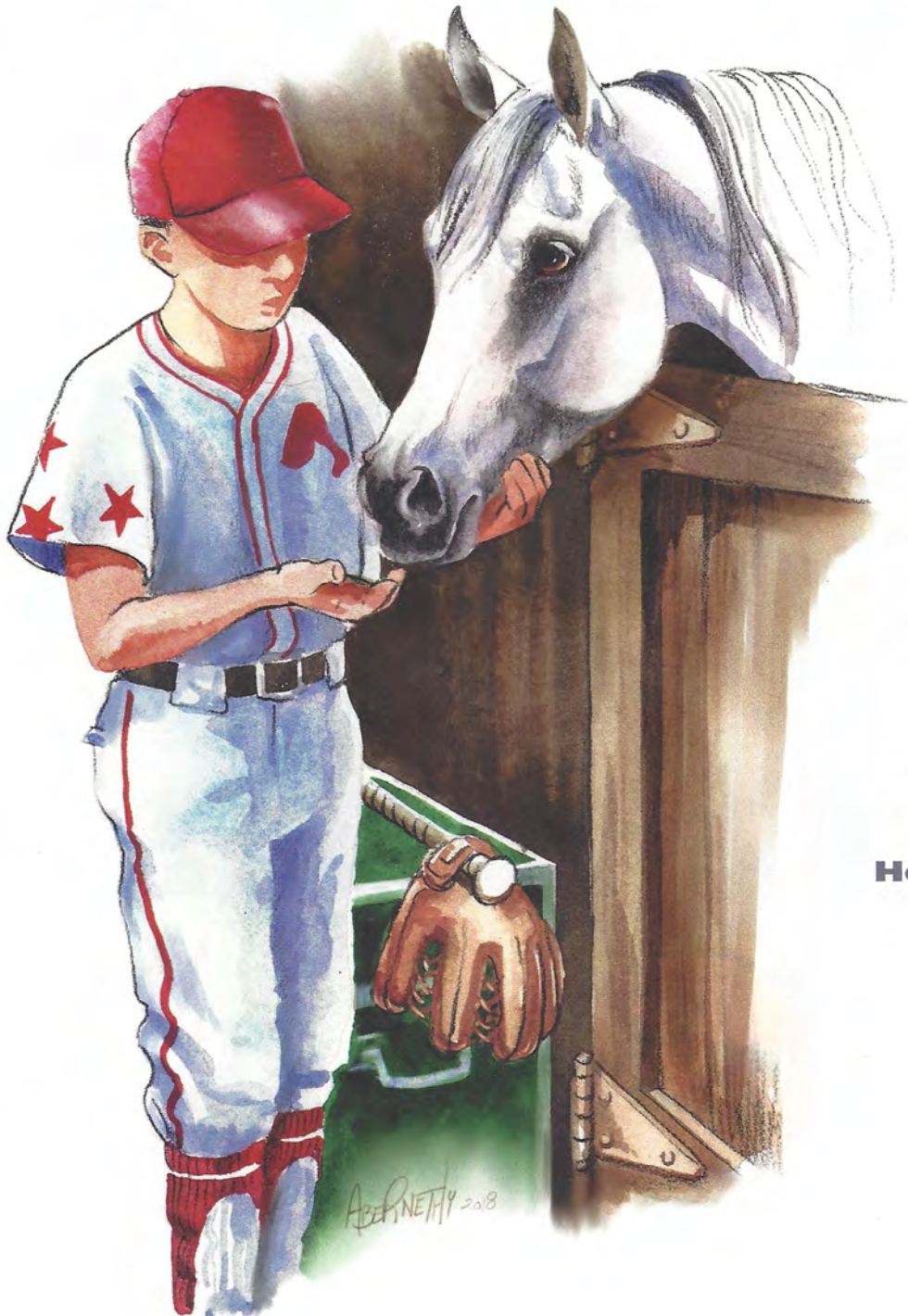


# DEAR YOUNGER ME



*The 'horse thing' will take you  
places you never dreamed of,  
if you just give it a chance.*

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**By AQHA Professional  
Horseman Don McDuffee  
with Katie Navarra  
Illustrations by  
Jean Abernethy**

DEAR YOUNGER DON MCDUFFEE,

You long to follow in your father's footsteps as a professional baseball player.

He played for the Boston Braves for one season before he was drafted into the United States Army Air Corps during World War II. From the time you were old enough to swing a bat and catch a ball, you've been out on the diamond.

I hate to tell you this, but your days on the ballfield are limited. Your older sister, Linda-Lane, has discovered boys. At 16, she starts dating her first boyfriend and immediately forgets all about the Arabian show horses in the barn. I know, you're 15 and all you want to do is play ball. But your parents are going to offer the horses to you or list them for sale.

Don't refuse their offer.

The "horse thing" is worth a try, but ask your parents to sell the Arabians and replace them with Quarter Horses – it'll be easier to convince them than you think.

With the money you make from selling your sister's horses, you can afford one Quarter Horse, a buckskin Leo daughter.

Breaking into the stock events isn't going to be easy. You live in New Hampshire, after all. There aren't many local trainers available to help you, and there are only three sanctioned AQHA shows in all of New England. The first few years are going to be difficult.

I realize you haven't spent much time riding, that is until your sister dumped her horses in your lap. There's a seldom-used dirt road just outside of town that makes a solid surface to ride on. Every day after school, you'll haul two horses out there and teach yourself to ride. You'll struggle to improve. Unfortunately, when you go to your first few shows, you find out that everything you've been doing is wrong.

Don't give up.

The summer in between your junior and senior years of high school, you and Bill Waterman will dream up the crazy idea to drive out to Ohio to learn from accomplished trainers. Do it. You'll end up working for legendary reining trainer Dale Wilkinson, and your buddy will spend the summer at Bill Horn's. While you're hanging around Dale's farm, tell him you're looking for a horse to buy. That bay gelding he's got named Highland Creek by Cajun Creek? Ask Dale about him. You'll learn that the gelding didn't turn out to be the futurity prospect Dale was hoping for, but the horse has talent and he'll help you break into the sport.

In fact, you'll end up showing that gelding to a top-10 finish in open reining at the 1968 All American Quarter Horse Congress, the year you turn 18. By this time, you're pretty well convinced that after high school, you want to be a full-time horse trainer.

Enroll in the animal science program at the University of New Hampshire and then rent a barn with three other young trainers. The money you earn riding horses will pay your tuition.

It'll help that you'll win a fair share of \$150-\$500 added-money reining jackpots. In 1970, after you graduate from college, Jack Farrell will offer you a job in Connecticut. That's when you'll discover cutting horses. Learn to show those cutters, but also jump on the horses that Jack takes in to train for brokers. That'll only do you good in the future.

You're going to spend a lot of time in the saddle for Jack: He has a 54-stall barn, and he believes that if a client pays you for 30 days of training, you gotta put 30 rides on the horse.

He'll also get you into the western pleasure pen. I realize that most of the AQHA shows are largely cutting events, but Jack's 9-year-old son, Jimmy, wants to show in pleasure. So Jack has you show Jusca Hepit in junior pleasure and Jimmy enters the horse in youth pleasure. The two of you win every class available.

As 1971 approaches, you'll celebrate your 21st birthday. This is the year your goals include winning Congress and an AQHA world championship. Congress comes and goes. Then it's Thanksgiving and the World Show is over. You haven't achieved either goal. You're scared and fearful that the future you dreamed of is out of reach.

But don't give up.

## Giving Up Isn't an Option

SEARCH OUT TRAINERS WINNING IN THE SHOW PEN AND LEARN all you can from them. Go south to Maryland to work for non-pro cutter Gil Porter. He's going to give you an opportunity to ride some really nice horses, including Miss China Cat and Smoke Nine.

This will give you some exposure in the show pen. Eventually, you'll need to move on.

Dick Tull, a halter guy in Maryland, is going to give you a big break. Take it. You'll be on the road nonstop, hauling from one show to the next. A month or more will pass in between the times you'll actually see your boss. He's going to teach you responsibility and introduce you to the weary road that leads to world champions. It'll be you and a couple of horses on the road together, chasing points and titles.

Talk to Carol. Accept her invitation to visit the farm. When she offers you the job, say "Yes," because it'll take you on an amazing journey for the next five years. While you're at the 1978 AQHA World Championship Show, a friend will tell you that Carol Harris of Bo Bett Farms in Reddick, Florida, is hiring. Carol is a master at foaling out mares. You'll learn a lot about the signs to watch for in a mare before foaling and how to help a mare and foal that are in trouble. During the course of your time with Carol, you'll help foal out nearly 300 mares.

At first, 1981 won't seem like a tremendously momentous year. On May 1, you and Carol will welcome the plainest bay colt into the world, born to the Striegel family's mare Alisa Lark. The Striegels wanted a filly and eventually they sell the colt – named Rugged Lark – to Carol.

You won't pay much attention to this colt, and when Carol asks you to start him under saddle as a 2-year-old, you will. Carol is a patient trainer. She believes in giving young horses all the time they need. When you start a young horse, it'll be with a side pull or a hackamore, and you won't progress to a bit until the horse is absolutely ready.

By the time that horse's career is over, he'll have won two AQHA Superhorse titles, one in 1985 and the second in 1987. He will also win world championships in pleasure driving and senior hunter under saddle and reserve world championships in pleasure driving and senior western riding. He eventually sires two Superhorse sons, The Lark Ascending, who wins the title in 1991, and Look Whos Larkin, who wins in 1999. Another son, Regal Lark, is reserve Superhorse in 1993.



Many years from now, you'll look back on the time you spent with this horse and marvel at the twist of fate that allowed you to be a part of his life from the very beginning.

## Stepping Up

IN 1983, YOU'LL STRIKE OUT ON YOUR OWN FOR THE FIRST TIME since your teenage years. While you're campaigning Bonanza Sassy, a horse that you'll eventually win the western pleasure Honor Roll with, you'll meet Brenda Seats. You're curious what the Michigan native is doing all the way down in Florida with her six-horse rig.

You strike up a relationship that will lead to a decades-long marriage. You and Brenda get married in 1988. Together, you'll buy an 11-acre farm in Ocala and start a breeding operation. At its peak, you'll breed up to 400 mares and foal out as many as 125 mares each year.

Not content to specialize in one area of the industry, you'll apply for your AQHA judge's card in 1985. When you show up for the hands-on portion of the exam, stay true to your gut instincts. Don't try to outsmart or guess how the evaluators will rank a horse. Be bold, be an independent thinker, and articulate your rationale clearly.

It'll pay off. You'll finish second in the class that day in Lubbock, Texas.

Your reputation as an independent, fair thinker will earn you prestigious judging opportunities early in your career. In 1990, Denny Hale will call and ask you to judge your first Congress.

The night before your first class, you'll be pulled into the arena for a high-stakes Miller hunter under saddle winner-takes-all event.

Look to your right: L.G. Heire is ready to judge, with pen and scoring sheet in hand. Look to your left: T.E. Vinci tips his hat hello.

Yes, you're really standing in the ring with these guys. They'll nod encouragement and hold you to the same level of standard in judging that they have become well-known for.

In the mid-1990s, you'll serve on the AQHA Studbook Committee, which approves the use of cooled semen in breeding — a real game changer for the industry.

In 1994, a fresh colt you're ponying from a four-wheeler acts up in the middle of a paddock filled with grazing mares with foals and cattle. He wrenches you from the seat, twisting and injuring your back because you don't want to chase him across the paddock. You don't think much about it until the

next week when you're in the halter pen. You bend down to fix a foot and realize that your back hurts. You'll ignore the pain. Spoiler alert: This injury will haunt you until you finally agree to surgery 16 years later.

Gritting your way through the pain, you continue to show in halter classes and judge events that demand hours on your feet. Eventually, you'll limit your judging to events on the West Coast where you can judge stock horse events so you can still judge halter, but then spend the remainder of the show judging from a seat because your back pain is excruciating.

You'll be associated with foaling, buying, training, showing or standing at stud more than 70 world champions in stock breeds (Palomino, Paint and Quarter Horse) and more than 25 Congress winners. Debbie Coughlin from Dublin, Ohio, will keep ESharp with you, a horse who will go on to win five AQHA world championships.

Your notoriety in the industry will bring you clients from all walks of life, including David Miser, the retired CEO of Carnival Cruise Lines, and Colin Carter of X-Ray Equipment Co. in Miami. During the 17 years Colin is your client, you will help him and his wife win 14 world championships. David and Colin will look to you for your wisdom in horse training and showing. And when you need business advice, they will repay the favor, freely sharing their expertise.

You'll balance the breeding and training operations with a full judging schedule that will send you across the United States and to Europe, Asia and Latin America. You'll marvel at how many opportunities AQHA will give you to travel the world.

## In Amsterdam

YOUR TRIP TO JUDGE IN BREMEN, GERMANY, IS ONE THAT WILL stay with you the rest of your life.

You and Brenda arrive a week early to sight-see. You travel north to the North Sea and Amsterdam, the city where Anne Frank and her family fled from Nazi Germany.

On your way back to Bremen, you and Brenda stop at the Bergen-Belsen museum. During the tour, you see a picture on the wall. The uniforms look eerily familiar. The gaunt faces staring back at you are American POWs who were also held at the camp. You remember that your father's best friend, Dick Shellback, had been a POW in Germany. You call your dad and ask him, "Where was Dick when the Allies liberated Germany?"

He doesn't remember.

"Call him. I'll call you back in a half-hour," you tell your dad.

When you call back, your father confirms that Dick was held at the Bergen-Belsen camp.

Then it hits you: "My God. It's 50 years later and I'm standing in the spot where my father's best friend was liberated."

You'll feel chilled to the bone even though it's a warm, midsummer day.

## Changes Every 10 Years

THROUGHOUT YOUR JUDGING CAREER, YOU'LL BE INVITED TO judge the AQHA World Show and the Congress six times each. The pain from your back injury so many years ago will force you to show less, and in 2010, you'll finally agree to surgery. Your doctor warns you that if you don't, you'll be wheelchair bound for the rest of your life.

He was right about one thing: The physical therapy was far more painful than the surgery itself, but after rehab, you'll feel better than ever, and your back will no longer dictate the events you judge.



As the years come and go, you'll realize that every 10 years, your focus evolves. Your latest endeavor began in 2013 and will likely take you to retirement. In your role with the board of directors for the Florida AgCenter and Horse Park Authority, you'll have an opportunity to make a lasting impact that will transcend breeds and disciplines. This is not a position to take lightly. Florida Commissioner of Agriculture Adam Putnam has to sign off on your appointment. Four hours into your service, you'll be voted in as chairman of the board.

Remember that plain bay colt named Rugged Lark? Even though he died in 2004, you've never forgotten him. You'll be instrumental in memorializing his legacy by leading the charge to have the newly constructed arena in Florida named in his honor. This horse meant a lot to you, and in many ways, you'll consider this your crowning achievement.

Nearly 50 years after horses were "dumped" in your lap and took you away from baseball, you'll be amazed at all of the opportunities you've been granted because you took a chance on horse showing, an endeavor you never intended to participate in.

The next 10 years are sure to hold as many opportunities as the previous 50. Your wife is going to continue giving you gift certificates to try "crazy" things, like parachuting and driving in the Tom Petty NASCAR driving experience. You're crossing off so many items on your bucket list, it'll be time to find a few new ideas.

Every morning you wake up, you'll look out across your 11 acres and be thankful for the great horses and the great life you've built for yourself. Thinking back on all you've achieved, you marvel at how AQHA has given you the opportunity to fulfill your dreams. Embrace each occasion with the vigor you have all your life, and you'll continue to be rewarded with good horses and gracious horsemen who will look to you for advice and expertise.

What a ride. 🐾

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