

Sylvia McDonald Has Always Believed In Being Correct

By: Kate Dernocoeur

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On Oct. 10, 2010, Sylvia McDonald rode to her 57th opening day meet with the Arapahoe Hunt in Colorado. Now 85, Sylvia (as she's universally known) continues to ride at least three days a week, despite arthritic hands and a knee replacement.

Throughout her seven decades of riding she's become notorious among the Arapahoe followers as an unswerving stickler for correctly following the traditions of the sport. But she's done much more than that in her life: She's the mother of five accomplished children, she co-founded the first Pony Club in Colorado, and she's bred and raised many notable Thoroughbreds for foxhunting.

"It's an addiction," said Sylvia. "It's my life. If I get sick or injured, that's the one thing I want to do: get back on a horse and go hunting."

Daughter Lyn Robinson recalled that while cubbing late last summer, they stayed out hilltopping for two hours, sometimes trotting and cantering to keep the field in view.

"I was tired," admitted Sylvia afterward. "I could only see [the field] in the distance."

But it's impossible to keep her very far away from horses and hunting. She's only made one concession to her age: Her mounts must stand quietly to let her get off at the mounting block.

"I think the fact that she's still hunting kind of defines her determination," said Dr. Marvin Beeman, a prominent equine veterinarian and longtime friend.

Beeman, who was MFH and huntsman for the Arapahoe Hunt until he retired his scarlet coat at the end of his 67th season last April, is the only person more senior than Sylvia in the hunt's membership. "She enjoys what she can of it, even if she can't see much of it hilltopping," he said. "And she always makes the effort to be properly dressed."

"Very, Very Strict"

Sylvia's sense of correctness was instilled early. Her grand-father, a Boston lawyer, enjoyed trail riding as a way "to clear his mind," she said, and he was the one who made riding possible for Sylvia and her cousin, Alice.

"My grandfather wanted to make sure we did it right," she said. "He went to England and Ireland and brought home two horses, but we didn't know they were for us. We had to earn permission to ride the horses. He was good in that way, good at making sure we were not spoiled brats."

He arranged for riding lessons with an Englishwoman named Phyllis Linington, who had established a riding stable in Milton, Mass., in about 1936.

"She was very, very strict," said Sylvia.

When she was 11, Sylvia and her flea-bitten gray Cinders began showing and won "a lot of ribbons." In one early competition photo, she shows perfect form over a three-foot post-and-rail in a large, open field—bareback. Sylvia was 12 when Linington introduced her to foxhunting with the Dedham Hunt (now the Norfolk Hunt Club).

"We had to do everything right, according to tradition," said Sylvia, who earned her junior buttons and a hunting whip at age 14. She still uses the child-sized whip. "It's wonderful for my arthritic fingers," she said.

During World War II, Sylvia trained horses in order to ride. She was Sylvia Robinson in those years, and her husband was stationed with the Marines near Pinehurst, N.C. In 1951, the young couple moved to Colorado with their burgeoning family: Lyn was born in 1944, Keith arrived in 1949, followed by Laura in 1950, Rickie in 1953, and Charles in 1958. Each earned Pony Club ratings, and Lyn and Laura are still active Arapahoe Hunt members.

Kindred Spirits

Soon after moving to Colorado, Sylvia crossed paths with Beeman, who as a young veterinarian helped attend her horses. Beeman had ridden with Arapahoe since age 6, and he donned the scarlet coat of a whipper-in at age 10 because of a shortage of qualified help due to World War II and because his father, the legendary George Beeman, was huntsman from 1932 until he retired in 1987.

"In those days, we were always interested in someone who had hunted back East," said Beeman. "Sylvia had spunk and a lot of try, and she was a good horseperson. We could see that when we watched her handle her animals and watched her ride."

For the Robinson children, learning to ride in the rough country of Colorado in the 1950s was far different than it is today. There was little formal structure, and few, if any, riding arenas. It was just a matter of putting a leg on each side and going "hell-bent for leather," said Lyn. Since no one had a horse trailer, they rode their horses everywhere, whether to the meet, or to school for show-and-tell.

Sylvia's first Colorado horse was named Sugar. "Someone gave her to me for \$100. She was 14.2 hands, probably 5 or 6 years old, and supposedly had a bad heart," said Sylvia.

Yet Sugar hunted for at least 10 years, and when Lyn was 8, Sugar carried her on her first hunt. Sylvia's best off-the-track horse, Swarie, cost \$100 and a load of straw in 1964.

But the most memorable was the Shetland pony Peanuts, who, at 11 hands was the first mount for many children (including this author). Among other things, Peanuts once climbed three flights of stairs as a school prank, and he and Lyn were pictured in a 1956 issue of The Chronicle of the Horse jumping over a 3'6" log.

Peanuts often went foxhunting with the family, which meant riding about 5 miles to hunt headquarters on Friday, where the animals stayed overnight, then 10 or so miles to the kennels on Saturday morning for the junior hunt. After the hunt, they would ride back to headquarters, eat lunch, then depart for home.

In 1954, Sylvia and her friend Rowena Rogers co-founded Platte Valley Pony Club. “Roe had started a Little Britches riding group, and one day, a friend said, ‘Why not make it into a Pony Club?’ ” recalled Sylvia. “I knew about Pony Club, so we did that.”

Their efforts earned both women the title of “Pony Club Legend” at its 50th anniversary in 2004, and Sylvia hunts with the commemorative pin on her lapel.

In 1963, Lyn became the second graduate A Pony Clubber in Colorado and just the sixth in the nation at the time; Laura earned her B rating, and Keith earned his C rating.

Ben Duke is another graduate A Pony Clubber who got his start with Platte Valley Pony Club, and his authorship of Pony Club materials has guided generations of young riders. A member of Arapahoe since 1964, Duke shares with Sylvia a strong belief in young people riding and caring for their horses correctly.

“That was one thing that brought Sylvia and me together,” he said. “She cares a lot about the young people. For many years she coordinated a junior day and an overnight camp, and also the chance for the young people to go exercise the hounds.

“But her greatest hallmark,” he added, “is being the watchdog of tradition, mostly in the way people are dressed and how their horses are mannered and properly appointed. She would find ways for years to let people know if they weren’t [being correct], such as wearing the wrong gloves, wrong vests, if their boots weren’t polished, whatever.”

Cross-Country With A Brain

Sylvia’s love of the sport extends to active involvement with the hounds (she prints Arapahoe’s Hound Registry each year), as well as breeding Thoroughbreds to be field hunters.

“She’s very particular about breeding,” said Duke. “She believes in the Thoroughbred blood. [Her horses] aren’t particularly tall, but they’re strong, and they have endurance. I whipped on one for two seasons, and it was one of the best horses I ever rode.”

Sylvia started breeding because, “we had nice horses, and I wanted to keep the bloodlines going. How did I learn? Dr. Beeman and his dad helped me more than anything. They had the stallions, and I had the mares. We put them together. It wasn’t very scientific!”

Nonetheless, “We produced some darned good horses. Colorado Thoroughbreds are more sure-footed. I wanted horses that could go across country and had a brain.”

As a result, eight of Sylvia’s horses have won Arapahoe Hunt’s coveted W.W.Grant Trophy for the best hunter in the field. Another year-end trophy is named in honor of one of Sylvia’s best horses, Basher, a grandson of Sugar.

“That was a hell of a horse,” said Beeman. Basher attended 18 opening meets and hunted for 17 full seasons. And he never took a lame step.

This year, Sylvia has 30 head of horses on her ranch in Douglas County, and six of the mares are in foal. This is good news to Duke, who, like Lyn, served many years as a whipper-in.

“If you’re whipping for Dr. Beeman, you go and go,” he said. “Sylvia’s horses are built to do that. They’re good, honest horses. They’re strong, and they tend to be sound.”

She’s A Competitor

Sylvia was only 3 years old when she got her first blue ribbon. She won her most recent blue ribbon 80 years later. In between, Sylvia Hurd Robinson McDonald has earned many more first-placed ribbons.

It was June 1929, when “little Silvia Hurd,” (as the caption reads) was pictured in the Boston Evening Transcript holding up her ribbon from the youngest rider class at a horse show in Milton, Mass. Her win in April 2009 came in Arapahoe’s hilltopper’s hunter pace.

The competitive streak that was ignited in Sylvia at age 3 has never dimmed. One great joy was riding in the hunt’s “old-fashioned” point-to-point races, in which riders pick their own route from the start to the finish. One year, she recruited Duke as her partner, informing him they had to win. The “creative” track that Duke discovered during the course walk involved extreme riding up and down a mountainside and into arroyos, but Sylvia kept up. They cut more than a mile off the track the other riders took, winning by about 7 minutes. She was in her 70s at the time.

Lyn said of her mother’s competitive nature, “I have the same thing: You don’t want to go out and do anything unless you do it well. And win. That’s the way she’s always been. That’s just the way she is.”


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It was a privilege to ride along with Sylvia McDonald hunting at the Arapahoe Hunt. Met her in 1993 and knew that I better should behave properly. A good friend, very supportive, funny, smiling and cracking jokes of all sorts. Hard to believe she is gone hunting to other horizon along with her departed friends...

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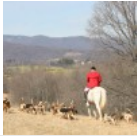
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