



30 YEARS *in the saddle*

JT KELLER CELEBRATES CAREER MILESTONE

Written by CAITLIN PIGOTT • Designed by SUGAR PINE DESIGN

As Gordon Potts jogged the first direction of the Arabian western pleasure open during the 2004 U.S. Nationals, with hopes of roses in his head as he sat aboard the iconic stallion Exxpectation, he realized the screw connecting the reins to his bit was gone. No screw, no way to show. Potts was in a place of desperation. When he looked up, he saw his assistant trainer at the time JT Keller heading back to their stalls in a full sprint.

“JT ran to the barn and back with that screw so fast, I could hardly believe it,” Potts said while reminiscing on one of his worst-case-scenarios. “I did not have to wait on those green shavings long.”

Keller ran the length of Freedom Hall twice that Saturday night to be there for his friend, mentor, and boss. As a business owner himself for the last 20+ years, he is no longer obligated to do that for anyone else. But, based on Keller’s (figurative) track record, it doesn’t seem there’d be much hesitation to do that again. Keller will always go the necessary length for the horses and people in his life.

Being someone who people and horses can count on has been a big contribution to his success as a horse trainer for 30 years.

Growing up as a quintessential “farm kid” with an uncle who was a hall-of-fame hackney pony trainer, Keller had early exposure to what it took to have a successful business and life as a professional horse trainer. When he decided to take a stab at the same career as his uncle, but in training Arabian and Half-Arabians, he headed out to work for some of the best talent. In 1994 he got his first gig working for Brian Scoggins; then worked for Jody Strand alongside contemporaries Joe Reser and Ryan Strand, and finished out his career in working for others at The Brass Ring, under Gordon Potts’ direction.

“Something I am really proud of is that I think I could walk into the living room of any person who I worked for, and be treated like family,” Keller said about his coming-up years.

MAKING THE MOST OF WORK AND LIFE

JT Keller Performance Horses was established in 2008. It operated out of Texas for 12 years until relocating (and rebranding to Keller Training) to Scottsdale, AZ in 2020. Along with managing a busy and booming business, Keller and his wife Anne are doing their best to have a healthy family life, including giving their son Bryce the closest thing to the “farm kid” life he had. Although the desert dirt might be a little different than what Keller found in Russiaville, Indiana, he is just as dedicated to his horses as he is the life his family shares.

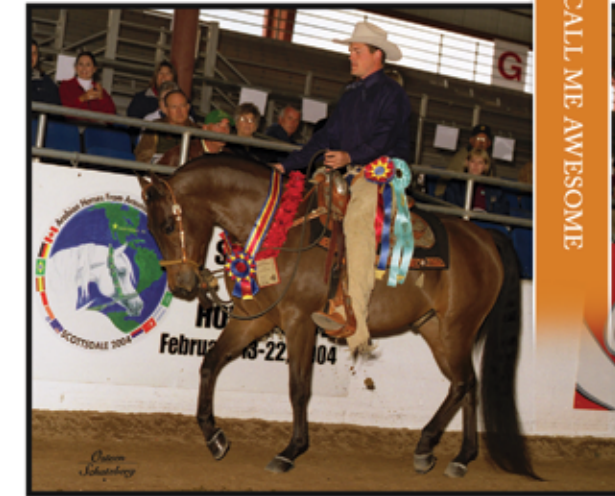
“My uncle died before he and my aunt had a chance to travel and do things they enjoyed,” Keller shared about his professional inspiration. “When I decided to do this, my aunt Barb was sure I knew the value of living a balanced life.”

At this point in his career, Keller admittedly finds the most joy in giving baby horses a solid foundation, working on the sales and marketing components of the business, helping his clients excel in the arena, and prioritizing quality time together as a group.

“This business is as much about the people as it is about the horses,” Gordon Potts shared. “JT has mastered both and I think that a lot of his success can be attributed to his charisma with the people.”

The officiant of the Keller marriage jokingly added, “Also, JT is nearly impossible to stay mad at.”

Jody Strand, someone who employed Keller on two different occasions, validated a lot of Pott’s commentary with his assessment of his longevity. He pointed out that Keller has a great personality, was eager to learn, and above all else just “wanted it” badly.



CALL ME AWESOME

COMPETITION JOURNEY

Keller knew he was leveling up for the first time during the 2004 Scottsdale Arabian Horse Show. As a Brass Ring employee at the time, he worked many of the horses who routinely saw the winner’s circle with Potts and their amateurs. However, he hadn’t had the chance to show one of high caliber yet. When Potts hurt himself during the show and was not able to show (future) Half-Arabian western pleasure superstar Call Me Awesome, owners Dennis and Linda Clark asked Keller to do the honors. The duo won the championship. He has gone on to experience many victories since then, but he signals that February day was the biggest turning point in his career. He saw his first bits of meaningful regional and nationals after that win.

He also fondly remembered victories like Enzia FMA’s 2013 Canadian National Championship in the Arabian Western Pleasure Open for owners John and Cynthia Moore, as well as KM Palermo’s 2014 U.S. National Championship in the Arabian Western Pleasure Junior Horse for owners Karen and Tony Caughell. There are many years of memories with lots of wonderful people like the Moores and Caughells that are worth celebrating.

“I don’t necessarily want to win for myself,” Keller shared about his competitive nature. “I want to win for the owners. A lot of my biggest wins have been for people who I felt really needed it. It is so special to share those moments with them.”

Just because Keller has struck a good work life balance in what he calls the “back nine” of his career, it doesn’t mean his competitive edge has gone anywhere. Keller channels the same want that Strand pointed out from early in his career when he shows today. Similarly, he wants the best for his amateur competitors. Keller feels his current group of amateurs are the most competitive ones his business has ever had.

He is currently excited about seeing how the purebred stallion Invictus A’s remaining junior horse years shake out. This horse is owned by his wife of 10 years Anne Keller and was bred by her parents. Keller said that showing horses owned by his wife – like 2016 purebred western pleasure futurity national champion Slate A – comes with a different level of joy.

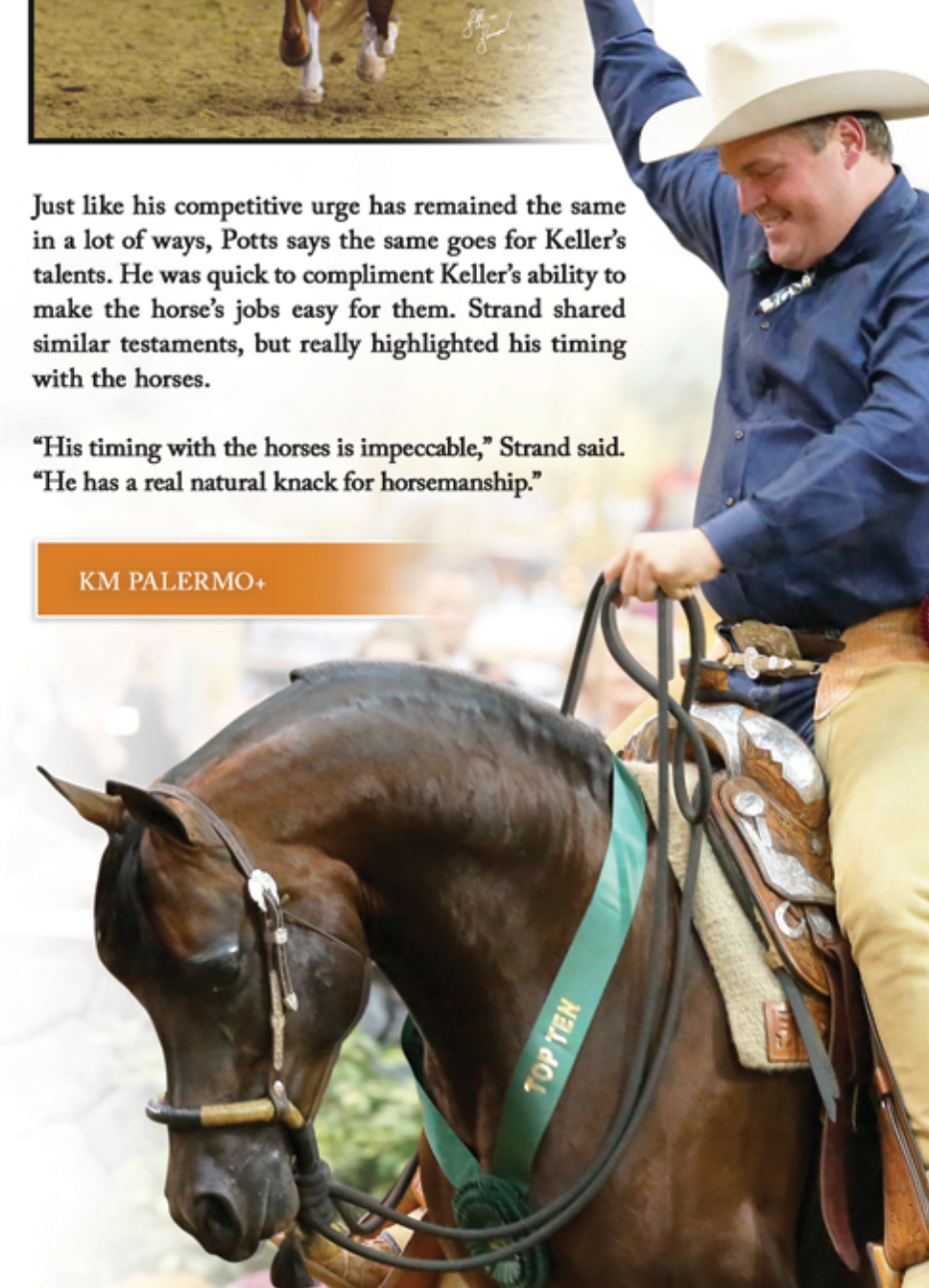


ENZIA FMA

Just like his competitive urge has remained the same in a lot of ways, Potts says the same goes for Keller’s talents. He was quick to compliment Keller’s ability to make the horse’s jobs easy for them. Strand shared similar testaments, but really highlighted his timing with the horses.

“His timing with the horses is impeccable,” Strand said. “He has a real natural knack for horsemanship.”

KM PALERMO+





THIRTY YEARS STRONG

As he reflects on 30 years in the horse business, Keller feels like each stop has been a different chapter of life. As shown, there were common themes and people along the way. And, Keller has never changed the core of who he is.

"People know what they are going to get with me," Keller said about maintaining healthy friendships and relationships in such a close-knit community. "I stand by what I say, and people know it is coming from a good place."



Potts shared another story that reflected Keller's reliable nature. Potts' truck broke down the day before he was set to leave for Region 14. Keller's crew wouldn't be making the haul, so without hesitation, he let Potts hitch the Brass Ring trailer to his truck.

"You can count on JT," Potts said. "He will get it done and be ready when it is time."

Whether it's showing up as a husband and father, making a victory happen for a deserving horse owner, lending a listening ear for a peer, or sprinting for a screw, Keller has proved over the last 30 years that he's consistently himself.

Some people say, "good guys finish last." Instead, Keller exemplifies that "good guys last" in this business. Three decades is a long time to do anything, let alone stay relevant and liked in a business that can be a revolving door for many. It still might be fun to see who holds the official Freedom Hall sprint record though... ■