

Gold, Blue, and Mary Lou: A Celebration of Alberta Lee Cox

By Katie Bowen



"It's not enough to be good if you have the ability to be better. It is not enough to be very good if you have the ability to be great."

— Alberta Lee Cox

She was the first woman to coach a U.S. Olympic team sport and the first woman to coach a U.S. women's basketball team on foreign soil. She was an excellent horsewoman, having raised and shown many champion American Saddlebred horses under the ownership of her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Leroy Cox of Raytown, Missouri, who kept in their employ, for over 45 years, their life-long trainer, Sug Utz. And often quoted, sandwiched between the inspirational words of Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, and John F. Kennedy, are the uplifting lines authored and spoken by a woman who inspired others to share in her vision of greatness, to partake in the highest rewards that life has to offer, and to reach, proverbial as it may sound, for the stars, and hopefully, if all goes as planned, land among them. Such is the essence of Alberta Lee Cox, who was, best explained by her protege and former student, Marian Washington, women's basketball coach for over 30 years at the University of Kansas, "ahead of her time. Her ideas were ingenious how intelligent, how intense. She had a flare about her; she was very strong, yet feminine. She was a teacher both on and off the court, and absolutely one of the greatest women in my life."

A Home Called Raytown

Raytown, Missouri sits just east of Kansas City, cradled amongst its neighboring suburbs of Lee's Summit, Independence and Hickman Mills. With approximately 30,000 residents, it has remained somewhat of its own entity, a town, though having only been incorporated since 1950, that remains true to its heritage. Today, as in days past, Fox Drugstore is still the place to pick up a prescription, Raytown Road remains a major thoroughfare, and the stable on 63rd Street, though now a newer building with a different name and under new ownership, continues to house top show stock, which continually win at the nation's top shows.

Yet, it was in the middle half of the past century that the Leroy Cox family laid the blueprint for what could be considered, by many, the standard by which to measure the honesty of the American Dream. Mr. Cox, the first Mayor of Raytown, embodied the spirit and fortitude of his peers determination to pass on to future generations the promise of a better tomorrow. With his only daughter, Alberta Lee, whom he affectionately called Babe (in homage, it is believed, to Babe Didrikson Zaharias, a track star of the 1940's who was also a gifted golfer, her husband a professional wrestler), Mr. Cox instilled values that catapulted her into the recordbooks of stardom; instead of being simply another gifted young lady, Alberta Lee became the posterwoman for success; traveling both nationally and internationally with her famous Saddlebred horses and with her incredible talent for basketball; the latter of which gave her the opportunity to participate in two world tournaments 1957 and 1961 and during which, from the years 1955-

1965, she traveled to three continents in international competition.

Betty Jo Morris, a former classmate of Alberta Lee's at Raytown High School, where both graduated in 1949, grew up playing ball and riding horses with the friend that she, and other classmates affectionately dubbed, "Bert."

"Raytown was a small town then. We had a stoplight one stoplight and it only stopped going in one direction. I guess you could say we were a one stoplight town. There were 86 of 87 in our graduating class, and so everyone knew everyone. After ball games, we headed east went to Kansas City towards a drive-in, because that is just the way it was; It was just a very small town, they rolled the streets up at 10:00. Back then, Bert had a convertible, which was a very big deal no one had cars, but even before that before the car and before she got into horses the show horses Bert had a horse that she called Clipper. The Coxes lived a block from my family's home, and they had a small pasture, a small stable a barn, and Bert was there all the time taking care of Clipper. Sometimes she would let me ride we would ride double, but she never let me guide."

In a town where, as Betty Jo pointed out, "everyone knew everyone" the Cox family became, for lack of a better



1. - 3. Alberta Lee Cox as a young girl and young woman. 4. Mr. and Mrs. Leroy Cox.

description, local celebrities. "They were neat people," recalled former Raytown resident Margaret Beissenherz, of the family that seemed to put Raytown on the map. "It wasn't that everyone knew Alberta because her dad was mayor, it was because of her ability. But she wouldn't brag, no. You had to bring it up, mention the horses or basketball and say "Congratulations." She was quiet that way, she would never do anything to bring mention to herself, or to harm the name of her mom and dad. They were just really likeable people." Indeed, Mr. Cox was just one of several local businessmen who kept the orbit of Raytown revolving. Standing next door to the long barn, Blue Ridge Stable, which housed his daughter's winning show horses, was the Raytown Medical Clinic, which had been started by another of Raytown's famous sons, Dr. Dillard Eubank, who was joined in practice by several of the Kansas City area's top young physicians, Dr. John Flatley, Dr. Al Sheehan, and Dr. Raymond Keltner, among others.

In fact, it was Norma Keltner, the wife of Dr. Keltner, who recalled the close affection between Dr. Eubank and the Leroy Cox family. "Dr. Eubank thought Alberta Lee was wonderful. He called her Babe and at one point he had a pair of her basketball shoes from the Olympics, or from something. He and her dad were very good friends, and at one point he had the idea that Dr. Keltner and Alberta should be a couple; he had some property at a lake in Lee's Summit and he would go there quite often and fish, whether there was a fish or not, and I think it was there that he came up with his plan. You see, he saved an additional piece of land next to his for Raymond, and I believe he thought it could be for Raymond and Alberta Lee. Well, anyway, I came into the picture, and ever since then he would tease me and say, you messed up the plans. That is how much he admired Alberta Lee."

The admiration, however, was twofold, as Alberta Lee was also quite fond of Dr. Eubank. It was in a Christmas card, the accompaniment to the gift of a horse show trophy and photograph, that, in her distinctive slanting script, proved the kindness and consideration for others that helped to make up the character of Alberta's being. "Doc and Anne," began the inscription inside the card, "Our plans are on Dolly's retirement next summer, so, I chose to give you something special to have this Christmas. This is a trophy that Dolly and I won at the Columbia, Missouri Horse Show where she always made such terrific shows. The picture so we can remember!" The card was signed simply, "With much love, Babe and Miss Dolly," yet the implication was great -no matter how successful she became, no matter how far she traveled, no matter how many accolades were bestowed upon her Alberta Lee remained thoughtful and true to those with whom she shared a Raytown connection. Loyalty, and a dedication to her friends and compatriots, was truly ingrained in her psyche.

All About The Horses

"There were so many of them, and when she entered the showing she just took over, she had so much charisma." Lynne Frazee, speaking from her home in

Hallsville, Missouri, recalled, noting the greatness and drama that seemed to engulf Alberta Lee and her Blue Ridge Stable trained horses. "There was always something extra, dramatic, like a scarf draped from her neck, flowing... Everything she showed was that way, impeccably turned out. Each step choreographed; perfectly in tune with her horse, so focused, so disciplined."

The horses, trained, of course, by Sug Utz at the Raytown barn, were numerous. There was Petticoat Junction, a trimmed-in-white under 15.2 mare that perfectly suited Alberta Lee to a T. Broadway Jane and Stonewall's Golden Honey were fine harness contenders campaigned by Mr. Utz, while The King's Story, described in a vintage *Saddle & Bridle* magazine as a "wheel'n deal'n" five-gaited gelding, carried Alberta to outstanding rides in the amateur classes. Miss Winning Ways, Fiery Fantasy and My Pretty Girl were contenders during the mid-1950's, yet it was, and remains to this day, the names Miss Dolly and Commander's Mary Lou that seem to define the excellence of Alberta Lee Cox's showing years.

"When she came to a show, she was the one to beat," noted John Wallen, the image of Alberta Lee and her show stock coming to mind. "The ones I remember most are Miss Dolly and Commander's Mary Lou she had a nice, strong, animated trot. But more than that," he remembered, "is that she was always a nice lady, always very complimentary. She would compliment *me* on the way I rode."

David Cunningham, who, in recent years, purchased a brick for Alberta Lee Cox at the Basketball Hall Of Fame in Knoxville, Tennessee, remains not only a fan and friend of Alberta Lee's both in the basketball and equestrian arenas, but had the opportunity to judge her at several competitions in years past. "She was always riding hard, was busy and very aggressive. When she came through that gate she came in it to win it. And yet, she was still a lady all the time doin' somethin' for somebody else."

Indeed, the perfection of Alberta Lee's showing presentations and her kindness, seem to transcend description. Several friends and former competitors struggle to remember the names of her former equestrian stars, albeit, with the exception of Miss Dolly and Commander's Mary Lou, and seem to focus simply on the memory of her vast successes. "You just knew," noted Jimmie Hite, "that when she came in the ring that she was probably going to win it!"

CH The Commander's Mary Lou

She ended her career where she began it, in the showing at The Missouri State Fair,



(top) Alberta Lee and Miss Dolly. (btm left) Alberta Lee riding an unidentified horse. (btm right) Sug Utz and Miss Dolly.

where 15 years previously she had captured the Three-Gaited Three-Year-Old Championship. And it was there, at the Missouri State Fair, that year in 1990, in aisle one of the brick show horse barns, that the beautiful and long-necked chestnut mare, CH The Commander's Mary Lou, joined in the festivities of her own retirement party, wisping at the hay, nosing at the balloons, nickering to the well-wishers who gifted her with flowers and cards and sentiments of good wishes.

For nearly a decade she had been, perhaps, the greatest walk-trot horse competing in the midwestern states. Her wins, too numerous to list, were in deep classes, sometimes more than 20 horses strong, and they came in the open, amateur and ladies Stakes and Championships. In 1984 she entered the fine harness division, and it was there that she became not just another champion, but a vision for the excellence of what a harness horse should be brilliant with animation, breathtaking with elegance. Hers was the fine harness trot of lore; slow, lofty, achingly beautiful. And through it all, she was teamed, of course, by perfection ridden and driven to a near undefeated career by Alberta Lee Cox.

A daughter of the Anacacho Shamrock mare, Senorita Marquita, and The Contract's Commander, the chestnut filly was christened Glenview's Mary Lou by her breeder Mrs. F.D. Sinclair, who named the dresden-fine baby after her own daughter, Mary Lou Gallagher. It wasn't, however, until after her win as a yearling in the Missouri Futurity and her subsequent purchase and re-naming by Alberta Lee Cox, that Mary Lou burst into the limelight -then as a vision of possibility and promise and now as a memory of the most perfect of show horses, performing, as she often did, to the musical chords of "Hello, Mary Lou."

Setting The Standard For Basketball And Women

In 1965, Alberta Lee Cox was named the Missouri Woman Of The Year; it seemed, on the outset, a significant title, yet it was merely a marquis for a lifetime that was to be filled with honors, awards, and accolades. Although her wins were numerous in the equestrian world, it was in a different arena, literally on the basketball court, that Alberta



Lee claimed the notoriety that would splash her name and face upon magazine pages, in newspaper articles, and on trophies of athletic achievement (The Alberta Lee Cox Sportmanship Award, awarded at the NJCAA Tournament, is "given annually on her behalf to the team that has shown exemplary and outstanding sportsmanship skills throughout the tournament"). She is a life member in the National A.A.U. (Amateur Athletic Union), and was an A.A.U. Basketball All American five times. She is an A.A.U. Women's Basketball Hall of Fame member, and was an original member of Helm's

Foundation Basketball Hall of Fame. For 20 years she played on the National A.A.U. Team and participated in National A.A.U. Tournaments ranked fifth or better in the nation. She played basketball in the United States, Europe, Canada, and South America. As a basketball player she was determined, formidable, focused, driven to be a success just as she was in the riding arena.

Lucille Davidson, nicknamed "Lutie" by her friends, traveled to South America to play basketball one year with Alberta Lee. "She was tough and determined. She was a guard. When we went to South America it was just an awesome trip we'd go



(top and btm) Alberta Lee and CH The Commander's Mary Lou.

to the beach, and all the young men would circle around us, whooping and hollering would you believe it? Anyway, we beat Russia that year in the finals for the World Championship. No one had done that before, so it was quite a big deal. Her parents were very supportive and they were very, very good at keeping up with her. They often had barbecues at the house." It was there at the Cox family home that Lutie saw the trophy case that Mr. Cox had built for his daughter in the home's basement. It contained an incredible assortment of trophies and memorabilia that combined both of his daughter's worlds, horses and basketball, and it was just this shrine of achievement that stayed etched in the mind of yet another visitor to the Cox home, as well.

"It was like seeing a Hall Of Fame in a basement glass enclosure," recalled Marian Washington, remembering a visit to her former coach's Raytown home. "There were uniforms, shoes, trophies, everything a full basement of everything you can imagine. Think of this: a long wall, ceiling to floor, wall to wall, filled with her awards. It was unreal, unbelievable."

Indeed, it was in testament of her great character that Alberta Lee had the fortitude to not only achieve legendary status for herself, but had the capability to take others to the heights that she, herself, had attained. As a basketball coach, she led the Raytown Piperettes (named, noted Betty Jo Morris for the fact that Alberta's father and grandfather, "both ran the pipeline. They actually laid the pipe, they were J.L. Cox and Son Pipestringing Specialists.") to fifth or above in the nation, and was also the first woman to coach a U.S.A. women's basketball team on foreign soil. She was the coach of the U.S.A. Women's basketball Team in the 1967 World Tournament in Prague, Czechoslovakia, and was the coach, that year as well, for the Women's team at the Pan American Games in Winnipeg, Canada. She was the U.S.A. National Women's Basketball Head Coach in 1965 and then made the history books by being the first woman coach of a U.S.A. Olympic team sport in 1967. And, it was in 1969 and 1970 that she coached the U.S.A. women's basketball team on their South American Tour, leading Marian

Washington and the Raytown Piperettes not just on a journey of athletic victory, but on a journey of diplomatic and lifelong lessons.

Remembered Marian, "She had competed at the highest level, and so she was very, very tough. She had a flare about her and she was a very strong woman, yet she was feminine at the same time. She was the best dressed coach, and she impacted us in the same way she was our teacher on and off the court. We went to South America at a time when the U.S. and other countries were on shaky ground, and at times it seemed threatening, students chanting but through it all she always remained calm. In Chile, we were winning, and people in the stands started throwing coins at us. Back then, our shorts were short, and the coins really hurt, so Bert said, "Pick 'em up and hand the coins to the kids," and so we went up and into the stands and found children and handed the coins to them, and that diffused the crowd. She just knew what to expect, and it wasn't about us; she would always tell us that we represented Oosa the U.S.A. and from that we developed a pride in our representation."

Marian Washington later became the face of women's basketball at the University of Kansas where she led the Jayhawks to the NCAA Tournament 11 times, and to several conference championships, as well as finishing with over 550 wins during her K.U. coaching tenure. Yet, Marian's success as a coach was fueled, perhaps, by the example set forth by Alberta Lee. While Marian was the first of two African American women to play on a United States National Team, it was Alberta Lee who chose just those players. "Bert," explained Marian proudly, "was the one who integrated the team. Bert made the decision. That's how intelligent, how intense she was as a coach. She was one of the greatest women in my life, and I am very thankful that she was in my life."

A Likely Connection

Their lives ran in a parallel universe both competed in the world of American Saddlebred Show Horses, both had families who were involved in and were supportive of the horse business, both had an Olympic connection, and both had fathers who shared an enthusiasm for politics, yet it wasn't until the year of 1989, when Janet Green traveled north to Kansas City to work for Charlie Judd, that Alberta Lee and the former trainer of Pinecrest Farm in Springfield, Missouri, became acquainted, and later became business partners. Indeed, it was Janet Green's mother, a former Olympic swimmer, who was instrumental in introducing the Cox family to her daughter, who, like Alberta Lee, possessed the shared trait of being formidable in the showring.

Indeed, if ever a lady knew the ropes of showing and competing with a gaited horse, it was and remains to this day, Janet Green. As a junior exhibitor she competed under the banner of the Arthur Simmons Stables, and later, as trainer at the Green family's

Pinecrest Farm, she became one of the area's top trainers, becoming legendary, of course, in the presentation of her Ladies Five-Gaited Gelding World's Champion, Magic Supreme. It was with "Charley," as the gelding was known, that Janet won class after class, from Little Rock and Lexington, to Louisville and The American Royal; and, then, too, it was with just this horse that Janet became literary, as well, quoting her oft-repeated line, "It's not so much what he has done, but that he keeps doing it." As testament to this, the Mr. Magic Man gelding continued to win nearly every class entered until his retirement at the American Royal in 1987, where he, ridden by Janet and joined in Kemper Arena's center ring with his former trainers, Tom Moore of Kentucky, Tom Moore of California, and Marty Mueller, entertained guests back at the barn aisle with a double tiered cake that stated, "I had the time of my life, Charley."

Now, joined with J.D. Gardner and staff at the beautiful Liberty Meadows Stable on Hillview Drive in Liberty, Missouri, Janet Green continues to pave the way for the success of the Cox family's equine legacy by breeding the Raytown Road stock which, to this day, still represents the vision of the late Mr. and Mrs. Leroy Cox, and that of their daughter, Alberta Lee, to better the American Saddlebred breed. With stallions such as Detour and Yellow Brick Road standing to the public, the name and importance of Raytown in the significance of the

American Saddlebred Horse carries on through the bloodstock that frolics in the farm's fields and in the showrings of today. Interestingly enough, it was not the Cox family who named the Courageous Admiral stallion, Raytown Road, but Janet Green, herself, who christened the late stallion after the Kansas City suburb's most well-known boulevard. "It was back when I first came to Kansas City, and was working for Charlie Judd. I didn't know my way around very well, and I drove the same path every day, Raytown Road, to get to Charlie's. It just seemed an appropriate name for a horse!"

Absolutely, if ever there was a woman who embodied the spirit of competition, of graciousness, and of greatness, it is Alberta Lee Cox. She led by example, and paved the way for women of all ages to aspire to high achievement. She proved that one can be formidable yet reasonable, tough yet kind, renowned yet humble. And with her connection to other great women such as Marian Washington and Janet Green, women who continue to teach and lead others still today, the influence of Alberta Lee Cox moves onward. See a junior exhibitor rallying a horse around the show ring for a blue ribbon, see a lady athlete driving down court for a lay-up? Perhaps they are simply competitors in their chosen sport, but more likely than not they are a connection to a lady who guided, through example, women to the pinnacle of success.



(top) J.D. Gardner and Busby Berkeley. (btm) Janet Green and Magic Supreme.