



World Championship Quarter Horse Show



HAROLD CAMPTON

Great Rides

It happened nearly a quarter-century ago, but this great pleasure ride still has folks talking.

By Honi Roberts

NOBODY WHO WITNESSED THE 1984 AQHA WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP Show senior western pleasure class will forget the day a 14-year-old boy and his mare found themselves on top of the World.

"I didn't mind being second to that wonderful mare and such a determined young man," said Bruce Walquist, the top trainer who was the AQHA open reserve world champion that year. "Brian Kissinger was a very serious, dedicated rider, and Kings Bambi was one of the great mares of the day."

Brian's dad, Craig Kissinger, owner of the R Lazy K Inc. in Glenvil, Nebraska, said it was just plain luck to have found her.

"I'd been looking for a pleasure prospect for my kids, when I went to a show in 1981, and sat next to a lady who told me that she had a horse I should see," Craig recalled. "When she left, a man sitting in front of me turned and said, 'I have a horse you might like.'"

Kissinger filed the thought but continued to scour the show grounds, without success. Finally, he jumped on a plane and flew to Gainesville, Texas. There, he set sight on a 2-year-old sorrel filly by Sonnys Dyn O Mite (Sonny Dee Bar) and out of King's Trinket by King. She'd been started by a cutting horse trainer.

"She was broke to death," Craig said, "but it was clear that she wasn't going to make a cutter."

Kings Bambi also had a big, kind eye and what seemed to Craig like an instinctive talent for the pleasure pen. The natural-moving filly had a soft, two-beat cadence and a true lope. Kissinger bought her in December, and brought her home in the spring. It didn't take long for the entire family to decide that "Bambi" was something special.

Brian, his brother and two sisters all rode. Their parents got them started in 4-H as youngsters, and by the time they were 8 or 9 years old, they were showing at AQHA events. Horses were family projects, with everyone involved. The Kissingers didn't hire trainers, although as they traveled the show circuit, they received plenty of helpful advice. Their training sessions usually involved a child jogging a horse, while their father told them what he saw from the ground.

Bambi was Brian's horse, and with one brief exception, he was the only rider that Bambi would ever know.

"She and Brian were a team," Craig recalled. "Bambi was about as close to being human as a horse can be. Brian was just 11 years old when he started showing her, but I knew I could trust her – she didn't have a mean bone in her body.

"All of our kids showed; that's what our life was. There was a great group of kids, and it made for a nice culture. A little success, now and again, made it even sweeter."

In 1982, the first year that Brian showed Bambi, she earned a Superior in youth western pleasure. The next year, they were 10th in year-end points. But even that could not prepare them for what was to come in 1984.

First, Brian and Kings Bambi slow-jogged to the AQHYA World Championship Show western pleasure title. To celebrate, the family went out for ice cream in Tulsa.

At the Texas Classic, the smooth-moving duo won the youth western pleasure and came second in the open 4-year-old and over class. The stage was set for the World Show.

"We decided that it was the mare's last run," Craig said. "She'd done everything asked of her, and win, lose or draw, she'd go out on a high note."

Today, Brian is a father of four; but nearly a quarter of a century ago, he celebrated his 14th birthday in October, and prepared to compete against the top pleasure trainers of the day.

"I don't remember feeling any different about it," he said. "All of us kids rode every day after school and showed all summer."

There was just one preliminary go-round at the World Show, and 15 competitors would be invited back to the open western pleasure finals. Numbers were called, lowest scores first. Bambi was the 14th horse lifted. The last called and high-scoring horse was the All American Quarter Horse Congress senior western pleasure champion, Bama Bonanza, with Bruce Walquist.

"We were thrilled just to be in the same class with them," Craig Kissinger said.

"Brian and Bambi were crowd favorites," Bruce remembered. "Understandably. He was fantastic in the way he handled the pressure, and she was a soft-moving horse, with an expression that told you she enjoyed everything she did.

"I'm just glad it was the only time I competed against them," Bruce added with a chuckle.

Bruce knew that when Brian and Bambi went through the in-gate, the crowd would cheer loudly, so Bruce's strategy was to put some space between himself and his youngest competitor. He jogged in last, after asking his people not to clap, in an effort to avoid startling his champion mare.

Brian laughed.

"That was smart! When Bambi and I entered the arena, the crowd clapped – which was unusual – and it almost caused a problem. Bambi perked up, wondered what was happening, but then quickly settled down and did her thing."

In the stands, the entire Kissinger family watched, on the edge of their seats. The crowd was enthusiastic and clearly had a special spot in their hearts for the young boy and his smooth-as-silk mare. At last, the announcer received the judges' final decision.

"It was incredibly exciting," Craig recalled. "Brian was number 500. At one point, the announcer said, 'and in fifth place, entry number 500' – then he paused dramatically, and the crowd groaned with disappointment! The announcer continued '500-something,' and they went wild. Brian was still in the running, and we knew he was among the top finishers. When the reserve champion was named, the crowd cheered, then went nuts for Brian. The announcer quipped, 'Why do you need me if you think you know who won?' Then, everything became a blur!"

Brian remembered two things: that he only made it about one-third way around the arena for his victory lap and that nearly "everyone in the world wanted to buy Bambi."

But she wasn't going anywhere, except back to Nebraska and the Kissingers' broodmare band. In the following years, Kings Bambi would produce eight foals, including five performers. The family retained several of her offspring because, as Craig said, "We just couldn't part with them. Anything connected with Bambi is special to us."

Brian proved his win wasn't a fluke, earning the 1986 youth world western pleasure title with another mare. Then, basketball and school claimed his attention.

Sadly, when she was just 16, Kings Bambi died suddenly from an acute burst stomach. The family grieved mightily. Today, there are memories, trophies and a garland of yellow roses in their family room that tell the story.

The Kissingers, who enjoy a low profile and usually decline any publicity, agreed to this story for just two reasons.

"Because the AQHA family has been so remarkably good to our family," Craig said. "And because this is about a mare that meant so much to us – and did so much for us. Kings Bambi was one of a kind."

Everyone who saw that great ride would agree. ■

Honi Roberts is a special contributor to The American Quarter Horse Journal. To comment, write to aqhajrnl@aqha.org