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USEF Horse &  
Equestrian of the Year  
Nominees:

Afires Heir  
&  
Michael  
Byatt

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2010 AHA Convention  
Goes Disney

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Start your Horse on Cattle  
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# A Storybook

Tale:

USEF Horse  
of the Year nominee

# Afires Heir

**F**or decades, winning the purebred English Pleasure championship at U.S. Nationals has been considered the pinnacle of a career. Horsemen, as well as spectators, crowd the rail two and three deep during the final Saturday evening performance to catch a glimpse of snorting, prancing Arabians blowing into the arena with an elegance and spirit of centuries past. It is the horse bridled high delivering an effortless performance with an exuberant trot and balance that is awarded the coveted silver trophy and rose blanket. Horses that win this title are forever considered champions of the breed, regardless of future success.

On Saturday, October 30, 2010 a bright bay stallion with a right hind sock and faint stripe danced into the Tulsa Coliseum for one final class.

Afires Heir and longtime trainer Joel Kiesner sought to achieve the highly improbable feat of winning the U.S. National Championship English Pleasure title for a third consecutive year. In a field of 10 competitive horses, each striving to out trot and maneuver the others, Afires Heir captured the audience's attention with his balanced and electrifying performance. From his entry to excited cheers to his steady walk and round, rollicking canter, he dazzled the audience and judges alike. At the conclusion of the rail work, he was one of two horses called out for a work off to determine the champion.

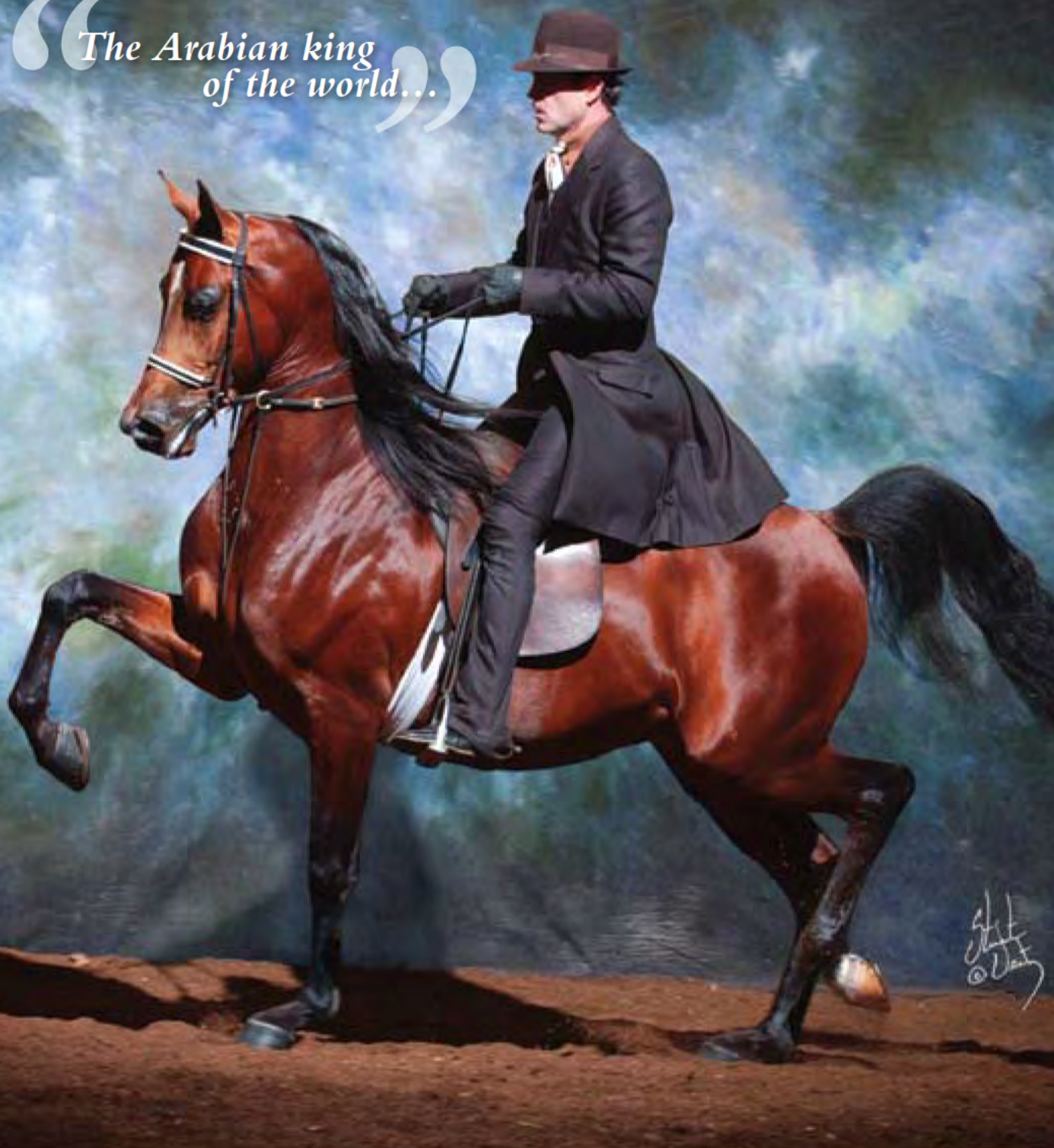
Asked to once again trot each way of the ring, Kiesner simply raised his hands off Afires Heir's neck and quietly encouraged the stallion to step up to the rail. They walked a stride or two from the line-up in center ring and fluidly moved into the trot. Within two or three strides, Afires Heir resumed his lofty floating trot, forequarters elevated with a round ground-covering forward gait. His hind-quarters delivered impulsion and regulated his speed and

elevation. Kiesner rode confidently yet quietly, displaying a concentration that did little to suggest the effort expended. Head held high straight over his shoulder, Afires Heir sought little contact with the bit, content to bridle vertically with occasional slack in his reins. As the work off progressed, he seemed to grow and move more extravagantly. Despite the electrifying cheering from the crowd, he made nary a misstep, his occasional ear flick the only testament to his attention to his performance. Despite the intensity and degree of motion, he quickly transitioned to a flat-footed walk when asked, without jiggling. When he finished the work off, he stood quietly in the line up, occasionally playing with his bits. In recognition of the tremendous performance of the horses in the work off, the call judge shook the riders' hands.

As the Top Ten ribbons were pinned, it came as no surprise that Afires Heir was among those selected for top honors. When it was time for the announcement of the champion, the announcer proclaimed Afires Heir once more the champion, declaring, "2008, 2009, 2010, three times the world's best." Accepting his rose blanket with the dignity expected of true champions, Afires Heir trotted one last time around the arena, exiting to much fanfare and a well-announced conclusion as "the Arabian king of the world...who retires as a unanimous champion tonight."

Called a "class act" by an announcer at the 2010 U.S. Nationals, Afires Heir has never disappointed or failed to

*“The Arabian king  
of the world...”*



live up to his early promise. Bred and raised by Tim and Marty Shea in Michigan, Afires Heir spent much of his first two years outside, playing with the other weanlings and yearlings. Tim Shea noted that one of his first recollections of the precocious youngster was when they brought him inside as a yearling “to get a feel for what he looked like in the summer of his yearling year, and he was really extreme in motion, piecey-looking... he was very different looking but looked outstanding very, very early” in his life. Tim Shea explained that in many of the best horses he’s seen, he can see their frame clearly and view how their parts or “pieces” move fluidly together. In addition to Afires Heir’s loose and easy movement, he “just reeked intelligence” that was evident to Tim even when Afires Heir was standing in his stall. Tim also observed in Afires Heir a “cheerful obedience and responsiveness” that exemplifies the ideal English Pleasure horse.

In addition to his phenotype, Afires Heir’s pedigree spoke to his potential. His dam was sired by Brass and out of a daughter of U.S. National Park Champion MHR Nobility. All of her foals shown to date have won U.S. National Top Tens. Further, Afires Heir is sired by Afire Bey V, himself a leading sire of English performance horses, with over 87 national champions sired to date. Afires Heir’s full sister, AFire Storm, was named a National Champion in junior mare halter in 2005. With each side of his pedigree littered with strong performance horses and producers, Afires Heir had the necessary genetics



to perform at the highest level.

Started as a late two year old, he quickly began to live up to the promise of his conformation, demonstrating an ease of bridling and fluid extreme motion, particularly in his trot. In the winter of 2004, Kiesner saw Afires Heir when looking for a new show horse for Bill and Shirley Reilich. Although not initially meeting their specifications for a new horse (he was a stallion, costly, and not likely to be an amateur horse), the Reilichs bought Afires Heir sight unseen after a few minutes of deliberation. Originally named Captain Afire by Marty Shea for his tendency to come in from pasture with his head held high, as though at military attention, Afires Heir’s talent and personality soon inspired Shirley Reilich and Kiesner to search for a name more fitting of a breeding stallion. Independently, they hit upon a variation of Afires Heir for the horse’s new registered name; the name stuck, although he is still called ‘Captain’ in the barn.

His training progressed smoothly, as he learned quickly and needed minimal repetition to master skills. Tim noted that Afires Heir never needed cramming or drilling; rather he “cheerfully did whatever he was asked to do.” Kiesner, Afires Heir’s lifelong trainer, says, “He was such a wonderful horse to train...there was no great manipulation in what he does; it’s what he was born to do.” Over the period of a year, Afires Heir moved through his training, developing strength and mastering his flexible limbs until he was deemed ready to enter the show ring.

In February, 2007, Afires Heir took to the ring for the very first time, debuting in Scottsdale to much fanfare. Ears pricked, he danced his way through the English Pleasure Junior Horse class in the Equidome to his first victory. In a foretaste of his future career, he became the talked about horse of the show; bystanders commented that he “looked as good as his Dad,” one that many had believed Photoshopped to display more extreme type and talent. Skeptics soon became believers, if not at Scottsdale, then when they saw him at U.S. Nationals. In a class with great depth of talent and potential, Afires Heir quickly rose to the top of the English Pleasure Junior Horse division. His controlled, spirited demeanor and elegant way of moving resembled that of a finished horse rather than one just starting his show career. After a dazzling class, he was named the unanimous champion. He accepted his roses with grace and gave a splendid exit pass.

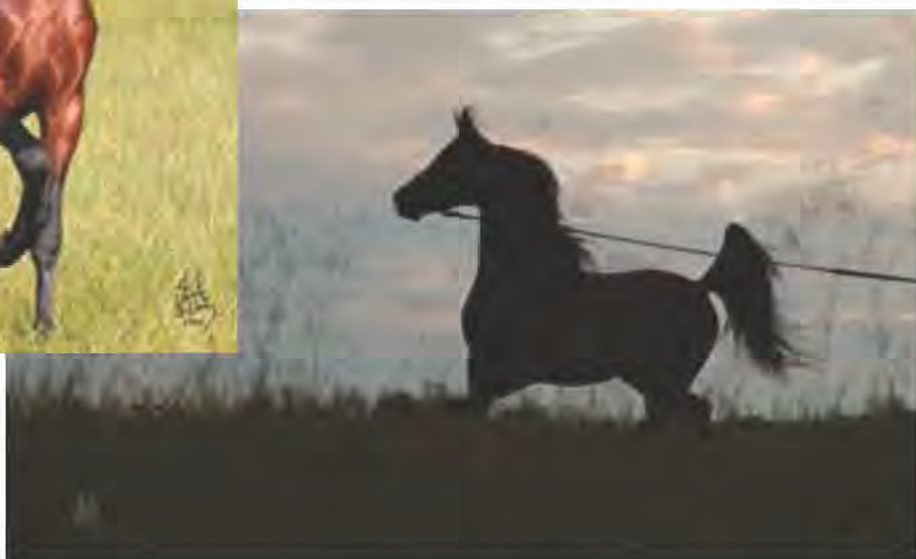
Many owners would let their horses mature a year or more after their junior horse show season before returning them to the demanding competition of the open division. Not so with Afires Heir. With a carefully selected schedule in his junior horse year to teach him about showing with minimal stress, he remained fresh and eager to perform. Just as importantly, his talent continued to develop; he gained increased scope and range of motion, as well as confidence and steadiness of movement. A few short months after his Nationals debut, Afires Heir returned to the ring in Scottsdale, this time in the Open English division against horses older and more seasoned than him.

Afires Heir rose to the occasion. Demonstrating nothing less than the brilliance that was the hallmark of his first year in the ring, he cavorted through class after class, qualifying for U.S. Nationals easily with first place and championship ribbons, including another win at Scottsdale.



His return to U.S. Nationals was much anticipated and culminated with another captivating and mannerly ride for unanimous National Championship. When 2009 dawned, Afires Heir had solidly established himself as the reigning champion of purebred English pleasure; in a USEF video commentary on English Pleasure at the U.S. Nationals, one trainer commented that his talent was such that it was highly unlikely that he could be beaten, unless Kiesner fell off in the middle of the class. No such untoward event occurred, however. Afires Heir turned in yet another stunning performance at U.S. Nationals that year, for a third unanimous Championship in an English Pleasure division. As 2010 beckoned, it became clear that Afires Heir was a supremely gifted individual; one who would attempt to create history by seeking a third consecutive title in English Pleasure Open. This dream became reality one Saturday in October when he was again named a unanimous national champion in a class that the Reilichs described as breathtaking; it was to be his last foray into the show ring.

Afires Heir retired with four unanimous U.S. National Champion titles, earned in consecutive years, three of which were in the same class. In his five year show career, he has never placed less than first on any judges' card. No other Arabian to date has achieved his record of consecutive and unanimous wins in the English Pleasure division. His retirement sets a precedent future competitors will be hard-pressed to achieve, one which Shirley "believes will not



be equaled in [her] lifetime.” Of his retirement, She noted that, although a difficult decision to make, he has “done anything anyone has ever asked him to do,” and then some.

Afires Heir exited the show ring to a standing ovation, once more blanketed in crimson roses. He returned home to Tennessee to continue with the next phase of his career as a breeding stallion. When asked about his legacy, those involved throughout his career point to his foals, the first of which began competing in 2010; all four of those shown at U.S. Nationals earned a Top Ten award or better, with three of them taking home ribbons in the English Pleasure Futurity class, including the Reserve National Championship. Of those foals, Kiesner claimed that there will be “a lot of special ones and special moments.” He cautioned that he is “not attempting to be braggadocious” but rather reflecting on the quality of the foals he has seen and begun training. More specifically, Kiesner predicted that the face of English Pleasure is likely to change, such that successful show horses will “have that regal, elegant style of a silhouette matched with the elegant style of motion, the gracefulness” that is exemplified by Afires Heir. To date, his foals appear to have inherited his loose, laidback shoulder, flexibility, long poll, and arched neck that made it so easy for him to perform; Afires Heir is also passing on his can-do attitude and intelligence, which have made his foals readily trainable. With his second foal crop preparing for their show ring debuts in 2011, Afires Heir’s promise as a breeding stallion will soon be tested and realized. Time will determine his future impact on the breed, although he will always be remembered for his elegance and attitude in the show ring.

Afires Heir’s dedication and joy in his work shine through, even when not under saddle. Bill and Shirley Reilich laughed when describing his tendency to “prance and be a goofball” on the lead line, as though knowing he is special. Even when turned loose in the pasture, he prefers to trot, with tail flagged and head held high. However his dedication does not extend to wearing blankets in the off season – he wears them when in training or showing but wriggles out of any blanket or leg wraps without damaging them as soon as he returns home from



U.S. Nationals. On the ground, he remains the consummate professional, easy to handle, although he prefers to be stabled in the regular show barn next to other horses for company. In each aspect of his life, Afires Heir has demonstrated the extraordinary qualities sought after in a breeding performance horse.

For Tim and Marty Shea, he is a breeder’s dream actualized, one they have been proud to have been involved in and followed. In Kiesner’s reminiscence of the bond he has shared with Afires Heir, he commented that “he’s a special individual and I have a tremendous amount of respect for him...he is a tremendously generous horse. I would think it, and he would just do it and keep trying to please until asked to quit.” Perhaps most tellingly, Kiesner asserted that “there has not been a day that Afires Heir has let [me] down with either his intelligence or his generous heart, not one day in five years of training.” From the Reilichs’ perspective, Afires Heir is a dream come true after more than 30 years in the Arabian industry; moreover he is the realization of Shirley’s childhood desire for a prancing Arabian horse to show. Shortly after his retirement, she rode him for the first time; she asserted that “he was the perfect gentleman,” obedient yet a powerful mover. His nomination for USEF Horse of the Year is a fitting tribute to an accomplished stallion with personality and intelligence critical for imparting a lasting legacy on the Arabian breed. In the words of the announcer at the 2010 U.S. Nationals, “If you could write this story, it gets no better than this... three times the world’s best and retiring on his terms.” 🐾

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# AFIRES HEIR



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