

A Tribute To John David White

(1963-2009)

by LINDA WHITE

Profound sadness swept over the Arabian horse community on Monday, March 16, as word spread that John White had passed away, a victim of the cancer diagnosed six months earlier. The 46-year-old trainer was greatly admired and held in the highest esteem throughout Arabian horsemanship.

“He was the ultimate horseman,” said Mike Neal when he learned of his friend’s death. “When I look up ‘horseman’ in the dictionary, John’s name will always be there in the definition. I will dearly miss him.”

“John will greatly be missed by countless people,” agrees Jessica Krentz-Lau, a client at John White Stables. “Not only did he help me become successful in the horse business, he was instrumental in helping me become the person I am today.

“He was also a good teller of jokes and one-liners,” she adds. “One of his favorites was, ‘If you’re doing something and it’s not working, do something else!’ That was also great advice.”

“If you’re doing something and it’s not working, do something else!” – John White

“Yes, John was succinct in his advice,” notes Karla Morschhauser. “He would focus on one or two things to improve your ride, thereby building your confidence and skill, and inspiring loyalty. He was unfailingly patient with my mother and me.”

“John White changed my life,” says client Sarah Delisi, voicing a theme heard repeatedly in the expressions of sympathy extended to his family. “I will never forget what he taught me, and how he made me want to try harder the next time. John will always be a heroic figure in my life.”

“He was a horseman’s horseman,” offers trainer John Golladay, making no effort to conceal his admiration for

his late mentor. “His influence and tutelage will be a major influence in helping me become the horseman I strive to be.” Golladay, who apprenticed with John and Lisa Jo White, returned at the end of February to help Lisa Jo, John’s wife and training partner, maintain the stable’s ongoing show and training commitments.

“We met John Golladay’s family 19 years ago, when we opened this stable,” Lisa Jo White recalls, aware of the confusion created by two subjects with the same name. “My husband John’s non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma was discovered in September 2008. When John Golladay learned of the diagnosis, he offered to help, but we were not ready to give up.

“All of our colleagues and friends have been so kind and supportive through all this! Mike Budd helped me at the National Show Horse finals and at U.S. Nationals. When John had his first chemo treatment not long before U.S. Nationals and couldn’t ride, Rob Bick and Jim Lowe rode all of John’s under-saddle entries. Jim drove a couple of times, and won a U.S. National Top Ten.”

When the first tests indicated a mass on John’s tailbone, the doctors began the favored intervention: chemotherapy. “In November,” says Lisa Jo, “they told us that the treatments had shrunk some of the tumors, so we felt very optimistic. On December 29, however, they gave us the word that the cancer was spreading, and was not responding to the chemotherapy. They switched the chemo drugs four times, but the results were always the same: cancer not under control.”

When Pam Bachman Reynaud arrived at the barn on December 30, the day following the bad news, she found John and Lisa Jo alone, riding together in the arena. “It was very touching to see the two of them, circling around each other on horseback, as if they were dancing,” she says quietly. “That was something I will always remember.”



“I was able to keep the barn going until January 21,” Lisa Jo says, “but after that, I was at the hospital all the time. I had been hired to judge at Scottsdale in 2009, but as John’s condition worsened, I told the Scottsdale Show management that I could not leave him.”

When oncologists suggested the possibility of a stem cell transplant, the couple eagerly agreed. White’s sister in Omaha proved to be a perfect match, so the procedure was scheduled for the end of March. As he and his wife waited, hopeful once more, White had more on his mind than battling his disease.

“‘You’ve got to get home and work the horses!’ he would tell me,” Lisa Jo recalls. “‘Don’t let the business fall apart!’ He would say, ‘Look, I love having you here, but you’ve got to go work horses!’” Lisa Jo expresses gratitude to Brittney Berget, a client of 10 years, who stepped in to keep the stable’s paperwork in order. Berget’s hands-on assistance allowed Lisa Jo to revise her daily training schedule to include hospital stays.

Berget was quick to convey her own gratitude. “The lessons John White taught our family, both in and outside the show ring, will stay with us forever. John was one in a billion. We are thankful that we had him as a friend.”

White’s life was characterized by the many lasting friendships he forged. One such friendship was with Ginger Tadin, whose vast equine knowledge and experience played a pivotal role in the direction the young man’s career would take.

“John was a wonderful caretaker of his horses; the horses always came first,” Tadin says. “Something funny I will always remember is that for the first full year we worked together, we both would keep forgetting to take down the knot in a horse’s tail just before the horse went into the ring. When John would see a tail still tied up, he would risk his life to take out that knot before they closed the in-gate!”

Kristan McElroy-Rogan offers a reminiscence of her own. “How many times, before passing through the in-gate, would I hear John say, ‘Let go of the bridle!’ or ‘Eye of the tiger!’ Even after a tough ride on a young horse, he was still able to find a bright spot and say, with his famous grin, ‘Well, your *lineup* was good.’ That one-line, no-frills honesty was a John White trademark.”

Sylvia Luce was another rider who appreciated White’s candid, straightforward manner and his respectful treatment of people and horses. “I will always remember how John used to make me laugh,” she says. “He is a hero in my life, and I will never forget him.”

“John White could put a head set on a rhinoceros.” – Brian Chappell

White’s sense of humor was another often-cited trademark. Fans’ recollections are filled with references to his humor. Betsy Haas and her husband, Steve, have been John White Stables clients for more than 14 years. “I will never forget the many times John’s sense of humor almost got me dumped,” says Betsy, shaking her head in disbelief. “When I was working my horse, he would crack the whip, the horse would react, and John would look over and give me that mischievous smile. Steve said to him once, ‘One more crack and she would have been off.’ Steve was never quite sure if we were joking around, or if that was actually part of the training!”

“I will especially miss how he would sit next to me and coach his riders,” says Mike Budd of his own experience. “If they were doing well, he would tell them so. If they were doing poorly, he would tell them, ‘You rode crappy today, but this probably just isn’t your day. Maybe tomorrow will be better.’ John was a great friend, with a one-of-a-kind sense of humor.”

Brian Chappell met White when White, then 16, stopped in at his farm, looking for horseman Rick Wallen. “I was training out of the old Rick Wallen property, so he wasn’t far off,” Chappell remembers. “He introduced himself to me. He told me his grandfather had horses, and that he could ride, so I hired him to work after school. When my assistant, Dan Carr, broke his arm, John took over the riding. He was a good rider already. Dan just had to teach him to post.

“He was a real athlete, from a family of athletes. He had a scholarship to the University of Iowa as a baseball catcher. When he hurt his shoulder badly, he lost the scholarship, but he continued on with me in Iowa City, working young horses. I brought him along when I went to Ford Arabians. When I went to Bara Arabians, in Colorado, I got him to join me there too. Sometimes I would catch-ride his horses, and each one was perfect. Then came the changes in tax laws and various other negative influences,



John White driving CF Hucks All Star.



John White and Rocky Roses with Brooke Berget, up.



John White and SA The Gambler.

and Bara Arabians began to wind down. Now, I felt really guilty; here is a special, kid, who could be anything he wanted—a lawyer, a doctor, whatever, and he's just training horses. Luckily, he met Ginger Tadin, who took him under her wing, and things began to get better for him. He and Lisa Jo got together, they got some good horses and good customers, and things turned around.

"He is the only person I could truly call a 'horseman's horseman,'" Chappell continues. "The best of the best: people like Ed Jenner, Bob Battaglia, Dick Obenauf and Carolyn Gardner would send their 'special needs' horses to John to straighten out. Think of what that says about his ability!"

"John could put a head-set on a rhinoceros. I worked more with John than I ever have with anyone else. My life has been truly enriched by knowing John White."

"He had a passion for turning out a good English horse," is Terri Sherman's assessment. "For the past 20 years, my family's English performance prospects have won regional and national titles under John's guiding hand. What we all will remember most, though, was John's easy, quick, often hilarious humor, combined with his genuine love of horses and people."

Pam Bachman Reynaud and her family were continually amazed by White's relaxed, easygoing manner. "He always seemed to put both people and horses at ease," she marvels. "John and Lisa Jo's farm was not only a first-class training facility, but a warm, fun place to visit."

Bob, Elise and Bella Groover enjoyed similar experiences. "My wife and I found John White to be the funniest person we knew," states Bob Groover. "He also had a kind, serious side, and showed a genuine interest in what we were doing. He was the first person to tell you when you did well, and the first person to say, 'Don't worry; we'll get 'em next time.'"

Expressions of sympathy came in from colleagues everywhere. "He was one of my good friends, and I will miss him a lot," J.T. Keller says sadly. "I will always value the time I spent with him. John told it like it was. There were no grey areas."

Kathy Cramer was moved by White's courage as he was besieged by his final illness. "I am very proud

and fortunate to have had John White and Brooke Berget show Rocky Roses, a horse I bred, to a national championship. Lisa Jo told me that the day after John had his first chemo treatment, he wanted to ride, even though he was very weak. She said he asked to ride Rocky Roses. I felt so honored."

"John was a great individual. I always held him in the highest regard." – Bob Battaglia

The facts are these. John David White was born Feb. 17, 1963, in Iowa City, Iowa, to Jerry A. and Janet Falls White. He graduated from Iowa City High School in 1981 and attended the University of Iowa on a baseball scholarship. In his first jobs with Arabians, he quickly discovered that his special talents lay in developing driving and English performance horses. He opened his first training stable in 1990.

John and Lisa Jo Marsh married in 2000. Their two sons, Zach, 8, and Rex, 4, have enthusiastically followed their father's example, with both beginning their horse showing careers last summer. White also enjoyed golfing and fishing, especially with his two sons.

When asked which of her husband's qualities she cherished most, Lisa Jo White replies, "He loved the kids. Even after a hard day's work, he would take them fishing or golfing, or maybe just to a sporting goods store. I will treasure a wonderful memory from early December, when John and both boys were riding together in the arena, laughing and talking, making 'big passes' with their horses, and trying to outdo each other. What a great time they had together! Eight days before John died, he wrote in his journal, 'I never knew what love was until the boys came along.'

"Last spring, when the boys wanted to start showing, they began taking lessons after school three or four days a week. John was so proud, so glad they loved the horses, and being in the barn. Rantoul, Ill., was Zach's first show. As John and I stood watching the class, Zach was making these exciting passes, with his horse going down the rail at a big trot. Zach was posting up a storm, and clearly having fun. His dad watched him closely, then suddenly turned to me and asked, 'If something happens, does he know how to stop?'"

"Zach and his Half-Arabian won two 2008 Youth National Top Ten Championships, and both the UPHA



medal class and the country pleasure class at Region 10 in 2008.”

White and his future bride met at the National Show Horse Finals in Louisville. “I was there as an equitation rider,” Lisa Jo recalls. The friendship continued as Lisa Jo went on to college, graduating from Michigan State University with a degree in communications. The pair later opened John White Stable in Woodstock, Ill. Lisa Jo and her team will continue the operation of John White Stables, offering all the services and opportunities their customers and the public have come to expect.

White is survived by his wife, Lisa Jo; his two sons, Zach and Rex; his mother, Janet White Cramer; and stepfather, W.D. Cramer, of Coralville, Iowa; his in-laws, Pete and Joe Marsh, Grand Blanc, Mich.; two sisters, Rebecca White, of Omaha, Neb., and Kathy Susan White, of Tampa, Fla.; two brothers, Jeffrey White, of Boston, Mass., and J.D. (Darla) White, of Plano, Texas; and many nieces and nephews. Jerry A. White preceded his son in death.

“John White was a truly unique and colorful individual,” says John Golladay. “He was a dedicated family man and horseman, and I am proud to say that John was and always will be my best friend.”

“John’s passing has affected us all,” says Bob Groover. “John White, the man he was, can never be replaced in our hearts. We will miss him greatly.”

Kristan McElroy-Rogan echoes those feelings. “In the hearts of everyone who had the opportunity to know John, he will be greatly missed, not only as a horse trainer, but more importantly, as a great man.”

The family is especially grateful for the personalized care provided by the staff at both Northern Illinois Medical Center and the Sage Cancer Center. For those wishing to send their expressions of condolence, an education fund for Zach and Rex has been established at McHenry Savings Bank, 353 Bank Drive, McHenry, IL 60050. ■