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The cowboy and the queen

Santa Ynez Valley horse whisperer cherishes bond with English monarch

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It has been 27 years since Monty Roberts of Santa Ynez Valley has been hobnobbing with Queen Elizabeth II, the reigning monarch of England and an avid horsewoman, and he still keeps pinching himself to see if it's not all a dream.

"Imagine a cowboy from Salinas who has the queen's phone number and can reach her any hour of the day, and she never refuses to take my calls. She has left meetings to speak with me," said Mr. Roberts, co-owner with his wife Patricia of the picturesque Flag Is Up Farms, where they breed, train, buy and sell horses.

Imagine also Mr. Roberts elegantly clad in top hat and tails, riding in a landau carriage drawn by four white horses at the Royal Windsor Horse Show, which was part of the queen's 90th birthday celebration the weekend of May 14 and 15.

The couple, who stayed in the Margaret Thatcher suite at Windsor Castle, were also guests of the queen at a luncheon before the show on May 14 and a dinner that evening.



Queen Elizabeth urged Mr. Roberts to write his autobiography. He and his wife presented a copy of "The Man Who Listens to Horses" to the monarch in 1996.

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Monty Roberts of the Santa Ynez Valley has been hobnobbing for 27 years with Queen Elizabeth II, the reigning monarch of England and an avid horsewoman. **NIK BLASKOVICH/NEWS-PRESS**

"I wanted to ride a horse in the show, but the queen wouldn't allow it because of my recent knee replacement. She was afraid I might injure it. But I did ride at her Diamond Jubilee," said Mr. Roberts. "She is an awesome woman. She is the No. 1 leader who influences the world for good and doesn't receive the credit she deserves. Everything I do with her, she pushes me in front."

During a lengthy interview with him and wife in their tastefully decorated home, Mr. Roberts, physically fit at 81, detailed an eventful life that strains credulity.

"If you tried to submit it for a movie script, no one would believe it," he said, recalling a traumatic childhood with a father who owned a riding school and believed in "breaking" horses using traditional methods involving pain, control, fear and coercion.

"I showed my first horse when I was 4 years old. I had to win every competition. My father was a violent man. If I didn't win, I was beaten. So were the horses. Years later, MRIs and CAT scans showed I had 72 prepubescent fractures. I loved competing, and I loved horses, but I knew there had to be a better way to treat humans and horses," said Mr. Roberts.

After graduating from Salinas High School in 1953, he studied animal sciences and farm management at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo but never graduated. (Since then, he has



To show her appreciation and fondness for the cowboy from Salinas, the queen made him an honorary Member of the Royal Victorian Order in 2011. **COURTESY PHOTO**

been awarded several honorary degrees for his humane and innovative horse training methods, which he calls Join-Up).

With Salinas as his home base, Mr. Roberts traveled around the United States, Canada and Mexico competing in horse shows and rodeos. He also married Pat, who grew up in Salinas.

"I met her when I was 9 years old. We married in 1956," said Mr. Roberts, adding with a chuckle, "We have three biological children, four grandchildren, 47 foster children and hundreds of foster grandchildren."

In 1966, the couple moved to the Santa Ynez Valley, where he managed Flag Is Up Farms, which was owned by Hastings Harcourt, the retired chairman of the prestigious publishing company who lived in Montecito.

"Flag Is Up Farms is named for the announcement that is made at all horse races, the magical moment when managers and owners no longer have a say in what will happen in the race," explained Mr. Roberts. "The flag is up means that the horses will be ready to go in 20 seconds, and all betting stops."

A long tree-lined driveway leads to the spacious home that was designed by the prominent architect Cliff May, who was known as the Father of the California Ranch House.

"The original house was 5,000 square feet, and we've added 5,000 more," said Mr. Roberts. "The property is on the border of Solvang and Buellton. The drive in is Solvang and drive out is Buellton."

While working for Mr. Harcourt, Mr. Roberts spent his time working with 650 to 700 Thoroughbred horses on the 1,256-acre farm - breeding, training, buying, selling and racing globally.

He was also secretly using nonviolent techniques to train them.

"I did it in hiding because everyone else believed in punishment, that horses needed to be beaten so they fear you," said Mr. Roberts.

In 1973, Mr. Harcourt died at the age of 73, and in 1979,

Flag Is Up Farms was sold. After an eight-month nightmare of legal wrangling, the couple ended up with the house and 154 acres.

"We got the farm, but we owed a lot of money," said Mr. Roberts. "We asked ourselves, 'What do we do now? How do we make a living?' What we had going for us, I know horses. I borrowed money to buy two yearlings, one for \$1,600 and the other for \$3,500. Seven months later, I sold them for \$16,000 and \$35,000."

For the next 20 years, they bought and sold horses.

"We still owed money, but life was good," said Mr. Roberts, who continued to use gentle techniques to train his horses, still in secret, until a friend persuaded him to do a demonstration in 1986.

"There were about 350 people here - trainers, owners, celebrities and two horse magazine writers, one from Florida and the other from California. The event was totally successful. I worked with 180 horses," Mr. Roberts said.

But the next year, he had only 20 horses to train because "the technique was too controversial. They thought I was crazy. They didn't want to change their ways. We began to lose money. We went out of business."

The couple had no idea how dramatically their lives would change in 1988 when they got a call from their longtime friend, John Bowles, who lived six miles away in the Santa Ynez Valley.

"John said Sir John Miller, equerry to the Queen of England, wanted to come and see me about my training idea. I thought it was a prank until John Bowles explained that the queen had read the articles by the journalists at my demonstration. She was skeptical but showed them to John Miller, who is charge of all things equine for her, and asked what he thought. Like everyone else, he said the idea was hogwash," said Mr. Roberts.

Instead of dismissing the idea, the queen asked him, "Don't you have a friend in California who can find out more about this?"



Monty Roberts rode in a landau carriage drawn by four white horses at the Royal Windsor Horse Show, which was part of the queen's 90th birthday celebration the weekend of May 14 and 15.

COURTESY PHOTO

The Roberts still shake their heads as they remember the day in October 1988 when the “two Johns” drove up to their home in a black Mercedes 600 limousine.

“Sir John Miller was right out of central casting - short with a white hair, clipped mustache, wearing a tweed suit. I spent the day showing him my technique,” he said, hearing nothing more until he received an invitation from Her Majesty at Buckingham Palace asking him to join her at Windsor Castle in April 1989.

When Mr. Roberts arrived there after being picked up at Heathrow Airport in London by John Miller, he found a number of important-looking cars.

“I was wide-eyed and confused until I was told that Gorbachev and his wife were visiting,” he said.

His first glimpse of the queen caused more confusion.

“I didn’t recognize her. She was in her riding outfit and chatting with Miller. Prince Philip and the Queen Mum were there, too. Suddenly, I realized who it was and blurted out, ‘Your Majesty.’ She stuck her hand out and began talking about preparations for the five days I would spend with 21 of her horses, who had never been ridden before,” Mr. Roberts said.

She said she would watch him for an hour and then tend to other business. Instead, the queen was so fascinated she cancelled her appointments to observe him for the rest of his stay.

“Then, she insisted I remain for a 21-day tour to train horses in the U.K., Ireland and Scotland. She provided me with a car. She was my tour manager. I trained 98 horses,” said Mr. Roberts.

Before he left, the queen also urged him to write his autobiography, which became “The Man Who Listens to Horses: The Story of a Real-Life Horse Whisperer.” It was

published in 1996 by Random House and has sold more than 6 million copies. He has since written five other books about horses.

Now known as The Horse Whisperer, Mr. Roberts travels three or four times a year to England to work with the queen’s horses and to attend historic events like her Diamond Jubilee and recent birthday celebration.

“I love her to death,” he said.

Although the longtime friend continues to address her as Your Majesty, Mr. Roberts sees “a real side to her that is just overwhelming. Once when she called me on short notice and I mentioned I was in work clothes, she said to me, ‘I don’t give two hoots what you wear.’ I can’t emphasize enough the queen’s ability as a student. She doesn’t forget anything, and she is intensely interested.”

To show her appreciation and fondness for the cowboy from Salinas, the queen made him an honorary Member of the Royal Victorian Order in 2011. The next year, she became a patron of Join-Up International, the nonprofit organization dedicated to the humane training of horses founded by Mr. Roberts.

“The Royal Victorian Order is given by the queen to people who have served Her Majesty or the monarchy in a personal way,” said Mr. Roberts, adding, “I have never been happier than I am now. I am completely content. Every single thing I have wanted to do in life I have completed and so much more.

“The queen gave me another life. She wouldn’t agree with it, but it’s true - she is so understated.

“If it wasn’t for her, I’d still be plowing around in Central California, trying to get cowboys to agree that being rough with horses doesn’t make sense.”

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