we're hands-on."

"Going to work in the morning was the easy part of the day," Pam added. "Then we would come home and really go to work—at lunch time we'd get a mare covered, then breed again in the evening. We built eight miles of four-board fence; cleaned stalls every day;



Pam Robinson with Summertime Lady, a member of the Brandywine broodmare band

Dr. Mom and Pop

no skipping. Of course, we haven't had a vacation in 20 years. Our vacations were coming to Kentucky for the sales. After the November sale this year we're planning to take a vacation. But it's been so long, we can't decide where to go." The couple has been married now nearly 30 years. Though not always in agreement on industry issues, they nevertheless tend to finish each other's thoughts.

Between farm chores, Pam was involved in dozens of sports medicine research projects. She pioneered the study of elite swimmers by age group; served on the U.S. Physiological Testing Committee for the Olympic Amateur Athletic Union; directed one of only four regional testing centers for elite athletes; performed physiological assessment of UNC's basketball players for legendary coach Dean Smith; published in major medical journals; gave speeches; and found time to coach the women's golf team to the national tournament, a first for North Carolina.

By 1996 the Robinsons were big fish in the small pond of North Carolina. They were breeders of the most state-bred winners that year, and of North Carolina-breds with the highest earnings. But in an effort to upgrade their mares, they were beginning to breed them in Kentucky and sell the foals in the commercial Kentucky market. Jim was coming into a retirement package that paid him as much as working did, freeing him to work on the farm. The Robinsons had dreamed of moving their operation to Kentucky one day, and that day came more quickly than anticipated.

"If you're going to breed 31 mares to Kentucky horses, you pretty much need to be there," Pam said. "I was transporting each of them back and forth, spending 50 days on the road. It's very dangerous. I was getting apprehensive about driving through the mountains in winter, and when you start getting scared, it's time to give it up." So despite the pull of a great career at

the university with three major research grants and 65 graduate students, Pam agreed with Jim that it was time to move.

"People at the university thought I was completely insane," she recalled. "I was in the prime of my career in one of the top positions in sports medicine in the country. Nobody believed I could or would leave.

But pretty soon

they were fighting over who would get my office, my directorship, and my grants."

Before leaving, Pam had begun work on the jockey injury study. "Jockeys are at high risk, and this was an area that was lacking as far as injury surveillance," she said. "I thought it would be good to try and contribute something to the horse industry based on my expertise and the facilities I had available—the amount of computer power and resources needed for this could only happen at a major institution."

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— Dr. Pam Robinson

She obtained funding from the National Center for Disease Control and the Injury Prevention Research Center. The study, which will be updated every three years, found the most dangerous place for jockeys was in the starting gate, and concurrently, Keeneland padded its starting gate to upgrade jockey safety.

"Change comes slowly in this industry," said Jockeys' Guild director John Giovanni. "Now that we've run the Keeneland meet, we'll talk to the jockeys and fine-tune it—add padding here, take padding off there—then we'll go out to other tracks and push for those changes."

Before the study was completed, the Robinsons moved to Paris and raised the curtain on the Kentucky version of Brandywine, named after a beloved Irish Setter they once owned. Their broodmare band has steadily improved as the couple sinks profits from the sales into breeding to better stallions in the \$5,000-\$50,000 range. Their mares now include Sealedwithakriss, a full sister to Ladies Double, the dam of Ladies Din. The mare is in foal to Exploit; Arctic Valley, dam of Da Devil, who defeated Cat Thief in the Kentucky Cup Classic (gr. II) last year. She is in foal to Unbridled's Song; Trial Breeze, who recently produced the first foal by Wild Rush, and is now in foal to Arch; and Tornado Cat, dam of European winner Bailey's Whirlwind, who is in foal to Victory Gallop.

In addition, the Robinsons have a pair of 2-year-olds in training, a Lord Carson filly and a Capote colt, neither of whom brought enough money to sell.

Being an expert on human physiology doesn't mean Pam goes strictly by the numbers when choosing matings. "You do your homework on pedigree analysis and race performance, then you look at conformation and how that stallion is going to suit your mare," she explained. "But there's no one cookie-cutter type of cross. I like a certain presence, a horse that has that certain something that says, 'Look at me; I'm special.' It's difficult to put into words, but I can go out in a field with 20 horses and one will stand out and catch your eye."

The Robinsons may be in Kentucky now, but not that much has changed. Oh, there's a night watchman during foaling season, and two or three workers through student-training programs. But the first week in June the couple start bringing their 17 yearlings in. They'll clean the stalls. And in July they'll commence serious work with the youngsters in the round pen, groom them completely, and start prepping for the sales.

"We're Mom and Pop and we want to stay Mom and Pop, so our broodmare band will stay where it is, at 31 head," said Jim. "The only reason we're still here is because we've been hands-on all these years."

"In this day and age we look around, and there aren't many people like us around anymore," added Pam. "We've put every penny and every hour into this. It has been total devotion."

Jim Robinson, a retired electrical engineer, takes a hands-on approach at Brandywine

