



SHAPING GREATNESS

Cannon Quarter Horses Is Making Its Mark While Turning Out Champions With Heart, Drive And Durability

Michelle Cannon is an unlikely horsewoman. Her family was far removed from the horse world. That is, until her dedicated parents welcomed the arrival of their bright-eyed baby girl who had an innate love for all things equestrian. "My mom always said that she made a mistake putting me on one of those horse toys on springs as a child," says Cannon, laughing at the fond memory. "Honestly I don't know where it came from, but horses are all I've ever wanted." Cannon's father, a police officer, worked nights and was determined to afford a horse that his girl could call her own. The pieces of her life's patchwork fell into place from there, carrying her passion on from her first horse, a wild Arabian-Quarter Horse mix, then leading her down the path to her present place at the helm of a storied and entirely self-made breeding operation.

As a pre-teenager, Cannon soon found that her aspirations were far greater than her unruly half-Arab gelding could satisfy. The family farrier recognized a spark in her and convinced her parents that she was in need of a better mount. "That was it, my gelding was sold, and we bought an Appaloosa from the farrier," says Cannon. "The agreement was, 'You can buy this horse with your savings, but she's going to come with a breeding to a stallion and you get to raise the baby.' They told me I had to sell the baby to pay my savings back," remembers Cannon with a sly smile. "Needless to say, that baby wasn't going anywhere." Thus, her path into the breeding world was forged, and she has yet to look back from there. "Here I was starting my own little horse operation, and breeding horses as a 12-year-old girl. Anything I could do to earn money I did. Any dollar I earned bought me a saddle, tack, grooming supplies and paid for anything else the horses needed."

Through high school, Cannon began receiving calls to ride and train horses. She jumped at any and every opportunity. "A girl on the school bus told me one day that there was a pony tied up in her yard

and her mom was going to call the meat truck to come get it," Cannon recalls. "I thought 'Oh no.' I couldn't let that happen. So, here I was getting off the school bus, saddling my horse in the pouring rain and taking off to get the pony." Her mother caught a glimpse of Cannon, drenched and climbing into the saddle. "She asked me where I was headed in that kind of weather. I said, 'Well, I gotta go get a pony,' and she said, 'Oh no, you are not!' Needless to say, I was headed down the driveway," Cannon says, remembering her signature strong will that was already well-cemented as a child. "I was dragging this pony behind me in the pouring down rain, and my mom was just shaking her head. Funny thing was, I cleaned it up and it was the prettiest little palomino pony you ever saw. I ended up selling it and making a few hundred dollars." Cannon's eye for a good horse developed early, as did her complete and utter focus on making a life and a name for herself in the horse business.

Originally from Washington state, Cannon moved to Texas in her early twenties, where she spotted a red dun mare on the neighbor's property and was instantly smitten. "I really didn't understand what she was trained for when I first visited her, but I knew I liked her color and conformation," says Cannon. When she inquired about buying her, the neighbor expected Cannon's interest in the mare to be performance-related. As he learned her passion for breeding, he promptly signed the mare over to her and agreed to take payments. "That was my first Quarter Horse," Cannon says, remembering the mare that started it all. "I had my mare, and now my mission was to shop around and find me a stallion."

When Cannon met her now-husband, her mare had given her two babies. Her husband was intrigued, owning two Quarter Horse mares of his own. On what was debatably either a very expensive decision or a wise premonition — or both — he took Cannon out to the fabled 6666 Ranch one day to see the stallions. "I thought 'Oh

my goodness,' I had never been to any operation like this. I had just been a backyard breeder." Witnessing the legendary 6666 Ranch breeding operation firsthand, Cannon became obsessively focused on matching mares and stallions with the goal of producing not only visually stunning horses with excellent conformation, but horses that were durable, workable and could win in the show pen. She had also come to the conclusion that expensive stud fees were tough to swallow, so she began shopping for a stallion to call her own. "That's when I found Shiners Nickle at Carol Rose's," remembers Cannon. "My husband told me, 'Don't even bother going up there. We can't afford anything there.' " In Cannon's typical fashion, she went to have a look anyway. "I came back with pictures and videos, and my husband was just shaking his head at me," she says chuckling. "A couple months went by, and I snuck back up there again to go take some more pictures, and I talked to the trainer. Together we would look around, and the whole time I was soaking it all up, studying anything and everything I could find."

Cannon couldn't shake her instant connection with Shiners Nickle. "One day I overheard my husband say to his friend, 'I don't know what I am going to do. She found the prettiest horse I have ever seen, and I don't even know how to tell her no.' " In Cannon's mind, she was determined to find a way to afford the stallion on her own, not wanting to burden her husband with the pressure. "I finally took him up there to see the stallions, and they must have pulled 10 or 12 stallions for us to look at and ride." It was always Shiners Nickle, however, and eventually, the Cannons purchased the storied stallion, leaving him in training at Carol Rose's ranch. Cannon quickly got an introduction to the reined cow horse world, a sport that was previously foreign to her. Each time Cannon would return from reined cow horse events she would think of her collection of ranch mares. "I had some nice ranch mares," she says. "Some of them I still have and breed today." Although they were nice horses, they were nowhere near the caliber that she'd need to breed to Shiners Nickle in order to produce the level of offspring she wanted. "That's when I started learning about mares that have winnings and produce earnings and things like that," she says of her shift in strategy. Her quest began to source mares that would complement Shiners Nickle and lay the foundation for Cannon Quarter Horses to become a legitimate player in the world of performance breeding.

First came Lil Lena Long Legs and a daughter of High Brow Cat, then several more. Meanwhile, Shiners Nickle was making a name for himself. He captured the title of Co-Reserve Champion at the coveted Snaffle Bit Futurity and had won nearly \$110,000. Cannon was pairing him with the elite-level mares she was sourcing, and her breeding operation was suddenly kick-started into a serious business. It was at that point that the unthinkable happened. "I bought Tootsie Rey and Mereyda, and we were in the beginning stages of really building something incredible." It was at that point, and completely unex-

pectedly, that tragedy struck. "Nickle went to the National Reining Breeders Classic (NRBC), and all of the sudden he was found dead one day in his stall there. It was early on in his 5-year-old year, and we were completely devastated," Cannon says through tears. Still

to this day Nickle's death hits her hard. "I had literally just spent half of my life's savings in buying him and the mares I had put together. I stood there just looking at those mares and just cried. I didn't know where to go or what to do. That's when I decided to just pray to the Lord and see where this takes us."

Her prayers were answered with the help of modern veterinary medicine and Texas A&M University's Dr. Dickson Varner and his team. Nickle's testicles were harvested immediately upon his death, which allowed for straws of his semen to be collected and stored for Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI) later on. "We bred a few mares within the first year with Nickle's frozen semen, and once that was gone we turned to ICSI." Cannon refers to today's Nickle babies as her "little miracle babies." Cannon kept all but a few of Nickle's daughters and holds them in high regard. Her instincts have proven

true, with his offspring developing into incredible horseflesh. "I kept praying something would happen with Nickle's babies, and then along came Shiney Outlaw," says Cannon proudly. In the first four years of showing Nickle's babies, every one of them that competed in the Snaffle Bit Futurity went on to the finals. The line is exceptionally talented, no doubt, and Cannon has continued on with fervor.

Shiney Outlaw's babies are just hitting the ground this year, along with the offspring of top cutting horse mares that Cannon has acquired. She's aimed her line to be successful and diversified producers, with cowy instincts in the cutting pen and an athletic nature for reining and fence work. Along the way, she has maintained a focus on her original ranch mares as well, believing firmly in producing good-quality stock that can seamlessly flow into the roping, ranch work, penning and sorting worlds. Cannon's development work starts the second her babies hit the ground. She handles them immediately after birth, building trust and a bond between herself, her team and the foals. The babies are led as early as one-day old, using pressure points and guidance from the handler's body. They're tied, their feet are picked up and they receive an abundance of loving attention from birth on into the round pen and beyond. "It's a very hands-on approach that we take," says Cannon. "We wear on the buddy system, so it's two to a stall. We'll go into the stall and work with them, and they have their buddy to keep them calm. It really becomes comical because that relationship between the two weanlings continues on out into the pasture. They're together until we separate them into stalls as yearlings to start prepping for sales." Sale prep will be a dominant focus from the summer through December, with the yearlings learning the ropes of the walker, underwater treadmill and round pen. The constant handling and attention makes for highly trainable horses.



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Cannon Quarter Horses

“Our approach is different by design, but our team is one of the most important parts of the equation,” says Cannon proudly of the people who dedicate their lives to the well-being and success of her horses. “The veterinarians play a huge role as well,” she says with gratitude. “Doctors Justin Ritthaler and Jeff Foland of Weatherford Equine and Dr. Veneklasen at Timber Creek Veterinary Hospital all contribute to our horses being healthy and raised right.” The health and durability of Cannon Quarter Horses is not left to chance in any fashion, as Cannon is meticulous about the details that make up her care plan and veterinary team. “I have people come in my barn all the time, and they just stare,” she says with pride. “I hear over and over again, ‘I just don’t understand how your horses look better than everyone else’s.’ Platinum formulas are a big part of our program here, and I laugh because my husband always tells me, ‘Don’t tell people what you feed.’ The more I looked at Platinum versus other products and other supplements, I just liked the way it looks and the way it smells. It looked like something I would eat. I kind of chuckle at myself when people walk into the barn and ask what I do differently. If they only knew how much I believe in Platinum. I say over and over, ‘People have got to feed the horses right,’ and so many don’t. I require the best for them. People will ask me, ‘I don’t understand why you keep feeding those recipient mares Platinum.’ I tell them, ‘You know something? You aren’t seeing that it’s not just about that mare. It’s about that baby, and I need that baby strong with well-developed

bones.’ I 110 percent believe that you have to give these horses the right nutrition for them to reach their potential.”

Michelle Cannon may have achieved a high level of success in the breeding and performance worlds, but she’s constantly mindful of her humble beginnings. In the end, her pure love of the horse is the same as it was back in Washington state, where it all started with a wild half-Arab and some scrappy ponies. “It’s their heart that gets me. They’re so powerful and majestic, yet they just want to please you and be near you. The things that they do for us are amazing, as is their love of their job and their sport.” Cannon’s goal is simple: to breed the very best performance horses that can readily win and maintain long and healthy careers. “Obviously I have very high hopes for Shiney Outlaw and his offspring. I pray that those babies excel very highly in all disciplines whether they be a cow horse, cutter, reiner, roper or whatever they go on to do. Shiney Outlaw is appealing to the masses and not just here in the United States. It was a huge shock to me when he won the AQHA World Show. I was not at all prepared for the onslaught of phone calls and emails from all over the world.”

Cannon is a dreamer but every bit a doer as well. She’s tough and determined but with a tender heart. She loves her horses beyond measure. “I scare my husband every day,” she says with a smile. “My vision is big.”