



Two Nebraska sisters have cultivated a successful barrel horse breeding and training operation that offers world-class rodeo prospects.

Story by KATE BRADLEY
Photography by DARRELL DODDS

Out of the Heartland

In southern Nebraska, Laura Smith (left) and Deanna Martin are breeding, raising and training top rodeo prospects.



FROM FAR LEFT: The yearlings run on rich pasture at Deanna's home in Diller. The horses are handled as weanlings and started lightly in their 2-year-old year. • Laura successfully piloted Streakin Ali to multiple barrel futurity top 10 placings in 2006, and made the finals in senior barrel racing at the 2010 AQHA World Championship Show. • The support of their parents, Roy and Karen Smith, helped Laura (right) and Deanna to pursue their dreams of breeding and competing on quality rodeo horses. • The "RS" brand is a nod to Deanna and Laura's father, Roy Smith.

AS THE ROCK AND DIRT ROAD stretches endlessly south, the rolling farmland is typical of how Nebraska is most often pictured. Every so often, a barbed-wire fence encircles a cattle pasture, interrupting the uniform rows of crops.

Finally, the sight of an arena plunked down in the middle of a recently harvested cornfield breaks the monotony. Outside of Diller, near the Nebraska-Kansas state line, is a small farmhouse and white-fenced corrals. One glance at the well-groomed, heavily muscled horses standing in the pens quickly establishes that this is not the average Nebraska farm. Though a carved wooden sign confirms it, the "RS" hip brand on the horses easily identifies Rodeo Solutions, the brainchild of two sisters who live and breathe the rodeo industry.

"You found us?" says Deanna Jo Martin. With a long-legged stride that eats up the ground between the farmhouse and gravel driveway, the tall blonde looks comfortable in the cowboy hat and well-worn boots she wears. "Laura should be here any minute. Can I offer you a drink?"

Deanna's quick grin and firm handshake immediately sets an easy tone, and nothing brings people together like talking horses. Moments later, a truck and gooseneck stock trailer pull into the drive and Deanna's older sister, Laura Smith, hops out. The blonde hair and infectious smile are trademarks of the pair, and what Laura lacks in her sister's lanky height she makes up for in unabashed enthusiasm.

Laura quickly unloads two horses. Her sister steps forward and takes the lead of a muscular sorrel stallion.

"That's Streakin Ali. He's been such a neat horse for us. And this is Stoli And Whiskey," Laura says.

The dark mane and tail of the first horse contrasts with the flaxen mane Stoli And Whiskey impatiently tosses as he is introduced. The stallion knows he is an eye-catcher. If there was any question about the quality of horseflesh found in

the far corner of southeastern Nebraska, these two stallions put it to rest.

A tall shade tree provides welcome cover from the strong Nebraska sun as the conversation continues.

"When did we start riding? Oh, man, I think we've been riding forever," Deanna laughs. "It's all we do and what we love. This whole thing started with our stallion, Cidone Socks."

Seven hours later, after recording a lifetime of stories, it's impossible to doubt the hard work, determination, love for rodeo and respect for the horse that is deeply ingrained in Deanna and Laura. It started when a pair of young, horse-loving girls took a dream and worked until it was their reality. Today, the Smith name is synonymous with Midwest rodeo champions.

HORSEBACK FROM THE START

In the mid- to late 1980s, Roy and Karen Smith had four horse-crazy daughters on their hands at their home in DeWitt, Nebraska, yet only a couple of horses that were used to work the family's cattle. A veterinarian, Roy knew that horse

involvement came with a host of responsibilities, including feed and vet bills, riding lessons and show entry fees. However, he didn't pause before purchasing pleasure-type mounts for his brood.

"We wanted to make sure the girls knew how to ride, so we bought some better horses," he says. "When we would go to 4-H practice, we would put eight horses in a trailer. The girls learned how to compete, and grew in the competitive air of not beating your friend but competing against yourself."

From 4-H to junior rodeo, then to high school rodeo, the Smith name was often at the top of class placings. The family moved from riding in horsemanship, Western pleasure and trail to youth rodeo in 1994. The fundamentals ingrained in the girls during their horse show years made them better riders who could guide a horse through the barrels, poles, breakaway and goat tying events. Four competitive daughters could pose a challenge, but their parents were resolute in focusing on sportsmanship and horsemanship, rather than the name atop the leader board. Despite

more often than not besting each other, the girls rarely quarreled.

"Roy taught the girls to beat their time, not beat someone else," says their mom, Karen. "That was good for them because they could run within a thousandth of a second to each other! We always told them [rodeo] was an opportunity and they had a choice to be good sports."

In 1993, the family decided to breed Bucks St Pat, a mare by Bucks Bar None co-owned with Women's Professional Rodeo Association champion barrel racer and mentor Kathy O'Brien, to PC Sun Socks (by Sun Frost), owned by Geno Hunt in South Dakota. While that breeding didn't produce a foal, Roy remained focused on the popular Sun Frost bloodline.

"I saw the 1994 Open Box Rafter Sale catalog and, though I didn't attend the sale, called in to buy our stallion, Cidone Socks, from [ranch owners] Jim and Joni Hunt," Roy says. "He was the high-seller that year, as a weanling. Cidone has been a great horse for us. The kids rodeoed on him, despite him being a stallion."

A palomino son of PC Sun Socks and out of Cidone Bee by the AAA-rated

racehorse Cidone, the young stallion was bred to run and also work cattle. The sisters learned how to handle a stallion and pay attention to their surroundings. When Laura was 13 years old and Deanna was 12, they took Cidone Socks to a roping clinic put on by Savannah, Missouri, horseman Roy Durfey. So began a lifelong working relationship that built into a family bond.

Durfey recalls the reserved little girls who came to ride with him, determined to do every event better and become horsewomen.

"That stud was the first horse I rode for their father," he says. "Over the years, they just got better and better at everything because they rode so much. They have both always ridden well, roped good and run barrels good, and have soft hands."

Durfey's mentorship lasts to this day, and the foundation methods Deanna uses to start colts tie into his program. The first horse Deanna started solo was Cidone Tiger Leo, a 1999 palomino daughter of Cidone Socks out of Tigers Fox, by Tiger Leo and out of a Mr Sugar King daughter. She became a top rodeo mount for the

girls, and is now the top broodmare in the family's 16-mare herd. The same training foundation on that mare is the building block on which they have improved through two decades of horsemanship.

It was in high school that the Smith start truly shined: Deanna was the 2001 and 2002 National High School Rodeo Association goat tying champion. Both girls saw regional high school rodeo success in barrel racing, pole bending, breakaway roping and goat tying. Their homebred and -trained horses were factors in their dominance, a point that was clear to the family.

While the other two sisters, Connie and Kada, drifted away from the horse business, Deanna and Laura were ready to take the leap into full-time breeding and training once they were out of high school. Backed by their supportive parents, the sisters went to work on a company name.

"We didn't want to go with Smith Quarter Horses or something, because if we both got married that wouldn't work," Laura says. "Our cousin was sitting with me and Deanna one day, and we were struggling with a name. The first thing he said was 'Rodeo Solutions.' Deanna and I both knew that was it. It fits us."

The birth of Rodeo Solutions allowed the girls to pay homage to their father in the brand used, an "RS." It also described

how they view their program—as a means for people to find the perfect equine partner, a solid, athletic horse that can take them to the top.

BUILDING A BUSINESS

Owning one stallion and several mares inevitably leads to the need to diversify the herd, which is what led the Smith family to purchase their second stallion in 2001. The Hunts' sale was again the go-to source.

Streakin Ali turned out to be a dream horse for the Smith's young breeding program. Though he was purchased as a weanling, the colt's running bloodline—he is by Streakin Turn by Streakin Six, and out of Dawn Otoo by Otoo's Troubles—was well established in the barrel horse industry. A twist of fate enabled the Smiths to purchase the horse. The sale immediately followed September 11, 2001, the date of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and many buyers were unable to make the South Dakota sale due to canceled flights. "Ali" was the high-seller of the sale.

"If everyone had shown up to the sale, we probably would not have got him," says Deanna.

The young horse lived up to expectations. However, the road to Ali's winning futurity season was not always sunny.

"Deanna really did all the work on Ali," says Laura. "She trained him and had him ready to go in the futurities in 2006, but then she had a wreck with a young horse, [and] broke ribs, punctured her lung and injured her spleen. She had the horse all seasoned up and was out. She told me it was all me, and I knew what I had to do."

Having worked side by side for decades, the sisters' riding styles were nearly identical, making it easy for one to step in for the other if need be. Laura rode the stallion to win the 5-State Breeders Futurity amateur division. The duo also placed in the top 10 at multiple futurities, proving the stallion's athletic ability and further establishing the Smith sisters in the rodeo industry.

With the reputation of Ciclon and Ali drawing additional outside broodmares to the family's DeWitt breeding and training facility, all the Smiths were busy. Roy supervised the breeding operation, while Deanna and Laura started young horses and kept the competitive horses in top condition. All three took part in pairing broodmares with stallions. At the same time, the barrel industry was evolving, with larger futurity offerings and more money available for breeders, trainers and riders.

Dash For Perks, by Dash For Cash, was a popular stallion in the barrel racing

industry. In 2008, the family couldn't pass up the chance to purchase an own son of the stallion, a yearling named Sulent, from Betty Wells and the late Jerry Wells of Purcell, Oklahoma.

In 2009, the family purchased another yearling at the Open Box Rafter Sale, Stoli And Whiskey, by Quarter Horse racehorse Stoli and out of a mare by proven cutting and cow horse sire Paddy's Irish Whiskey. At the time the cross was new to the rodeo industry. The colt was bred by John and Lis (Loiseau) Hollmann of Frenchmans Quarter Horses, who own Frenchman's Lady, the dam of leading barrel horse sire Frenchmans Guy.

"When Stoli was young, his line had not made an impact in the barrel racing world, our foal was the first one to be bred along those lines," says Deanna. "This cross was one of the first with a champion running line and a champion cow horse. We didn't know what was going to happen or the impact Stoli would have as a sire. We just hoped it would be a good match."

The sisters have high expectations that Stoli And Whiskey's offspring will compete among the top barrel racing horses across the country. The stallion is proving his bloodline carries speed and smarts, despite the fact he was injured during his 5-year-old barrel futurity year and unable to compete. However, as a

6-year-old, he and Deanna placed in several jackpot barrel races around Nebraska, establishing that he had the ability foretold in his breeding.

The stud barn was full and there were young horses to season, yet Deanna set a goal to obtain Ali's American Quarter Horse Association Register of Merit. When the horse qualified for the amateur and senior barrel racing at the 2010 AQHA World Championship Show, Deanna couldn't wait to run him. Again, bad luck befell the duo.

"I lacerated my liver when a horse kicked me before I ran Ali at the WPRA finals in 2010. That was also before the World Show for AQHA," she says. "I wanted to run him, but couldn't. Laura rode him for me and earned his ROM [in both amateur and open performance]."

Finally, in 2012, Deanna was able to ride the horse she trained and seasoned in a "bucket list" event: the WPRA finals. The duo placed in two rounds and earned close to \$2,500. The recognition of both Deanna and Ali's hard work came in the form of a full studbook.

The pieces of the Smith program were solidly in place. They were overseeing a successful breeding operation, and training and competing on the offspring of their horses. But they couldn't pass up an opportunity to round out the stallion

selection with the successful Fire Water Flit bloodline. Firewater On Ice, a 1996 bay by Fire Water Flit and out of Chicago Bug by Shawne Bug, was purchased in 2012 from Ron Hanson.

The stallions carry sought-after bloodlines that cross well on the 16 mares Rodeo Solutions breeds each year. The mares offer a mix of running and foundation Quarter Horse lines to the speed-heavy stallion lineup. There are two Dr Nick Bar mares: 2001 mare Mis Nick Flit, out of a Fire Water Flit mare, and 1997 mare Zap Em Nick Bar, out of Half Moon Boone by A Goin Boone. Others include a Rocket Wrangler granddaughter, Dash Bar Tillie, Irish Thorn, a daughter of Paddy's Irish Whiskey; My Ragedy Ann by Chick Colonel, by Colonel Freckles; and mares with Ciclon Socks in their pedigrees.

"We are unique in that we have several stallions but not a large broodmare band," says Laura. "We breed a number of outside mares to each stallion. But with so many choices, it also lets us handpick the best crosses for ourselves and our clients."

THE MATCHMAKERS

When Deanna and Laura looked for a way to stand out as breeders, they did so by offering clients a customized package.

"You know, buying a horse is almost like 'Horse Harmony' and you're looking for



LEFT: Positively influencing youth is important to Deanna and Laura. Riding all Rodeo Solutions-bred horses are, from left, Mallee Jones riding Streakin Laola, Rachel Hansen on Streakin Sun Frost, Tucker Martin on Streakin Flit and Jamie Hansen riding Quick Angel Rocket. RIGHT: Mallee Jones schools Streakin Laola under Laura Smith's experienced eye.



LEFT: Jamie Hansen and Quick Angel Rocket practice breakaway roping before an amateur rodeo. RIGHT: With Deanna and Stoli And Whiskey looking on, Rachel Hansen and Streakin Sun Frost practice running the poles before heading to the National High School Finals Rodeo in the event.





Deanna rides Nick Turn N Streak, a 3-year-old filly by Streakin Ali that is owned by Kelley Haythorn of Arthur, Nebraska.

THE LINE-UP

The Smith family stallions encompass some of the most sought-after bloodlines in the barrel racing industry.

Ciclone Socks, 1994 palomino
Sire: PC Sun Socks by Sun Frost and out of Frenchman's Sox by Laughing Boy
Dam: Ciclone Bee by Ciclone (by Easy Jet) and out of Laughing Bee by Laughing Bar Boy

Firewater On Ice, 1996 bay
Sire: Fire Water Flit by Flit Bar and out of Slash J Harletta by Harlan
Dam: Chicago Bug by Shawne Bug (by Lady Bug's Moon) and out of Chicago Owl (TB) by Tanistair (TB)

Streakin Ali, 2001 sorrel
Sire: Streakin Turn by Streakin Six and out of Turnin Around by Peppy San Badger
Dam: Dawn Otoe by Otoe's Troubles (by Otoe) and out of Jacks Dawn by Ali Jack

Surtent, 2007 black
Sire: Dash For Perks by Dash For Cash and out of Perks by Easy Jet
Dam: Beautiful Dreams (by Majors Meyers) and out of Alive N Sassy by Shawne Bug

Stoll And Whiskey, 2008 sorrel
Sire: Stoll by First Down Dash and out of Strawberry Silk by Beduino (TB)
Dam: Oats And Whiskey by Paddys Irish Whiskey (by Peppy San Badger) and out of Oats And Cream by Mr Sun O Lena

the perfect match," Deanna says. "We've sold babies and finished horses, and always know who we are selling to. If I buy one, I want something I can train. A working woman, she might want something gentle that she can ride when she has time. I try to learn as much about the buyer as I can and then match that. We are kind of horse matchmakers."

On the breeding side, Laura feels the same way. When selecting a cross, conformation, attitude and size are big factors, but so is knowing the horse's athletic ability. Facilitating the best cross is her goal. Deanna focuses on the resulting offspring's training.

"You can almost make a horse to order," Deanna says. "If a customer calls and wants a gelding, say, that can rope and is started on barrels, I customize the horse to fit what they want. I talk to the customer and try to figure out how they ride."

Whereas some people look first to a trainer's style to find a horse that will suit their own needs, Deanna says that their buyers are drawn by the bloodlines offered by Rodeo Solutions' program. She gets to know the buyer and tries to train a horse to fit the rider. If the rider likes to guide a horse predominantly through rein cues, and not leg cues, she will train to that effect, and vice versa. Catering to clients in a manner that ultimately helps the horses have success is a priority for Laura and Deanna.

All prospects are started on roping calves and barrels. According to Deanna, a rope horse has to run and rate, just like a

barrel horse, so the pairing is a natural two-event fit. The 2-year-olds are started in the spring and ridden more heavily in the fall. Since 2008, Deanna and Laura have consigned 3-year-olds to the Fulton Ranch Performance Horse and Production Sale held in August in Valentine, Nebraska.

"The girls' horse program complements many of the successful programs out there, like the Fultons," Durfey says. "They put a solid start on a horse, with a lot of vertical and lateral flexion so you have a horse that is collected. The girls are really good with young horses and the ones that go to the sale are really broke."

In 2012, Kelley Haythorn of the legendary Haythorn Ranch in Arthur, Nebraska, was in the market for a barrel prospect and was interested in the five horses Rodeo Solutions consigned to the Fulton sale.

"The breeding program is really put together, and they do a great job of training," Haythorn says. "The horses are super gentle and ready to go on. When I called Deanna to talk about their horses, I knew I could purchase any of them and do well. I bid on the first horse of theirs that came in [the ring] and got her."

Haythorn took home Streak Em Nick Bar, a 2009 mare by Streakin Ali and out of Zap Em Nick Bar by Dr Nick Bar. She made numerous calls and texts to Deanna and Laura, seeking advice on running the mare and preparing for her first futurity season. In 2014, the duo won the Hawk Futurity rookie division in Lincoln, Nebraska.

"You get a lot of satisfaction working with people of any age and seeing them have success, seeing them accomplish a goal," Deanna says. "When Kelley won that futurity, I felt so much pride for her because I've seen her work for it."

Haythorn knew she clicked with the Ali daughter, so in 2014, she picked up the phone and ordered another Smith horse. She purchased a fill sister to her winning mare.

"They worked with me for about a year, to find the perfect horse for me to purchase," says Haythorn. "They put a lot of themselves into their horses. I know I have two young horses in my trailer that are going to be really strong competitors."

A solid work ethic was instilled in both Deanna and Laura by their parents at an early age. Today, they pass that mentality down to the young people who ride with them.

FUTURE FOCUS

The duo has seen changes in the last year. In 2015, Deanna married Marc Martin, and she and her husband reside in Diller,

where Rodeo Solutions now keeps its training stock. Laura remains at their home place just a half hour's drive north in DeWitt with the competition horses and stallions. Despite the distance that separates the two, it is obvious their dedication to the horses, and each other, remains strong. In a way, Deanna says it allows them to focus their efforts.

"We both have a lot on our plate, but each part of this is so important," she says. "Here [in Diller], I do a lot of starting and training our young ones. Laura and dad [manage the breeding] in DeWitt, and that is where our stallions and competition-age horses are. The broodmares go between breeding [there] and pasturing here."

"If there is a day I need to move our cattle, we get together. We also meet up on ultrasound days to see the foals. We get excited. And there is always a barrel race to go to together."

What has not changed is the fact that they are always available for their clients.

At Deanna's home, it is a regular occurrence to have a trailer pull in and a

young rider unload horses. The national championships Deanna earned in high school still resonate with up-and-coming rodeo youth. When a potential buyer visits, it is not unusual for them to begin regularly riding under her or Laura's guidance if they purchase a horse.

"The kids are a big part of the fun in this [livelihood] because they all come with different backgrounds but with the same goal, to learn and win," Laura says. "Rodeo is a journey. Taking a colt or buying a finished horse, it doesn't matter. You're not going to be perfect off the bat. We have a lot of life advice and a lot of lessons learned that got us to this point. And we want to share that while we help people with their horses."

What began as one father's wish to provide his daughters with top rodeo horses has evolved into a lucrative horse breeding and training program, one that is making a name for itself far outside of the borders of Nebraska. 🐾

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