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► CAROLINE WEEDEN & TOPSIDER

Get To Know **THE WEEDENS**

RAISING THE BAR FOR HUNTERS

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Caroline And Rush Weeden Want To Raise The Bar For Hunters

The Illinois couple has found their calling in the hunter/jumper industry, and their passion for the sport has led them to give back at every level.

BY ANNE LANG



Carl Weeden hosted and competed in last year's CN Chicago Hunter Derby, riding Valentino to sixth place. (MOLLIE BAILEY PHOTO)

Ever since 2007, when they helped to create the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association International Hunter Derby series, Caroline ("Carl") and Rush Weeden dreamed of hosting one of those derbies.

Their first opportunity came the following September, when they were the primary organizers of a \$10,000 derby at the Evergreen Classic, held at MK Pritzker's Wisconsin farm. Then, in August 2009, the Weedens offered the inaugural \$25,000 Chicago Hunter Derby at their own 40-acre Annali Farm (also known as Brookwood Farm LLC) in Antioch, Ill.

However, they neglected to alert the weather gods of their plan.

"It rained and rained all week leading up to the derby," Carl recalled. "We were nervous, because the farm was new [they had relocated their operation from Lake Forest, Ill., just months earlier], and our footing is grass. People were having trouble even getting in because of the rain; it was just insane. [Fellow organizer/trainer] Lynn Jayne and I were in a complete panic: 'What do we do if it keeps raining? What do we do with all the horses, all the people?'"

Rush was anxious as well. "I kept saying: 'Lord, we're doing this event for charity. You can't be doing this to me!'" he recalled.

The Weedens were trying to figure out how to move the derby to the indoor arena when it finally stopped

raining just before the event. "Since our field is 50 years old, it handled the water well," said Carl. "The undulating terrain helped it run off, and Rush had spent a lot of time getting the drainage just right on that field."

Rain or shine, the Chicago Hunter Derby has taken place at the Weedens' farm every year since, with prize money (thanks to returning sponsor Canadian National Railway) boosted to \$50,000 for the 2012 derby, slated for Sept. 8-9. New this year will be a \$5,000 USHJA National Hunter Derby, sponsored by Abba Vet Supply.

Carl is most proud of the event's philanthropic element: It's benefited the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago every year. Over time, the

Weedens added the USHJA Foundation (Carl is on the Board of Directors) as a beneficiary, and this year the derby will also benefit the University of Chicago Cancer Research Foundation.

Chicago Equestrians for a Cause, formed during the event's first year by the Weedens and Jayne (who's also president of the USHJA Foundation Board), generate the charitable links to the derby.

"Lynn and Rush and I wanted to create what we felt would be an ideal hunter derby, [and out of that notion evolved CEC]," Carl explained. "Hunter derbies are sort of a back-to-the-future thing, where you're taking some of the old and bringing it up to the new. One of the old trends I remembered were the charity horse shows. We've gotten so far away from that; shows have become such big business."

By making the Chicago Hunter Derby a charity event, "we'd be giving back to the community and hosting our idea of an ideal hunter derby," Carl said. "We get a lot of support from [non-horse] people in the community who want to support the charities, to be entertained by the derby and be able to give back at the same time."

Building A Business

The Weedens' journey to success with their annual derby, myriad volunteer activities and all facets of their hunter/jumper show stable began in their childhoods. Rush, 53, started riding and showing at the age of 8 in his native Cazenovia, N.Y., where he also became an avid foxhunter. He was 15 when his family moved to the Chicago area. Rush later worked on a farm in Lake Forest owned by Barbara Gould, and in 1985, he and his father bought the property. They renamed it Brookwood Farm after a house the Weeden family had owned in upstate New York.

Carl, 47, grew up as Caroline Johnston near Montreal, the daughter of a plasma physicist and his wife. The youngest of three children, Carl (like Rush) started riding at age 8, inspired by an aunt who owned horses. Carl's first riding memory is of being led on her aunt's pony, Wimpy. When Carl joined Pony Club, her parents let her bring home one of the program's ponies to keep in the backyard, where they built a makeshift stable and paddock.

► USHJA DERBY FINALS PREVIEW

Carl completed a year of equine studies at Humber College in Toronto, and then she decided she'd benefit more from practical experience in the industry. She landed a job at the Lake Forest stable owned by Denise Dennehy and met Rush at the shows. Their friendship led to marriage in 1991 and the subsequent arrival of daughters Allison, now 14, and Annie, now 16. (A longtime soccer player, Annie has picked up riding and currently shows in the children's hunters.)

In the fall of 2008, the Weedens transferred their farm from Lake Forest to Antioch, located just west of Lake Michigan and halfway between Chicago and Milwaukee. The family still maintains a home in Lake Forest, where their daughters attend school, but they also keep a house at the Antioch farm,

where about 38 horses (their own and those of numerous boarders) reside. The Weedens group shows in St. Louis in December (usually followed by a quick family skiing trip), then operates out of Wellington, Fla., from January-April. In the summer, they primarily show in Kentucky and Michigan.

Carl and Rush each train, ride and show. Some of the more notable hunters they've campaigned for clients over the years include Frango, Westcliffe, Topsider, Croquet, Valentino, Quannah, Condanas and Balisto.

At this year's \$100,000 USHJA International Hunter Derby Finals (Ky.), Carl plans to ride The Spy, owned by Ila Lemonis. "And at the moment," Carl said, "I have two nice first year horses: Fernelli, owned by Piper Benjamin; and

Lucky Times, owned by Emma Heise. Both show in the junior hunters as well and are very good for their owners."

Margaret Benjamin, chair of Chicago Equestrians for a Cause, has trained with the Weedens for years. "They're both very talented and draw on a lot of experience," she said. "They have a comprehensive program that respects both the horses and the riders. They work very hard to keep the horses not only show-ready, but lesson-ready—they're all fit and healthy. They create a safe situation as well as a competitive situation for everybody, adults and children. It's a great formula."

Carl adheres to the philosophy that no rider is too experienced to stop learning from others. "I am so fortunate to be surrounded by a wealth of great horsemen who I have learned so much from," said Carl, who's trained or ridden in clinics with horsemen such as George Morris, Jayne, Richard Cheska, Ray Texel and Val Renihan. "And being able to observe at some of the best venues in this country is also a great asset."

Benjamin said Carl is interested in the sport as a whole. "She looks at it strategically, so not only is she concerned with everyone's riding at the moment, but she's also looking down the road to see where the sport is going," she said. "And she's worked really hard and tirelessly at that for the past few years, without losing energy. The farm is Rush's pride and joy, and using the farm for a big event like the hunter derby is really generous of them. It's a great contribution to the sport."

Fueled By Optimism

Hosting the Chicago Hunter Derby has given the Weedens an inkling of what it would take to run a full-length, rated horse show.

"It definitely gives us insight on what show managers have to go through," Carl observed. "Rush gets the farm all ready and looking perfect; he's the 'man behind the curtain,' for sure. But we're really lucky that we also have a great crew like Bobby Murphy and Brian Lookabill of Kentucky Horse Shows LLC, also Lynn Jayne. She's a driving force and the main person responsible for obtaining sponsorships."

"One of the big things you learn," Carl added, "is to budget your time



"Rush and I enjoy giving back to an industry and a sport that has given so much to us," said Carl Weedens. (MOLLY SORGE PHOTO)



Rush Weeden has shown horses, like Balisto, for more than five decades.
(MOLLIE BAILEY PHOTO)

and to focus on the things that are important in order to have the event run well. You learn how to make quick decisions and figure things out as you go. To surround yourself with great people is really important."

Carl cited the creation of the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association and its many programs as the most significant strides

in the hunter realm over the past decade or so. "It has evolved our sport now that it has its own governing body under the USEF," she said. "And of course another big change has been the addition of international and national hunter derbies.

"In my mind, I'm hoping we're headed toward a more athletic and exciting hunter sport," she added. "You've seen

that excitement in the handy rounds at shows and in the course designers building better courses. The hunters have become more interesting to watch, and they've become more athletic."

Rush agreed: "Having a lot of jumper background myself, I like the style of the hunter derby courses," he said. "There are a lot of people doing the derby classes now because the money is good and because they have the horses that can jump the required heights. It's brought back some horses who had been doing the jumpers and can handle the bigger hunter courses, and it's added a few more classes and social events for the spectators at the shows. I like to think the hunters are headed in the right direction." 🐾

► Going The Extra Mile

Think it's impossible for busy horsemen to find time to volunteer? Not the Weedens.

Although Rush Weeden is usually too occupied with farm duties to serve on equestrian boards and committees like his wife, Carl, he still hauls loaned jumps to shows all over the country, including for the 2011 USHJA International Hunter Derby at Devon (Pa.). He and Carl co-sponsored that event and the 2010 and 2011 USHJA International Hunter Derby at Franktown Meadows (Nev.). Both of the Weedens have been involved with charitable activities such as the annual Bowling for Equestrians in Florida, which benefits the USHJA Foundation's Horseman's Assistance Fund for injured equestrians, the Illinois Special Olympics and, of course, Chicago Equestrians for a Cause.

In addition to serving on the USHJA Foundation Board of Directors, Carl also serves on the USHJA's World Champion Hunter Rider and High Performance Hunter committees.

"Both are very important to me," said Carl, "as they are changing and

shaping the hunter industry, which has always been a passion of mine."

Brookwood Farm has hosted many clinics over the years, including an annual clinic conducted by the couple's good friend, George Morris. In November, Brookwood LLC will host the USHJA Level II Emerging Athletes Program National Training Sessions at Fields and Fences Equestrian Center in Gurnee, Ill.

"We do so many clinics, and we're so involved with the USHJA," Carl noted, "so we had offered to host the Level II [at their own farm in 2010 and 2011]. It was so exciting to see these kids and the opportunities and exposure that they were being offered at the high end of our sport. I was enamored of the program from that point on, and we try to support it every way we can."

What motivates them to do so much outside their own business? "Rush and I enjoy giving back to an industry and a sport that has given so much to us," said Carl.

Added Rush: "We really love to see the hunters progress, to help bring the hunter standards up a little bit

and to get people more involved and excited. I mean, I love the jumpers, but the hunters were starting to get a little stagnant there for a while. So we're trying to help bring them back. It used to be that it was tough to fill a hunter class at the higher levels, but now those classes are filling again because people want their derby hunters to get some prep classes under their belts."

Not surprisingly, the Weedens' generous spirit and involvement has cultivated a wide circle of loyal friends. One of those is Lynn Jayne, who met Carl in 1995 and has since served with her on numerous committees and events.

"Carl is never afraid to ask for help or to learn from others," Jayne said. "She watches others whom she emulates and tries to figure out their secrets. She is forward thinking, always trying new things. Carl has a great work ethic and is a true competitor. Rush and Carl are truly great friends of mine, and I know if I was ever in a bind or tough situation, I could count on either of them to help me."