

EPOQUE KISS NKF

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

*Overall Horse Of The Year | Overall Five-Gaited Horse Of The Year
Open Five-Gaited Stallion Of The Year*

BURT HONAKER

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE *Trainer of the Year*

BY SARA PIZZUTO

He had been heralded by many in the equine world as the next big thing—a type of athlete that only comes along once in a lifetime. His pictures swirled throughout social media. Murmurs of his greatness circulated through industry trainers. Spectators flooded to the rail just to catch a glimpse of him in the flesh. Epoque Kiss NKF proved all the theories said about him true on Saturday evening in Louisville last year when he left Freedom Hall with the breed's biggest prize. Breeder, owner, and trainer, Burt Honaker, was in the saddle aboard this highly touted Saddlebred as he was crowned the 2022 Five-Gaited World's Grand Champion. Honaker and Epoque Kiss NKF landed in the history books last season and now at the top of your list as the People's Choice Trainer Of The Year and the People's Choice Overall Horse Of The Year.

Burt Honaker was born with horse training in his genes, as his father and mother trained horses throughout his childhood. Honaker's parents would come home from their full-time jobs in other professions and begin working horses for their clients at night.

"I barrel raced, and I did a little bit of everything," Honaker said. "Back in those days, I would show my western horses and I would get off and show my juvenile gaited horse. I grew up doing a little bit of it all, but my parents always loved Saddlebreds and they even had clients. It was a different world back then. They worked 20-something head of horses every night after work and so that is what we did."

Honaker ultimately decided to pursue horses further and become a professional trainer. He and his wife Miriam are now at the helm of their Northern Kiss Farm in Wytheville, Virginia. Burt Honaker has established himself as a successful breeder and trainer in the Saddlebred industry, yet it was a particular horse that made him a recent topic of conversation.

Honaker had developed a friendship with fellow trainer Robert Gardiner. Gardiner had garnered much success with his mare, VHF Belle Epoque, whom Honaker always had an affinity for. He was eager to breed that mare with his stallion, Callaway's Northern Kiss.

"I had loved that mare and she was one of my favorite horses of all time and I had always wanted her to have a baby by Northern Kiss," Honaker said. "One day we decided to breed them together and I got one and Robert got one. It was a toss-up on who got which. Robert always said that he liked having earlier babies than me and his was due two months ahead of mine so that's why he picked the recipient mare he picked because she was due first. Then I ended up with the one carrying Epoque Kiss. It was just kind of by luck of the draw."

Burt Honaker was hard at work with his string of horses in April of 2016 when he noticed that the recipient mare carrying Epoque Kiss NKF looked as if she would foal soon. It was a normal birth and Epoque Kiss tagged as "Henry" was welcomed into the world. However, Honaker quickly realized all was not well.

"I noticed when he came out, as soon as you break the sack, most colts are shaking their head and snorting their nose," he said. "But with him, there was nothing and I thought, 'Oh my God, she had a stillborn baby.' I started cleaning his nose and



"Henry" battled through a difficult birth experience to mature into a victorious show ring competitor. He made his show ring debut in 2021 with Burt Honaker and quickly generated a buzz throughout the Saddlebred industry.

trying to get the fluid out and he was still pretty lifeless. He didn't have a whole lot of color to his lips. I knew that something was wrong."

Honaker quickly started rubbing Epoque Kiss NKF with towels to stimulate him. He additionally tried with his mouth to give the foal oxygen through his nose. After a minute, Henry began to move his head, but Honaker was still quite nervous. He decided to call his vet who was conveniently already in the area. They immediately gave the foal two bags of plasma and milked the mare before tubing the foal to get milk to him. Henry began to show signs of life and was able to sit up on his own, but still wouldn't stand to nurse. However,

Honaker and his team refused to give up on their new foal.

"I put him and his mother in my arena in a bullpen and I backed my camper up to there," Honaker explained. "We literally got up every hour, picked him up, and one of us had to hold him and one of us guided him to his mother to nurse and we did that for almost two days before he stood on his own. Once he started standing, we started feeling a little bit better. My vet said we had to take it minute by minute, but we weren't sure if he was going to make it."

Though Henry's first days of life were filled with struggles, Honaker was certain that his new



Epoque Kiss NKF was born, raised, and trained at Northern Kiss Farm with Burt Honaker and his wife Miriam. They celebrated with the grand stallion after he and Honaker were named the 2022 Five-Gaited World's Grand Champions.



Epoque Kiss NKF was crowned the 2022 Five-Gaited World's Grand Champion with Burt Honaker in what was only the stallion's seventh ever class. This duo also made the victory pass as the Five-Gaited Stallion World's Champions for the second consecutive year.

foal was destined for greatness.

"I know it sounds crazy, but I thought he was special when he was just lying there," Honaker said. "There was something about that colt. He was beautiful just lying there. I called Robert and said, 'I got the prettiest damn colt you have ever laid your eyes on, and I don't know if he is going to make it.' There was just some kind of aura about him. Once he got healthy and turned out amongst the other weanlings,



Burt Honaker directed Epoque Kiss NKF under the spotlight at the UPHA Chapter 14 Symphony Of Horses—his first appearance of the 2022 show season.

he was a different animal than the rest of them. It could be raining, snowing, hot, and the others would be standing there looking miserable and if he saw me or saw someone walking down there, he would throw his head up and come running down like, 'Look at me.' He was like that from day one."

Burt Honaker made the decision to debut his promising youngster in 2021 at the Asheville Saddlebred Classic. Epoque Kiss made his first victory pass as the Denver Junior Five-Gaited victor. Though the appearance was Henry's first time off the farm, the now famed stallion had already attracted a buzz that rang throughout the equine community.

"I felt more pressure before I ever took him off the farm because there had been several horse trainers that had seen me work him at home and said, 'That might be the greatest horse I've ever seen in years,'" Honaker said. "I was probably more nervous for his first horse show when I took him off the farm at Asheville than I was showing him in the world's grand championship in Louisville just because so many people were hyped up to see him just from hearsay and hearing about him."

The hype surrounding Epoque Kiss NKF continued throughout the 2021 season. Henry won his first world's title in Louisville that year as the Five-Gaited Stallion World's Champion—winning the honor in just his third ever show ring performance. However, Honaker felt that his horse was not yet seasoned enough to handle the intensity of the 2021 Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship and spent that winter strengthening his promising superstar. He returned to the show ring in 2022 much to the delight of his expansive fan club.

Epoque Kiss NKF's first stop of the 2022 show season came in West Springfield, Massachusetts, where the stallion grew further accustomed to the roar of the crowd during his appearance at the UPHA Chapter 14 Symphony Of Horses. He then earned a round of honor at the Cleveland Tri-State Charity en route to the fabled grounds of Freedom Hall. Honaker and Henry made a repeat trip to the winner's enclosure in Louisville as the 2022 Five-Gaited Stallion World's Champions. However, this time Epoque Kiss was ready for the showdown that would ensue on stake night in Louisville. He and

Honaker made their way down the chute for the horse show's grand finale, the Five-Gaited World's Grand Championship. They were ultimately crowned the world's grand champions in what was just the stallion's seventh ever class—a deserving title for a horse who had captivated the attention of the industry.

"It was a complete dream," Honaker said. "I am a breeder and a trainer, so my goal was to breed a horse from my breeding program to show in that class much less with me on it. It was unbelievable to me that it had happened. I think I am the only person in history that has bred, raised, trained, and shown a horse to the world's grand championship. I just wanted a horse nice enough to say that I raised him and showed in that class whether I was on it or somebody else. It was truly special."

Epoque Kiss NKF will return to the show ring in 2023 to once again thrill audiences, judges, and trainers alike. Honaker thinks that his stallion can only improve—strengthening as he gains experience in the ring.

"Last year in the world's grand championship, it was his seventh time showing in his life," Honaker said. "I don't know of any horse that showed seven times and won the world's grand championship gaited class. He is truly just very green showing still. It is all his talent that helps him just rise above the rest. I can't imagine what this horse would do if he got seasoned and became a real pro at it. But he is a stud so studs can be a little different about things. He is not easy on himself at a show. He gets himself worked up. So that all goes into play with how he trains."

Honaker is also looking forward to Epoque Kiss NKF's future in his breeding program. He explained that he is collecting frozen semen in order to breed Henry to some of his own mares this year. Regardless of his next steps, Epoque Kiss NKF has cemented himself as one of the greatest gaited horses of the last decade. The efforts of Burt Honaker and the Northern Kiss Farm team have enabled Henry to rise to the forefront of the industry, captivate horse enthusiasts, and add his name to the history books. He is a living legend with an undefeated career and will long be celebrated after his time in the show ring draws to a close. "Epic" indeed.