



▲ Chestnut Lane Farm



The Chestnut Lane group at Devon ▲

# Chestnut Lane:

SHARING THE MAGIC

BY BETTS COUP

**C**hestnut Lane Farm came into being as the result of one woman's love for horses and a flyer—a happenstance event that brought the Roberts family into the Saddlebred world. However, in the 16 years that Chestnut Lane has been owned by the Roberts family and headed first by John Whalen, and now by Matt Lightner, it has

become a fixture of the busy and competitive North Carolina show circuit and has a program that does for others what that flyer did for the Roberts family: provides a way to get to know horses and to discover the magic and the fun the show horse sport holds.

Amy Roberts had always loved horses, but she had never had much access to them. However, that changed in 2000, when Amy was on the hunt for a hobby for her then 9-year-old daughter, Jennifer. "I had already tried introducing her to all of the 'normal' sports—dance, ice skating, gymnastics, soccer, golf and tennis—with no luck," Amy recalls. She came across a flyer that advertised year-round private riding lessons in an indoor arena, and that flyer was for Jimmy Orphanos Stables, where John Whalen was teaching and training at the time. Amy seized the opportunity to introduce Jennifer to a new sport and try her own hand at riding as well. They were both hooked. Jennifer rode throughout much of her junior exhibitor career, competing in





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Saddle Horse Report

▲ The Chestnut Lane group at Roanoke Shenandoah Valley 2017

Equitation under John's careful tutelage, and she still enjoys coming home to ride when she can. Amy, on the other hand, says, "I fell in love with the breed as well as the style of riding. I competed in my first Academy show at Clemson Fall Classic in 2000 at the age of 39 and was immediately bitten by the bug. I wanted to buy a horse but couldn't talk my husband into it."

In the end, Bill Roberts might have been better off just buying a horse for his wife and daughter. In January 2001, Amy found out that the barn had been put on the market. "I was completely crushed because I had just found this wonderful place, and since it was unlikely to stay a Saddlebred barn under new ownership, I wasn't sure what this would mean for my daughter and me in terms of riding. Surprising everyone, my husband—the man who didn't even want to buy a horse—declared that we should buy the barn," Amy explains. "We talked to so many people before making that decision, and the bottom line was the same: parents said it was the best thing they ever did for their child, and young adults who had grown up competing said that horse shows were the best memories they have as a kid. We made the commitment, along with John Whalen, to keep the barn going." They named the farm Chestnut Lane, inspired by one of John's previous addresses, and the Robertses felt it suited the property.

From the start, the goal for Chestnut Lane was to provide a place for people to have fun, be safe, learn about horses and compete to the best of one's ability, with an emphasis on sportsmanship and the valuable lessons that can be gained from riding and showing.

"We all know that you win some you shouldn't and you lose some you shouldn't. You should learn something from every ride or drive and then apply that to the next time. Sportsmanship, respect and manners have always been important at our barn," says Amy. "We strive to teach that to our lesson kids as well. You have to not only win with dignity; you have to lose with dignity as well. Riding teaches great life lessons."

The program grew with John at the helm, but a few years ago, he decided his life needed to take a different direction. Once again, Amy wasn't sure about the future of her dream barn, but Nicki Immonen, who was working with John as a trainer and instructor at Chestnut Lane, thought of Matlin Lightner for the head training position and gave him a call. Amy says, "Thankfully, he said yes, and he has been the best addition to Chestnut Lane we could have asked for."

Matt had more than a decade of experience working as an assistant for various trainers up and down the East Coast, along with a lifelong love of working with horses. He grew up in the small town of Monterey, Virginia, where his parents owned a grocery store and managed a farm with cows, sheep and a hay field they cut themselves. "As a kid, horses were my favorite animal," Matt says. "I love all animals, but horses were in a different category all their own. When I was 5 years old watching a horse show at the Virginia Horse Center, I remember telling Karin Banks, a family friend who then had horses with Danny and Nancy Troutman, that I was going to train Saddlebreds. I loved watching them, and that was just

what I was going to do." He started out riding with Jimmy Varner, a local horseman who would, as Matt explains it, train and work any horse. "His favorite was a Saddlebred or even a good racking horse—anything that was game and fast," Matt recalls. "He taught me how to read a horse's eye and personality, and he started me very young breaking colts for him."

Jimmy also gave him the greatest advice a young horseman could get. When it came time for Matt to graduate from high school, he told him, "If you aren't going to college, and you want to train horses, you need to go out and get more experience. Go work for someone and stay at least a year-and-a-half, but no more than three years, and learn as much as you can, then move on to the next. Treat it like a college education." That was exactly what Matt did. He worked with Harrison Shiflet, then Smith Lilly and was an assistant for Kristen and David Cater for several years. Finally, his last assistant trainer role was for Rob Turner, with whom he remained until he got that fateful call about Chestnut Lane. "I learned stuff from all of them, from how to get colts to amateur horses polished and ready for the show ring," says Matt.

In addition, Matt made a habit of studying other trainers working horses before or after a show. In particular, he would always go watch Todd Miles work horses early in the mornings. "He always has had tons of talent at getting horses ready for amateurs to show," Matt explains.



Among his mentors, he also counts his sister, Christy. Though she's not a horse person herself, she has been with him through every step he's taken. "She has supported me through every job and state I've gone to," Matt says. "Plus, when I got started she was a travel nurse, so she helped me adapt to moving from place to place without friends or family close by."

Matt knew of Chestnut Lane from when John Whalen was the head trainer and instructor, and he'd always thought it was a classy place. When he took the job, he'd never even met Amy, but his instincts about the place were right. After he met her, he knew he'd made the right decision. "After the first day, something about her told me we were going to be able to do big things together," Matt says. "I was and still am wondering when I'm going to wake up from the dream that I've actually made it to be a head trainer. That's all I've wanted since I was 5, so now I just need to keep proving myself and continuing dreaming big."

Throughout his career, Matt has been known for his ability with a young or green horse; he trained the likes of WC Charming Madness, WC The Embezzler, RWCC Make Mine Black, Celebrity Son, Nubiana and Hart's Extraordinaire, among many others. He has a good eye, and he explains that when looking at youngsters, he likes to see "their presence and attitude towards work," adding, "I like to see a horse trot from his back and roll through his shoulders." When he came to Chestnut Lane, he brought this talent for starting horses with him, and the barn was happy to open their doors to having young horses and prospects added to the program. "It's been especially fun to watch him work with the young horses he's found; it's the first time I've truly seen what it takes to bring a colt from the field to the show ring," Amy says. "Matt is very patient with these young horses and has a very keen understanding of how to approach them and how to earn their trust." For Matt, there's something special about seeing horses he's worked as youngsters go on to become World's Champions or even just to be the best horses they can be in the show ring.

Today, Matt is working a total of 12 show horses with the assistance of two wonderful grooms, Lalo and Cefas, as well as the clients and lesson kids who like to spend all their time at the barn. The numbers of those lesson kids are growing, too, as Matt is teaching between 30 and 40 lessons a week. After their lesson program shrank following the recession in the late 2000s, Matt has been working to find ways to build things back up. "He looked into different ways to advertise, and the program is picking back up. Our lesson program keeps growing every month, and we're continually coming up with ways to promote riding as a sport," Amy explains.

Chestnut Lane also takes some boarding horses, which helps support the business and keeps people at the barn and riding, so there actually 30 horses and ponies at the farm altogether. That's enough to keep Matt plenty busy. "We're open Monday through Saturday. I work horses in the morning, then after lunch I teach lessons until sometimes eight at night," Matt says. "When I'm not teaching, there are 20 acres of grass that need to be mowed, and when you live on the farm, there's always something to repair or replace, so I've turned into an okay handyman, too."

Amy and Bill could not be happier with the way things are going at Chestnut Lane. "I'm really excited about the direction the barn is going under



Jennifer, Bill and Amy Roberts ▲

Matt's supervision. His enthusiasm is contagious, and his energy seems endless. Matt has proved extremely talented at finding horses new to the show world and shaping them into extraordinary prospects for our riders," Amy explains.

When it comes to making those matches between a client and a show horse, Matt explains that the first thing he considers is how a horse and rider's personalities might work together. "I like something game, but not so game the rider will get scared," says Matt. "This year, it's been great to see all the horses that I was able to pick out and buy for clients work out—for them to be able to figure them out and be very

competitive in some very deep classes. It's really cool being able to see a product that you found for a customer and be able to show it, and to win on top of that is an awesome feeling," says Matt.

Chestnut Lane's clients could not agree more. Suzanne Wright brought her first horse, a Friesian, to the farm in 2010, after 20 years away from the horse business. A friend recommended John Whalen and Chestnut Lane, and after a phone call and visit, she knew it was the right place for her. "I've always enjoyed being a part of Chestnut Lane because we've always been a very close-knit barn family. A lot of the customers are





▲ Matt Lightner instructing Millie Holcomb

ladies of about the same age, and we just always have fun together," she explains. After John's departure, Suzanne was happy to see Matt join the team, grateful for his energy, work ethic and sense of humor. "I think he has many strengths as a horseman. What impresses me most is his patience and kindness with young horses. It has been fun to watch him start a colt and see the changes over the months," she says. "He also has a great eye for matching a horse with a rider and makes changes to each to create a more cohesive partnership. He's just a very, very talented young trainer."

Denese Patch is also a longtime client of Chestnut Lane, who started riding at the farm in 2002 after her daughter began taking lessons. She currently has a Saddlebred hunter, Madeira's Fox, and she praises

Matt for his ability to understand the requirements of the division and work her lovely gelding towards the perfect hunter form. "Matt's ability to understand what a horse is thinking and why they might be thinking that is one of his most important strengths. His insight is a valuable skill which enables him to train each horse based on its individual personality and needs," she explains. "He always puts the well-being of his horses first. His horses are happy and well cared for." She adds, "Matt's work ethic and enthusiasm for what he does stood out to me from the beginning. Matt is one of the hardest working individuals I know. When he's not training horses, he's busy look for prospects, thinking of ideas to grow the lesson program, and making improvements to the farm. After a full day of training and teaching, it's not unusual

to find him in the field installing new fencing, or tearing out landscaping. It's evident Matt enjoys what he does; it shows in his attitude towards the horses and customers."

Not only does Matt enjoy working with amateurs of all ages and skill levels, it's something at which he excels. "Matt's teaching style emphasizes rider performance using both the rider's body as well as their mind," Denese explains. "During lessons, Matt has his riders ride without reins to learn how to guide and steer the horse using just the rider's body weight. He does this to demonstrate how subtle shifts in the rider's body affect the performance of the horse."

For Matt, the greatest reward is seeing an amateur finally understand what it is they need to be doing to improve their riding or driving technique. "I love it all," he says. "Being able to work with the horse and rider and seeing the light bulb go off in the rider's eye as they figure something out is amazing."

Matt has an excellent working relationship with Amy and Bill Roberts. Amy gives all the credit to Matt, Cefas and Lalo, citing them as the reason everything on the farm runs so smoothly. She laughs, saying, "My job is just to pay the bills—they're the ones who make it such a wonderful place to be." The admiration is reciprocated, as Matt truly appreciates having barn owners like the Robertses. "They are both incredible to work with and talk to," he says. "They stand behind me 150 percent with everything I do here at Chestnut Lane. I could never ask to work for nicer people. Even on those phone calls when a few things have broken and need to be replaced or fixed, they always make sure it's taken care of." That partnership has resulted in a special atmosphere at Chestnut Lane and has attracted an amazing group of loyal customers. "The best part of our barn is the feeling of family," says Amy. "We support each other and cheer each other on at the shows as well as at the barn. A favorite show time tradition is to have dinner together almost every night, ending the week with a big cookout."

Suzanne Wright agrees, and she praises Amy and Bill for creating the atmosphere they have at the farm. "I can't say enough nice things about Amy and Bill Roberts. They were welcoming to my family and me from day one, and we have been friends ever since," she states. "Their hospitality and generosity at horse shows make the show such fun! Amy is a great cook and always feeds us wonderful food. I am very grateful for the opportunity to have such a great place to keep my horse and for all they do to make us feel welcome."

Denese also emphasizes the team camaraderie at Chestnut Lane. "I would describe the atmosphere at Chestnut Lane as open, friendly and supportive. Saturdays are especially fun, because everyone shows up to ride and hangs out afterwards," she says. "At the shows, we're a supportive bunch. We do each other's buns, help pin coats and cheer each other on. During downtime at the shows, we'll go out to eat, shop or visit local attractions as a group." She, too,





Matt Lightner showing Nubiana at Louisville in 2014 ▲

commends Amy and Bill for their ability to welcome everyone and to provide an enjoyable atmosphere—especially through their “Camper Town” cookouts and the birthday parties they host at their camper at horse shows. The spirit that the Robertses and Matt have fostered at Chestnut Lane is one of fun and family, yet that fact never detracts from the dedication to the horses or the show horse sport.

That is made all the more clear by the results they see at shows. At the recent Roanoke Shenandoah Valley Horse Show, the team earned three championship titles. Prior to that, they traveled up to the Devon Country Fair and Horse Show for the second year and came home with two championship victories, one for Amy with her exciting roadster pony Cool Max, and one for Suzanne Wright and her stunning five-gaited pleasure mare, Fort Chiswell’s Wild Kiss. “I love Devon—showing in front of a crowd of people and everything else that Devon brings to the table, the class, the kindness. The atmosphere of that place is beyond words. It makes non-horse people want to go back,” Matt says. “My success there this year was awesome. Even though we only had a few there, they all did well, and the ones that won are new to the barn in the past year, so that was even better.” Amy agrees, adding, “There’s something

completely magical about that place. You can feel it the moment you step through the gate. The history surrounds you, the volunteers welcome you, the shopping beckons you. It’s unlike any other show I’ve ever been to.”

Amy also loves the entirety of the show horse sport and the people that come with it. “There’s also something completely magical about the equine world: the people, the animals and the competition itself. First of all, you are with a group of people who are animal lovers, and that’s definitely not a bad group to be around. Secondly, the horses—what magnificent creatures! Most of them just want to please, and many actually enjoy their job,” she says. “Finally, where else can people in their 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s compete on a national level in a sporting event? All in all, it’s a wonderful community.”

Matt also appreciates the community and enjoys being a part of the North Carolina circuit. “I like being back down in the South. It’s nice to go to shows and see all the Carolina barns succeed, on or off our home turf,” he explains. When he isn’t at a horse show or home working horses, he might be visiting his family or spending a long weekend with fellow horse people, having made lifelong friends along his path so far. He’s made the horse world his life, but it’s also provided him with a wonderful community.

Looking forward, both Amy and Matt would like to add another team member and continue to expand both the lesson and training program. Anyone looking to join the team would have to be a special individual who understands their vision for Chestnut Lane, someone who wants to be a part of the fun and can really enjoy the life they’ve built there. But that is the goal for the program: to create a place just like the one Amy found for her daughter—and herself—back in 2000, a place where newcomers can come to ride and discover the world of the show horse sport; where longtime riders can come to see great young horses and ride with an experienced, versatile horseman; and where everyone can genuinely enjoy these animals and the passion shared by horse lovers. As Amy puts it, “I hope the program will continue to grow so that we can introduce and promote this wonderful breed to more kids. Saddle seat riding teaches patience and attentiveness to your horse, as well as what’s going on in the ring around you, sportsmanship and an appreciation of and respect for the most beautiful horses in the world,” she says. It’s a dream shared by many in the sport, but one which Amy and Bill, along with Matt, are making a reality on an everyday basis at Chestnut Lane Farm.