

AERC Pard'ners Award 2004

Debbie Ivey & Vali-Hifazeyna

BY GENIE STEWART-SPEARS

Who would have believed that a scrawny, 14.2-hand Arabian mare with 6" canon bones and all four feet 00-sized would make an endurance horse, much less compete successfully for 17 years? Or that this mare would carry a 5'10" lightweight rider for 16 years, covering 6,030 career miles together in which the pair would complete 109 rides—of which 101 would be top 10 finishes with 36 firsts and 26 best conditions?

Believe it. Debbie Ivey and Vali-Hifazeyna were awarded the Pard'ners Award because they did all of that and more. "Vali is perfect example of why you shouldn't judge a book by its cover," stated Doug Ivey, Debbie's husband and biggest fan, about Vali-Hifazeyna, better known as Vali.

Like many horse lovers, Debbie, whose father James "Bud" Davidson is a well-known endurance rider in the Southeast, had a pony as a child. When Debbie was 15 years old, she babysat her young cousin all summer in exchange for an 18-month-old racking filly. It was this filly that gave her a taste for racing.

"I used to race trains on her," laughed Debbie, who raised and trained the filly by herself. "I would ride to the little country store a couple miles from the house. It was all dirt roads back them. My parents didn't know this then, but I would ride down to that store and wait for the train. When it came, it didn't take much urging for my mare to take off racing alongside it. The engineer would always honk at us and that would make her go even faster. And I was riding bareback. I'd just grab a handful of mane and wave at the engineer. We never beat the train because the road curved away from the tracks. But I'd continue galloping the rest of the way home. It was a thrill to race that train!"

It wasn't until after she married her now ex-husband Yves Morrisette that she started taking riding lessons and got back into horses. "I was learning how to rope cows; I was trying to be a cowgirl," she said.

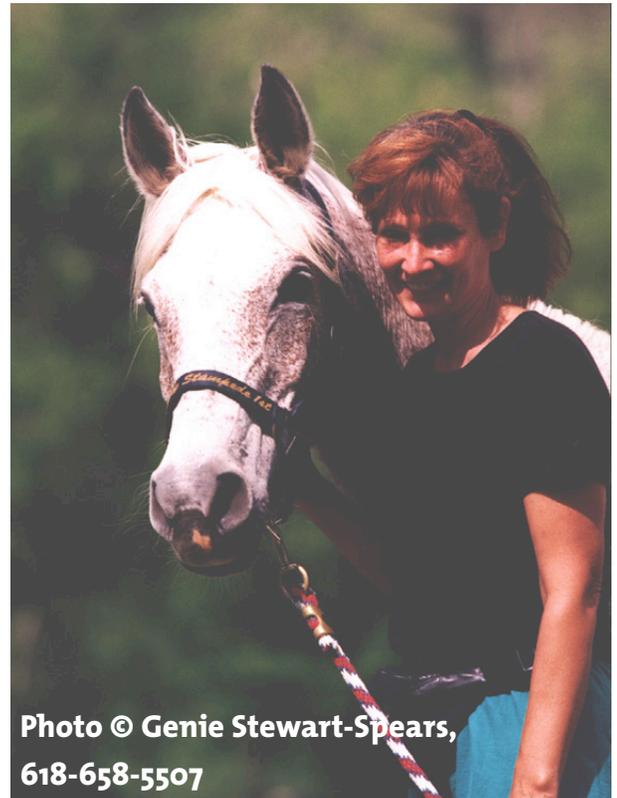
But Debbie met Barbara Rogers (the Southeast Region's Jodi Rogers Buttram's mother) and discovered endurance riding. Rogers lived in the same community—Russellville, Alabama—and, without a lot of effort, enticed Debbie to ride a 25-mile event in the fall of 1988. After she completed, Debbie, who was a certified farrier, was asked to go to the away vet check to see if she could help some riders whose horses had lost shoes. "I went out there and replaced missing shoes, including one on Amir Nezraff+, Nina Warren's horse that is in the AERC Hall of Fame.

"It was at that ride that I first saw Vali on the 65-mile ride. She came into the last vet check 45 minutes ahead of the next competitor. But she was lame and was pulled. Barbara told Yves that the mare was for sale, and she would be a good horse to buy. But Vali was pitifully skinny. I looked her over, and told Yves that he didn't want that horse! Her right front foot, the one she was lame on, was one-fourth inch longer than the left front. She had lost a shoe just before the ride. A farrier replaced the left front shoe but didn't attend to the right front to make it equal. So I was concerned that she might have some permanent damage. But after the event, Yves went to see her and, after riding her, he bought her.

"She barely weighed 700 pounds. I was embarrassed to take her to rides. Although her name is Vali-Hifazeyna, Angie McGhee later told me they used to call her Vali-'Emphysema'! She was hard to put weight on. She wouldn't eat grain that I top-dressed with supplements so I had to give her vitamins with a syringe by mouth. It wasn't until feed companies started adding more calories to the specialized feeds that I was able get much weight on her. In 2002, she weighed a healthy 820 pounds. And thanks to a high-fat feed (Endurance Gold) that Kentucky Equine Research developed, she is fat as a butterball these days."

Despite the earlier weight problem, Yves trained her all winter and entered her in the 50-mile Natchez Trace Ride in the spring of 1989. "I was going to do the 50-miler on my horse, Jet Stream, but he colicked in the pre-ride vet line! He was so nervous," she recalled, "that he just laid down and colicked right in front of everybody."

Yves, however, started the ride and was doing well until he and some other riders made a wrong turn and did extra mileage. At that time he had been in third place. Although he did complete, it was more than he was prepared to do. "He got so tired," laughed



Debbie, "that he got off and sat on the side of the trail for a long while. He said he couldn't ride anymore and when he tried to walk, he couldn't walk either! He had never done a ride before, much less a 50-miler. He was happy to finish, finally, but he said he was going to do 25 milers after that experience. When I told him Vali needed to do 50s, he said, 'Then you ride her in the next 50-mile ride. If you just finish the ride, I will take my hat off to you.'"

That next ride was the Heart of Dixie in April of 1989. But it was a 65-mile ride and, except for the 25-mile ride the previous year, Debbie didn't have any experience or training herself. "I hadn't even conditioned Vali; Yves had," she said. "But I got in behind some riders and off we went!"

Debbie explained that everyone in front of her was getting pulled and by the last vet check, she was in first place with a 20-minute lead on the next riders. "I didn't know what I was doing; I barely knew how to read and follow the ribbons. At that time, I didn't have enough sense to know the people behind me might be trying to catch up. I let Vali do a nice easy trot. Luckily I still finished first, but only two minutes ahead of the next rider. Vali earned best condition, too. After that, I had in my mind that that is what we were supposed to do all the time. But, of course, it didn't always work out that way."

Nevertheless, that first year, Debbie and Vali started and completed 10 rides, winning six and finishing second in the other four. And Vali earned five best condition awards.

Caught up in the fun of the sport, the next year Debbie and Vali entered and completed the two-day 150-mile Race of Champions in 42nd place. The pair also completed the Race of Champions in 1991 (fifth place) and 1992 (fourth place). They were on a roll.

The years 1999 and 2003 weren't good years for the pair, though. Although they started one ride in 1999, they were unable to complete and did not compete again that year. Then, in January 2003, the pair started the year off well, but that would be all for the year as Debbie's son tragically died in February and her brother passed away three weeks later from a heart attack. Debbie was too lost in grief to continue competing.

Then, in 2004, she and her new husband Doug moved from Alabama to South Carolina where they don't have facilities for the horses yet. Vali is on pasture at her dad's farm back in Alabama. Debbie, however, has since been competing on her dad's horse Toby.

What makes Vali so special? "Her big heart and her awesome trot," answered Debbie. "In the vet checks, her heart rate would drop like at rock most of the time. By the time I dismounted at the in-timer, got my time written on my card, and walked over to the vet check, her heart rate was down or was very close to being down. And, she has a turbo trot of about 23 miles per hour. With her awesome, ground-covering trot, if I could keep within sight of the front-runners, we could catch them. If there was a race-off for the finish line, she would more often than not beat them because she was so fast."

What makes these two such an awesome partnership? "I listen to her and she listens to me. From the moment I got on her for my first 50-mile ride, I trusted her, and she trusted me to take care of her," stated Debbie. "When you are running through the woods like endurance riders do, you put your life on the line a lot of time with the trust you put in your horse. And I trusted her a lot with my life!"

"I try to watch out for her and, bless her heart, she watches out for me," continued Debbie. "She will take me around a tree without knocking my knees or if a limb is too low, she goes around without me asking her. We just click together. For example, when I first get in the saddle, I can tell whether it is going to be a good ride or not. I can feel how she is feeling."

According to Debbie, Vali enjoys competing. "It is as if she was born to do this sport. She is just amazing. I will never, ever have another horse like her. She wasn't the best of the best—like Becky Hart's RO Grand Sultan+ // and/or Darla Westlake's RT Muffin—but she's close on their heels!"

In 2002, at age 21 years of age, Vali was first overall in the Southeast Region and won the Southeast Endurance Riders Association "Most Consistent Best Condition" award. And she finished fifth in the national War Mare Award standings. "None of the War Mare recipients have had as many points as Vali earned back in the early '90s," stated Debbie. "She would have easily been War Mare a number of years, if that recognition were offered back then. To me, she is the ultimate war mare. I would still be competing on her had I not had to turn her out to pasture on my dad's farm because I moved and am building a house. Of course, I wouldn't race like we used to, but I feel she still has 'it' and could still top 10."

While their record reflects strong competitive spirit, Debbie says, "The most important thing is to ride your horse the best you can while keeping it healthy and happy during the rides. Enjoy the ride and help your horse enjoy the ride and have a safe, nice finish. It is not important to win every ride as it is to finish with a sound and happy horse. To me, it is not just the race but rather the ride that is the ultimate experience. It is about the trust you put in your horse and the trust the horse puts in you and that you have a good time along the way."