

## Afires Vision— Aiming For History

by Mary Kirkman

There was a day when the U.S. National Park Championship was the most dazzling class of the show ring. Everything else could be exciting, but Park—well, that was the *crème de la crème* of competition. As such, it was traditionally the closing class of the show. Legend after legend heated up chilly October nights, and the stories from long ago still light up the eyes of those who were there.

As time went on, however, the increasing ability of the English Pleasure horses made park contenders almost redundant. While there were some real champions, the numbers which had distinguished the class were no longer there; the phenomenal talent, strength and mental focus it took to be a national champion in park were in short supply. It took years before a fresh crop of true park horses emerged to return the jewels to the division's crown.

It was into this world that Afires Vision was born. The 8-year-old stallion had been purchased for owners Karen and Olivia Stull on the basis of his "good motion" and handsome appearance, but when he went to work with trainer Bob Battaglia, the results surprised everyone. Afires Vision had what it took to be a park horse: a spectacular, cadenced trot, infinite endurance, sizzling excitement, and the mind to hold it all together.

The record for 2006 reflects the rising tide of his ability. Region 7—English Pleasure *Champion*; Region 1—English Pleasure *Champion*, Park *Champion*; Youth Nationals—Park *Champion*, with Olivia Stull; U.S. Nationals—*Top Ten Park*. Every championship was unanimous.

"He gives a brilliant performance, with a lot of impulsion," Bob Battaglia explains. "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."

This year has been much the same, a parade of park success. Scottsdale—*Champion*; Arabian World Cup—*World Champion*, with Karen Stull; Region 7—*Champion*. And then, at Region 2, he threw in the *championship* in Pleasure Driving as well.

"You put it in front of him and he does it," Battaglia marvels. "You teach him, and he does it. We all, in our minds, have a checklist of what we want our horses to do. With Vision, even as we're checking things off, we're adding things to the list because he can do them."

One key to the stallion's ability is his combination of talents. "He has the English horse manners, but the park horse athletic ability," Battaglia says. "He'll 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.'"

The stallion's two show seasons at Battaglia Farms have afforded the development of his strength and his understanding of his work. "A lot of park is that the horses have a great deal of reputation behind them," Russ Vento, the farm's co-owner, notes. "At the national level, it's not a class where a new young horse steps up to win. In many people's mind, it is one of the most—if not the most—prestigious classes."

At the same time that Afires Vision's reputation in the show ring has acquired a luster, so too has his attraction as a breeding stallion. For Karen and Olivia Stull, this dimension of the Arabian industry was not part of the plan, but owning an individual with his potential and pedigree has changed all that.

The fact is, Afires Vision's pedigree is a blueprint of English accomplishment, with a definite emphasis on park. By Afire Bey V, out of the Zodiac Matador mare, Matoskette, he offers the influence of eight national titlists, some of them among the most revered in the history of the American show ring. There is \*Bask, Zodiac Matador, Mi Toska, Afire Bey V, Huckleberry Bey, Bay-El-Bey, Bay Abi and Raffon. Many, such as \*Bask, Mi Toska and Raffon, were National Champions in both performance and halter.

"He looks like Matador and has that go-forward of a Matador," Bob Battaglia observes, "but he has the elegance and fluidity of Afire Bey V."

There is yet another accolade: "Afire Bey V is the winningest sire of all time," says Russ Vento, "and to my knowledge, Vision is the only national champion park horse stallion out there sired by Afire Bey V."

Not surprisingly, the public has responded over the past two years by sending mares to Afires Vision. His book has been substantial, and the arrival of a few earlier foals—the oldest are now three and four—is expected only to increase that appeal.

"The majority so far look to be English, both purebred and Half-Arabian," Battaglia reports. "They all have size, 16 hands for the Half-Arabians and 15-plus for the purebreds, and they all have huge, black eyes, little tiny ears, incredible shoulders and huge back ends. They are built to do performance."

Even so, those attributes may be outshone by one particularly valuable talent that is evident in the ones Battaglia has seen under saddle. "They all have memory retention," he says. "You're not having to retrain them. If anything, they're going forward at such a fast rate because it's easy for them. They're athletes; they're built for it, and they have the mind to understand."

The oldest will be entering the show ring next year.

At Battaglia Farms, the presence of an outstanding stallion is not new occurrence. Over the years, the farm has been home to some of the finest breeding sires in the Arabian and American Saddlebred breeds: Hucklebey Berry, DGL Justafire, Sultan's Great Day and Revival all have been on the roster there. Afires Vision, Bob Battaglia says, fits right in. "I think he will go down in the history books as being one of the great ones."

Right now, Battaglia and Vento look forward to the bloodlines of the future. "We've crossed our Hucklebey Berry daughters on Justafire," Battaglia says, "and when they're old enough, we'll be able to breed them to Vision."

Russ Vento considers the young stallion who has so impressed them. "People say, 'oh, nothing's that great; tell me something bad.'" He smiles. "Well, the worst thing about him is that he likes to break his waterer."

Given the titles already on the record for Afires Vision and the breeding potential so apparent, it is inevitable that the subject of retiring him has arisen. Just as quickly, it has been dropped. For Karen and Olivia Stull, Bob Battaglia and Russ Vento, Afires Vision deserves to pursue his destiny. They look down the calendar to the last U.S. Nationals in Albuquerque. "This year, our main goal is park," Battaglia says. "If all the stars align and everything is in the right place, it will be his turn."