

# LONE STAR Saddlebreds

By Julie Size

Have you ever wondered what it takes to create a successful American Saddlebred training facility? What if you are in an area of the country where the average horse owner does not even know what a Saddlebred is? Let's raise the bar even further and add to our list that the atmosphere must be fun and enjoyable. Well, I want to tell you about a special barn hidden in a small town just outside of Houston in Magnolia, Texas, that embodies each of these qualities, called Lone Star Saddlebreds!

Owners and trainers Koren Mercer and Milo Jones merged their dreams into such a business. Thirty roomy stalls, wide barn aisles, large indoor covered and outdoor riding arenas, tack and wash stalls are just the beginning of this perfectly maintained facility. Walking through the barn, enjoying the horses, watching lessons, and visiting with their customers, gave me a sense of the accomplishment that this Saddlebred farm has achieved, but it wasn't something that was done overnight.

Milo Jones is an accomplished rider, competitor, and trainer who

grew up around horses. His family owned many saddle horses from the time he was three. When he was seven, a very special Christmas surprise was awaiting him; his very own horse! It was a mare named Joy's Choice that would forever be a part of his cherished memories. Milo's passion for horses was already a part of who he was at this early age. His father taught him good horsemanship and a most valuable lesson when it came to training. You can ask a horse for more and he will give you all he has, but never try to force it out of him. He continued to work, ride and compete with the family's 80-plus head of horses until he turned 18, at which time he left for college. It was not long before the desire to work with horses welled up inside of him and by the time he was 22, he was training Saddlebreds in Kentucky again. For a short while, Milo moved to Los Angeles, Calif., and worked as a stunt man, but in less than two years, the high stress job sent him back to his true love. From there he moved to Colorado, again trained Saddlebreds until he was 36 before a trip to Texas changed his life.

Koren Mercer grew up with the affliction we all know as horse fever, but she was the only one in her family to be stricken by it. Starting at the age of 10 she began taking academy riding lessons with Patty Milligan. Not able to own her own horse at that time, increased her desire to improve her riding skills. She worked so hard that she was repeatedly asked to catch ride show horses owned by the farm at competitive shows. The diversity of riding so many horses only increased her skills. After graduating from high school, she had to set her love of riding to the side while she went to college and earned her degree in Clinical Dietetics. Eager to get back in the saddle, soon after graduating she purchased a horse called Kiawah's Royal Sultan. She took all she had learned and rode as an amateur owner/trainer in the country pleasure division.

In 2000 a chance meeting between Koren and Milo came about at the infamous Big D Charity fish fry at Milligan Stables.

There was an instant attraction, Koren admitted with a sheepish grin.

The two became more than just a couple; they became a team and a partnership began to unfold in their lives. Six months later they accepted a dual training position in Tulsa, Okla., with Milo working show horses and Koren giving lessons, starting colts and both grooming.

Two of the horses we started there are now here at Lone Star, Koren pointed out.

The couple worked in Oklahoma for one year before accepting a position in Tampa Bay, Fla.

We learned a lot about the business and managing so many customers in the different barns we have worked in over the years. I know it has made a difference in the way we deal with every kind of situation here. No matter how much you love horses, if the barn environment is not relaxing and fun, you will not enjoy the experience. Family atmosphere and working together as a team is mandatory.

After another year, a job position became available in Texas. Koren



Koren Mercer and Milo Jones.

was especially anxious to move to the Great State to be closer to her mother, who at the time was recovering from a stroke.

We worked in Tomball, Texas for two years before making the decision to open our own barn. It was the best decision we have ever made, Koren reflected.

Starting out they rented a barn in Cypress, Texas. Within 18 months they had outgrown the facility and were desperately looking for a new home. Looking at many properties and locations, they were thrilled to find a barn in Magnolia, just north of The Woodlands, Texas.

There are several Saddlebred farms northwest of Houston, but very few that are northeast. Houston is so large; this gave us a good location advantage. Currently we are at maximum capacity and we have only been here for 18 months! Milo stated.

Not only has their customer base increased, but so many of their clients now own new horses. In country pleasure, Megan Weise now owns Callaway's Better Than Ever, and Fay Stephens owns Eagle's Point Harry Potter. Nancy Kanive purchased So Fizzical and Shalynn Randal is buying Hot Damn I Am. Corrine Stith has already made her beautiful first presentation of her country pleasure driving horse, Screen Idol.

In show pleasure, Nicole Tucker purchased Simply Unpredictable, Sara Bratcher bought Executive Phorce, and Sharon Moritz owns Blues Traveler and will ride him until her two-year-old Totally Kool is ready for his debut. Hannah Houske just took ownership of the recently gelded Evil Cat, which Milo will be showing in park pleasure until Hannah is ready to take the reins.

In the gaited classes, Lone Star will be well represented by Selectively Wild owned by Jan Carroll and Time To Win owned and ridden by a mother/daughter team, Emily and Melissa Jernigan.

Along with this clientele, there are an additional eight academy riders and three nice prospect horses that Koren and Milo are training. Two walk-trot horses include Brazen Affair and Blink, along with the well-known five-gaited, two-time reserve world champion, Bueno Day.

When I sat down with Koren and asked her to tell me what makes her barn different from the others, she was quick to point out that almost every Saddlebred barn in our area had good things to offer and how fortunate we were to have such a talented variety of trainers in Texas. I had to push the question further to get the answer I was looking for.

Okay, I said, then tell me why all of your customers are so happy?

Without hesitation, both she and Milo answered, We strive for a family atmosphere here. If there is conflict, it must be worked out. All riders must learn



horsemanship and respect. Respect for not only the animals, but for each other. We need all of our riders to understand that ground handling and grooming are just as important as riding. Equitation is emphasized more with the junior riders, but all riders need to learn the basics of balance and position. I want them to compete against themselves and we try to make the group lessons just like a show, so that nothing is overlooked and they are prepared for anything.

When I had the chance to talk to several of their junior riders, these exact words were echoed when they were thrilled to

explain to me what the phrase One-Two Punch stood for.

Sara, Megan and Nicole eagerly explained, Many times there is more than one rider in a class from Lone Star. We are a team and we strive to hear our team members tied for the first and second place honors. That is the One-Two Punch! I am just as thrilled when this happens if I am in second place than if I am in first as long as one of my buddies is bringing home the blue! We take the time to cheer for our team mates, even if it means staying after our own classes are done.

Typically a new rider starts by taking private lessons on Belle Esprit, a 28-year-old confident lesson horse, who was quite the equitation show mare in her day. Once they have proven to both themselves and their instructor that they are ready to move on, the new student is allowed the chance to start group lessons. Both Koren and Milo give lessons with Milo working more on performance and Koren with equitation.

This makes our students more well rounded riders, they explained.

Earlier this year, Lone Star Saddlebreds suffered a great loss when their beloved lesson horse Billy Kidd passed away. Purchased from Barbara Simpson just two years ago, Billy quickly became the students favorite horse.

In recognition of what an amazing animal he was, we have decided to dedicate a Memorial Trophy for him for the Academy Maiden Limit Championship class. He took such loving care of so many of our

beginning riders, he deserves this honor! The students heads were nodding yes as Koren told me about this.

In a typical year, Lone Star participates in 15 to 20 shows. During the summer months, some of the show horses are moved to Kentucky for their more active show season. Milo goes to attend to them. Koren stays in Texas to work the farm here and continue to give lessons. I was so impressed by this system that puts so much emphasis on the customer and the pride of each individual's accomplishments. It was easy to see why Lone Star customers and their horses are so content!

