



the Princess & Her Ponies

Abigail Kawanakoa: A Legendary Quarter Horse Woman Transforms the Sport She Loves

words: POWELL BERGER

“I LOVE THESE HORSES MORE THAN LIFE ITSELF. I DELIGHT IN THEM. THEY DESERVE OUR LOVE. THEY DESERVE THE BEST WE CAN GIVE THEM.”

Princess Abigail Kawanakoa, seen here in a 1978 photo riding in an Aloha Festivals patu unit, is a lifelong horse rider and has always cared deeply for her horses. Janet Van Bebber of the American Quarter Horse Association, says that Kawanakoa will be remembered for how she treated her horses—ensuring they were rested and providing them with the best pastures. “She raised the bar.” (photo by Honolulu Star-Advertiser).

NATIVE HAWAIIAN HEIRESS ABIGAIL KAWANAKOA IS WELL KNOWN THROUGHOUT HAWAII FOR HER LEGACY TO NATIVE HAWAIIAN PEOPLE. What’s lesser known is her decades of mastery in the world of competitive quarter horses on the mainland. “Miss Abigail,” as she’s known in the quarter horse world, has transformed the racing sport and industry as a world-class breeder, owner, racer, business woman and fierce advocate for the well-being of her beloved horses.

As a new chapter begins with the sale of her Lakeview Quarter Horse Farm in Nuevo, California, it’s clear that the horse woman known for her great skill sitting a horse and mastering the sport will leave a legacy of excellence for decades.

“Most people in the quarter horse world know her or know of her,” says Paul Jones, a horse trainer who has worked with Kawanakoa for years. “She’s deeply respected for her competition and excellence at the highest levels of the sport.”

As she tells the story, Kawanakoa returned to Hawaii after finishing school on the mainland and set about figuring out what to do next. “I’d always ridden horses, ever since I was a little girl,” she says. “I thought I could be good at this, and it was something I wanted to do.” Many decades later, she’s not just “good at this.” She’s set new bars of excellence across the sport, winning the sport’s All American Futurity—the quarter horse equivalent of the Kentucky Derby—in 1993 with her horse, A Classic Dash, winning five world championships and consecutive titles, and breeding more than 40 stakes winners and 300 other winning horses.

When she was inducted into the American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame in 2018, she told the association, “I love

these horses more than life itself. I delight in them. They deserve our love. They deserve the best we can give them. We domesticated them; we should be friends with them. They are the part of our lives that make us better people.”

Her work reaches beyond her ranch. When Dr. Wayne McIlwraith at Colorado State founded the Orthopedic Research Center at CSU focusing on equine surgery, joint disease, and the similarities between equine and human physiology, Kawanakoa stepped up to support his work. For her unwavering support and excellence in the field, she was awarded an honorary degree from CSU in 2016.

Her dedication to the relationship with her horses has defined her excellence in the field. She’s known for making sure her horses are rested when they need rest, that they have the best pastures—caring for the horses instead of pushing them. “She will be remembered in this industry for how she treated her horses, how she took care of them,” says Janet Van Bebber, chief racing officer for the AQHA. “She raised the bar.” Van Bebber recalls Kawanakoa hiring Connie Hall to train A Classic Dash, making her the first female trainer to ever win the All American—together, they took home the sport’s top prize.

“Of course we all know her princess status,” Jones says. “But in the world of quarter horses, we have doctors, lawyers and princesses. What matters is what you accomplish, not who you are.” To those who know her, no one is better. “Even now, she watches races on TVG from Hawaii and calls me to assess the race,” Jones says. “She sees every move the horses made, every move the jockeys made. She amazes me.” ■