



COVER STORY: **AFIRES VISION** *ECHOING THE GREAT DAYS OF PARK*

by Mary Kirkman

There was a time in the Arabian industry when the park class was the traditional close of Saturday night competition, offering the crème de la crème of action and English athletic ability. Over the years, as English pleasure has elevated in style and excitement, park has been pushed further into the stratosphere, and really outstanding contenders have become hard to find. But if those horses are rare, they are more highly-prized. When a natural one comes along, a horse who can trot high and go long, and who clearly loves putting on a performance for the history books, railbirds sit up and take notice.

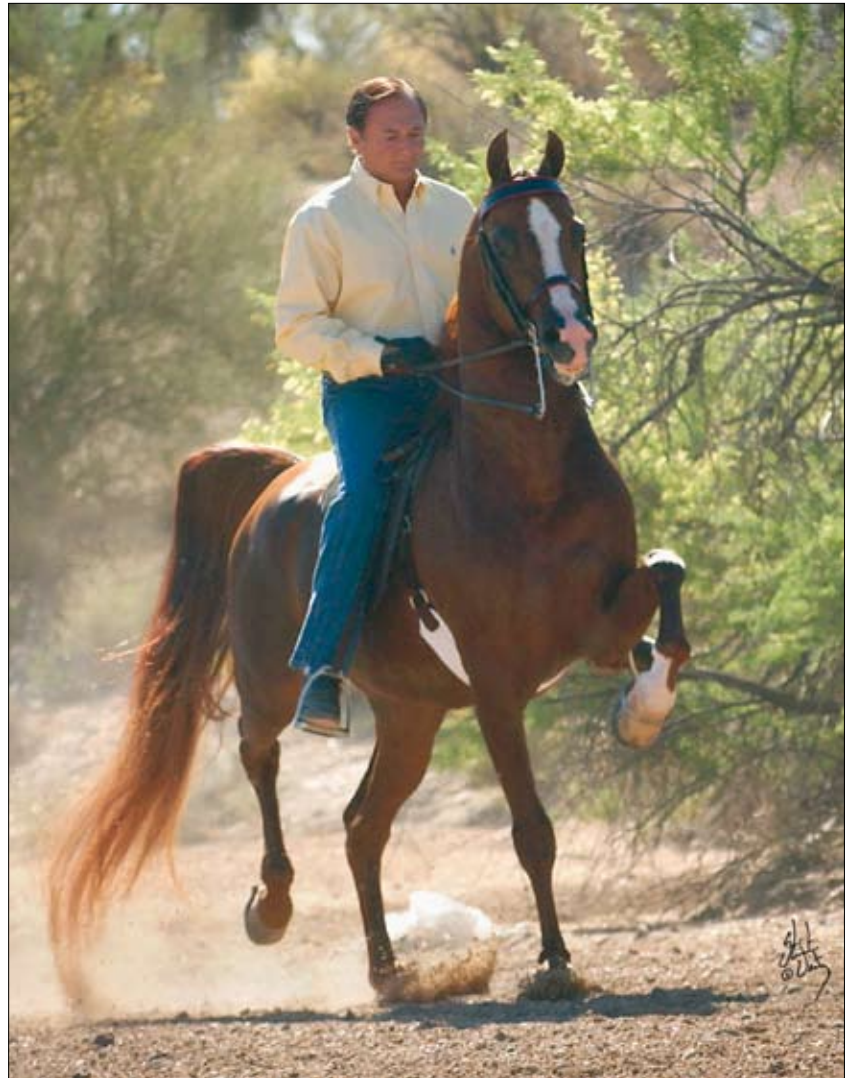
Russ Vento, of Battaglia Farms, had only a sense of that potential last December when he spotted a young stallion named Afires Vision at the Saguaro Classic. Bred by Tierra Farms and started by Rod Owens, the handsome chestnut was showing in amateur English pleasure.

"We asked if he could be purchased, but they said no way," Russ recalls. "Later, the situation changed and they gave us a call. We didn't even ask a price; we just got in the car to buy him. This was all prompted by a glimpse of his trot out of the corner of my eye. It was while he was working in a turn, and I said, 'Oh, my God!' We were just lucky to get him." Afires Vision was purchased on behalf of Karen and Olivia Stull of Scottsdale, Ariz.

"I think in the next two years, he is going to be one of the greatest in the breed," Bob Battaglia, normally reserved in his assessment of horses, says bluntly.

With just two months of work, the stallion showed conservatively in English pleasure at Scottsdale—and then let rip with an unbroken string of championships and blue ribbons. At Region 7, he was unanimous English Pleasure Champion, and then at Region 1 racked up unanimous Championships in both English Pleasure and Park. At Youth Nationals, he and Olivia Stull polished off his record with the unanimous Championship in Park. Now he's taking aim on U.S. Nationals with Battaglia in the irons.

"He is talented and just shows it more and more all the time," Bob says. "He's getting stronger, and he's got a pedigree (Afire Bey V x Matoskette, by Zodiac Matador) to back it up. That should make him one of the better breeding horses; when you



Afires Vision with Bob Battaglia, up.

look for the kind of horse that also produces, you've got the blood of eight National Champions behind him."

The eight national champions reflect some of the most extreme English and Park talent seen in the show ring, as well as titlists in halter. Afires Vision himself offers the sculpted face and tiny, tippy ears of Zodiac Matador and his sire *Bask, with the large, wide-set, dark eyes of Afire Bey V. The extravagant talent seems to come from everywhere.

"I think he got the best of all of his grandparents," Russ observes.

Any discussion of Afires Vision seems to revolve around two particular points—his athletic ability and his work ethic.



“He is a horse that wants to do it,” Bob says. “A lot of horses have talent, but they don’t want to do it. He gives a brilliant performance, with a lot of impulsion. He gets his speed from the power in his hindquarters, his gaskin, and he takes a long step to push off and get that front-end height through his shoulder. He’s strength in motion.”

“He has elegant front-end motion, and is very strong—pushes off his hocks, and he can hold unbelievable speed,” Russ amplifies. “He’s got kind of a strong look of his grandfather, Zodiac Matador; Matador horses were really strong in the hind-end and pushy. It is real easy for Vision to squat and elevate, and the speed he carries—I haven’t seen too many others, other than Nobility, that can carry that kind of speed, and that is a lot to put in print. Vision’s got all those capabilities, but with the elegance of Afire Bey V.”

There is another attraction to Afires Vision as well. “He is very mannered, he’s wonderful to be around, and his work ethic is fantastic,” Bob says. “He loves to go and do his job. He’s a sweet horse to be around—one of the nicest. He can come right from the breeding shed and go to work. He just pays attention to his business.”

So professional is the stallion that 17-year-old Olivia Stull rode him to the unanimous park championship at Youth Nationals after only four practice rides. Stull is an accomplished horsewoman in her own right, but still was a new partner for the stallion.

Olivia and her mother, Karen, have been involved in Arabians for eight years, but until the purchase of Afires Vision, they had concentrated on show ring participation in such classes as show hack, native costume and side saddle, and their horses had been geldings and mares. Their stallion has been an introduction to high-action performance of the most exciting kind, and they have found they are loving it. In addition, they have expanded their interest to breeding, and have been looking selectively for broodmares.

With the pedigree to back up his ability, Afires Vision is slated to be a breeding stallion in addition to his show career. Even with the current focus on his career and very little advertising, he attracted more than 20 mares this season. There are about a dozen offspring on the ground from earlier breedings, with the oldest 3 years old.

“Rod Owens, who has them, says they have the same work ethic,” Russ reports. “He says he actually has to hold them back because they are willing to do so much and are so easy to train.”

“Vision has great hocks, which is something that we’ve lost a little bit of in all breeds, not just our own,” Bob reflects. “He

seems to be producing that with the foals that are on the ground. Of course, we won’t know until we really start riding them, but it seems to be something that he is producing, and something that is definitely needed in the Arabian.”

Battaglia Farms is freezing semen on the stallion so that mares can be serviced while he is on the road. The operation is qualified by the Department of Agriculture to ship internationally as well.

So, what is in the future? Certainly the breeding career, but also his show ring magic.

“At this point, he has all his buttons and gears in place,” says Battaglia. “What we’ll see now is strength; he’ll just get stronger and stronger. To me, he is a combination of English and park, in that he has the English horse manners, but the park horse athletic ability. This horse

will breathe fire and go down the rail, hocks pumping, legs waving, ears forward—and then they’ll call for a walk, and he’ll say ‘okay.’”

Even as the stallion gets older, the combination of breeding duties and showing should not be too demanding. “He’s a national champion, so he only has to show once a year because he’s qualified for life,” Bob points out.

Just as alluring as the prospect of foals from a horse with the talent, attitude and pedigree of Afires Vision is the excitement of showing him; riding one of the great ones never gets old. Bob smiles. “He may someday be as good as Zodiac Matador.”



Afires Vision with owner Karen Stull.