


TOP 12

GREATEST BARREL RACING TEAMS OF ALL TIME



Last fall, *Barrel Horse News* readers were asked to vote on who they believed were the greatest horse and rider pairings in the history of barrel racing thus far. After tallying the votes for the 123 teams whose names were entered, we will now reveal the 12 highest-placing duos—one at a time—from January through December 2010, through intimate interviews with the selected riders.

This month, we introduce the team that, according to your votes, is the 4th greatest barrel racing team of all time.

The Countdown

12. Mary Burger and Rare Fred
11. Ryan Lovendahl and Blazin Jetolena
10. Kelly Yates and Firewater Fiesta
9. Brittany Pozzi and Sixth Vision
8. Sherry Cervi and Jet Royal Speed
7. Tyrney Steinhoff and Nate Shilabar
6. Martha Josey and Cebe Reed
5. Lindsay Sears and Sugar Moon Express

4. Lance Graves and Miss Fortunes Fool

3. October
2. November
1. December



#4

Lance Graves and Miss Fortunes Fool

The Crowd Pleasers: With a bond that was visible from the bleachers, Lance Graves and Miss Fortunes Fool broke records to become one of the most memorable barrel racing teams in the history of the sport. By Breanne Hill

MISS FORTUNES FOOL STOOD ACROSS THE BRAZILIAN AUCTION arena from Lance Graves. It had been almost three years since the two of them had made a competitive run together and since Graves had carefully helped the mare's former owner, Heath Boucher, find what they had considered to be an appropriate new home for her.

In those three gap years, Graves had little to do with the elegant gray mare's life. He'd gone on to ride other outstanding horses. She'd begun competing again with other riders. Yet there, in the auction ring, she was billed as the greatest champion Lance Graves had ever created. Videos of their record-breaking runs played on giant monitors throughout the auction house.

Graves was instantly emotional.

"It was difficult for me to watch her go through the ring," he admits.

The veteran trainer's visceral reaction to Miss Fortunes Fool's sale was not so much due to the fact that she was one of his most successful horses as it was to his personal love for the brilliant little mare he calls "Mildred."

Talented, but eccentric, Mildred was never the easiest horse to deal with outside of the arena. During her early career, Graves painstakingly worked around her issues and,



Lance Graves and Miss Fortunes Fool broke five arena records together.

ACTION PISTOP PHOTOGRAPHY

in the process, formed a bond with her that made the mare try harder for him.

"She's probably the favorite mare we've ever had on our place," Graves says. "We've always been especially protective of her, I guess."

As Graves observed the Brazilian auction,

his deep ties to the mare once again surfaced. It was no longer his place to handle her, so he kept his distance, but he couldn't help but wonder if Mildred would remember the guy who took her on when she was just a young upstart.

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Soon, curiosity overtook him.

"Every morning, when I walk into my barn at home, I do this whistle, and I tell the horses good morning," Graves explains. "So there we are in Brazil. She was across the arena, and her handler was holding her, and I just thought, 'What the heck,' and I did that little whistle. Well, she spun her head around and just about jerked her handler down looking for me. Oh, my God. It was tough to take, but it meant everything to me that she would spin around like that and look for me.

"That's what made us a great team all those years ago. She loved me, and if she loved me half as much as I loved her, then she should have been a happy, joyous mare."

Growing Up Graves

Born in Ponca City, Okla., Graves moved to the country town of Hartshorne, Okla., when he was 3 years old. His father, James, had high hopes that Graves could become a top-notch horseman and had him in the saddle practically from the moment they got out of the city.

"We were quite poor when I was a little boy," Graves remembers. "My first memory of going to horse shows, I was maybe 4. We had a little red Toyota pickup, and my daddy built a stock rack by hand for the back of it. We would load my pony up in the back of the Toyota and go to playdays and horse shows."

James may not have had a fancy rig or horse to give his son, but he did impart a healthy dose of competitiveness and drive to Graves—especially when it came to barrel racing.

"My dad started reading about these futurities they were beginning to have in Texas," Graves says. "He thought that was interesting. He thought that was very close to what horseracing did, so he thought it would have a future."

Under the guidance of the only coach he would ever have, the first Old Fort Days Futurity Champion and fellow Oklahoman Dale Youree, Graves made his initial impact in barrel racing at the age of 7. It was then that he became the youngest competitor ever to make the finals at Old Fort Days.

"I stopped doing all other events when I was 8," Graves says.

Graves' childhood and adolescence blurred with his early adulthood as one ongoing barrel racing run. He says now that he doesn't remember ever choosing to become a trainer

"Mildred" and Graves were a team for two years.



and professional rider. It was just simply the way things were.

"The first time I got paid to ride a horse, I was 7," he says. "You know, I don't think I ever really had a childhood, per say. From the time I was really, really little, everyone around me was just really serious about barrel racing, so there was no revelation one day that, hey, now I'm a horse trainer. Everything just kind of flowed together."

Amazingly, however, it wasn't until 2003 that Graves says he feels like he truly hit horse gold when he acquired the Dash Ta Fame son What Fame.

With What Fame, Graves won several titles including the 2003 AQHA World Championship in Open barrels.

Because of the gelding, Graves' father became convinced that Dash Ta Fame-bred horses were perfect for barrel racing.

"After that, we went out and gathered a group of Dash Ta Fame horses that he thought could work," Graves says.

Among those horses was the mare Silver Creek Dash, whom Graves sold to trainer Bo Hill. As Hill furthered Silver Creek Dash's training, Graves says he received a phone call from her.

"Bo called and said, 'Look, Lance, I think this filly is the real deal,'" Graves says. "She told me, 'I'm going to track down the rest of that family.'"

Hill was as good as her word. Graves soon received another call from the Kansas horsewoman. This time, she was on her way back from New Mexico with a full sister to Silver Creek Dash in her trailer.

"I had nicknamed Silver Creek Dash, 'Wilma,'" Graves says, "so Bo said she was going to think of the most awful old woman name ever to give this sister to match Wilma."

A few hours later, Hill phoned saying she had thought of the perfect name.

"I'm going to call her Mildred," she told Graves.

Fortunate-ly

Graves didn't meet Mildred until months later in Fort Smith, during the Old Fort Days Futurity.

"Bo said she was going to bring Mildred to Fort Smith with the idea that I could help her market and sell her," Graves says.

By that time, Mildred had been to a few different trainers, with Hill finally putting

some snazzy touches on the way she was getting around the barrels.

“Bo had put a real pretty, round pattern on her,” Graves says.

But pretty pattern or not, Graves and Hill couldn’t find anyone to buy the filly. The main drawback seemed to be her small stature. She was neither tall nor big boned, and that produced doubt in all of her potential owners.

“We actually had a Brazilian client come over and pick her apart,” Graves says. “They said she was too little. Her conformation wasn’t good, and she was too slow. They said she’d never be fast.”

Graves listened to all the potential buyers’ assessments of Mildred, but he saw something different when he looked at the petite filly.

“I’m not a really big man,” Graves says, “but I rode Mildred, and I told Bo, I don’t think she’s too little at all.”

Beyond her physical potential, Mildred had something else that immediately attracted Graves to her—an approachability that he believed revealed intelligence and sensitivity.

“I always judge a horse by the way they approach me,” Graves explains. “I liked the look in Mildred’s eyes. I liked her expression,

the way she looked at me. It was just like she was saying, ‘If I trust you, and you show me what you want me to do, I’ll be more than happy to do it for you.’”

The chemistry between Mildred and Graves prompted Hill to come up with a plan. She suggested that Graves find a client who would buy Mildred and let him keep her to train.

Graves suspected that he had the perfect potential buyer in Heath Boucher, a barrel racing enthusiast from Fredericktown, Ohio, who had already approached Graves once about riding for him.

Luckily, Boucher went along with the plan, and Mildred went home with Graves.

Upon arriving in Hartshorne, Graves and his crew, including wife, Stacy, and brother-in-law, Pete Oen, were immediately treated to what life with Miss Fortunes Fool was going to be like. Among her many hang-ups, Mildred was prone to freaking out when she was hard tied.

“The first day we got her home, she flipped on us,” Graves says. “We had tied her, and when she pulled back and felt that she was trapped, she glazed over and went over backwards. She ended up under the

horse trailer, split the saddle and tore the manger door off the horse trailer.

“We thought we’d killed her.”

Mildred was also claustrophobic. Graves moved her from stall to stall and even barn to barn at his ranch trying to find an area in which she didn’t act nervous.

“We finally put her in the main barn, with a stall that has a half door,” Graves says. “She seemed comfortable there.”

Although Mildred had her mental hang-ups, she was never aggressive or mean to any member of her new family.

“We had to work around her a lot, but she was really the sweetest-hearted, kindest mare,” Graves says. “Even though she was challenging in a couple of ways, she wanted to please us. She seemed like she really wanted to make us happy.”

The need to please made Mildred easy to mold on the barrel pattern. Stacy and Graves took turns working with her during her early training process, with Stacy putting her patented “corner snap” on Mildred, in which the mare learned to drag one hock while keeping three of her legs in motion.

That back and forth method of training continued until Graves finally decided to try

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Mildred on the clock for the first time, at Jud Little's 2006 Bar Nothin Barrel Bash in Ardmore, Okla.

"I didn't compete there with her," Graves explains. "I just backed her up and rolled her through the exhibitions afterward, which were on the stakes."

The Barrel Bash's Sweepstakes featured 600 entries that year. Mildred exited the arena on her exhibition run with a faster time than the Sweepstakes champion.

"We were blown away," Graves says. "That's when we knew she was a player."

Short Times

The very first event in which Graves and Mildred competed was the 2006 Run for the Bucks Champion of Champions Slot Race. Once again, Graves got a taste of Mildred's sensitivities when she stepped on her own shoe during warm ups, a mistake that seemed to make her insecure about running.

Her bad nerves carried over into the slot race, when what Graves describes as a "tentative" run left them out of the money.

The next day, however, Mildred was a new horse. She and Graves entered the Run for the Bucks Futurity with average expectations and went home with a winning of time of 14.8 seconds.

"I think there were only three horses in the 1D with her," Graves says.

From that race forward, Mildred was a contender at every race she entered. Over the course of the next year, she and Graves ran the fastest time in 11 futurities and broke records in five arenas.

Graves still considers his 2007 Southern Rebel Barrel Futurity run aboard Mildred, in which they clocked in at an astonishing 13.7 seconds, to be one of the greatest of his career.

"Literally, the first 45 days of her competing, I've never seen one better," Graves says.

Indeed, Mildred and Graves were an exciting pair to watch, whether you were observing from the bleachers or from the stall area, where Graves continued to work around his champion mare's phobias.

Graves and Oen even had to have a special saddling ritual with Mildred in which they'd let her walk circles in her stall as they put one piece of tack on her at a time.

"We'd take about 15 minutes to saddle her, and then we'd leave her saddled for about two hours before I'd warm her up,"

Life after Lance: Miss Fortunes Fool at auction in Brazil in 2010.



FABIO CABRERA

Moving on from Mildred: Lance Graves and his newest champion, another Boucher-owned, Dash Ta Fame daughter, Famous Silk Panties.



KENNETH SPRINGER

Graves says. "People used to laugh and say, 'I can't believe you'd put up with that crap,' but that was just her."

If there is a fine line between genius and madness, Mildred walked it well. Her strong competitive nature took over when she was in the arena, but once she was out, she would again seek approval and comfort from her rider.

"The thing she waited for at the end of the alley was for me to pull her up, reach down and rub her and tell her she was the greatest horse in the world," Graves says. "And I would."

In 2007, there was no doubt that Mildred was one of the greatest barrel horses in the world. She amassed enough points throughout the year to be named BFA World Champion without having to compete in the final race of the year.

The victory was a bittersweet one for Graves. Sweet because Mildred had shot past expectation to become a barrel racing star, and bitter because he and Boucher had

agreed to retire Mildred and sell her to a good home where she could begin a second career as a broodmare. She was sold to Dale Rankin, of Tuscola, Texas, in 2008.

Letting Mildred go was a difficult task for Graves. Perhaps because of all the care she required outside of the arena, he felt a special attachment to the small gray mare with the big, intelligent eyes.

"I've had about four horses in my life that people always ask about," Graves says. "I think the thing that made Mildred special was that she always ran over her head because she wanted me to be happy with her. I felt like she tried twice as hard for me because we were so bonded."

"I promise you, the day she left my hands, I kissed her on the head and told her she was the greatest horse in the world. She deserved to hear it from me one more time."

More Famous

Miss Fortunes Fool and Lance Graves have continued to make headlines without each other. This year alone, Graves has found substantial success on another Dash Ta Fame daughter, Famous Silk Panties, who may turn out to be his most lucrative winner ever.

And as for Mildred, her Brazilian sale made headline news in the barrel racing industry when Osmar Dias Farias bid \$356,000 for her, the most money reportedly ever offered for a barrel horse at auction in Brazil.

In the midst of all the money talk, Graves remains officially neutral. While the world screams of Miss Fortunes Fool's magnitude and breeding potential, for Graves, the subject of Mildred remains a very personal one. It seems there remains so much more to this story than just the past and present headlines.

"How do I want the world to remember Miss Fortunes Fool?" he asks. "Well, me personally, I will always remember her as the beautiful little mare who was great because of what she was on the inside, not the outside. She wasn't the biggest or the fastest, but she was going to give me every ounce of her being every time she stepped into that arena."

"Because of that, she will always have a piece of my heart. She will always be loved by me and my family—no matter where she is."

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