

"Stevie" Murray and Easter Day Playboy, aka "Gilbert," have lived many places and sampled many disciplines. Here, they're taking part in the Grand Island Endurance Ride on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.



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I Am AMERICA'S HORSE

Easter Day Playboy takes "versatile" to a new level.

By Kathy A. Johnson

AS QUARTER HORSE LOVERS, WE AGREE OUR BREED IS VERSATILE, willing and smart. Nineteen-year old "Gilbert," a handsome chestnut with a big white blaze, takes these qualities to the extreme. If it's a sport involving horses, he has probably tried it.

Gilbert, whose registered name is Easter Day Playboy (Days Imperial-Playboys Party by Dodger's Playboy), has done everything from western pleasure to dressage, polo to endurance. He has ponied horses on the track, taught children to ride and is about to star in a music video. And he's not done yet.

AQHA member "Stevie" Murray has owned Gilbert for 15 years. As a teen, she was looking for a project horse when her

then-mentor and trainer, Shorty Parks, recommended that she check out Easter Day Playboy at the Werkema family farm in Caledonia, Michigan. She ended up taking him home after that first meeting.

"I don't think I even rode him that day. I was just so mesmerized by watching him trot," she said.

Stevie trained Gilbert herself, with the occasional advice of Mary Luther.

"Gilbert taught me how to train a horse," she says. One of her biggest challenges was getting him to stop pinning his ears and chasing the other horses in the show pen.

"I had to get him to stop 'hunting down' the other hunters!" she says, laughing.

Gilbert soon settled down and began showing hints of his talent and versatility. About 10 years ago, Stevie took Gilbert to the All American Quarter Horse Congress where they competed in a dizzying number of youth classes, including showmanship, horsemanship, hunt seat equitation, trail, hunter hack, team tournament reining and team tournament horsemanship. Though they didn't end up placing, Gilbert did well and made the finals in quite a few classes.

Over her years with Gilbert, many trainers wanted her to buy a sport-specific horse, but Stevie preferred her "second place citizen" — her project horse who she said was good enough to win second place in almost anything he did.

"I always wanted to try new things, and I was so lucky to have the horse to do it with me," she says.

Stevie fully intended to sell Gilbert before she went off to Michigan State University for college, but he had other plans. Six people came to look at him. He bucked off every one of them, after having never bucked before (or since). He also bit Stevie's dad — the only time he has ever bitten anyone.

"So he came to college with me," Stevie says. She eventually became the captain of the equestrian team, and the whole team took lessons on Gilbert twice a week.

When Stevie graduated, she moved to Chicago, and, of course, so did Gilbert. In Chicago, she couldn't find any barns that had even seen a western saddle, so "we hung up our spurs and moved on to hunter jumper and dressage competitions. Gilbert was braver about jumping than I was," she says.

While they were briefly at a dressage barn, the owner loaned Stevie her saddle, bridle and show clothes, and Gilbert placed first in his first dressage test.

"One of the things I like best about him is he's an amazing pattern horse," Stevie says. It was while they were in Chicago that she loaned Gilbert out as a polo pony and also used him to pony Thoroughbreds at Arlington Park racetrack.

After Chicago, she moved to Cleveland, where she started fox hunting with Gilbert. In the winter, when the snow got too deep to trail ride, she and a friend took turns pulling each other on skis or a sled behind Gilbert. She also taught Gilbert to drive so she could sled or ski behind him if she was by herself.

Stevie has used Gilbert to help her break and train horses, as well as a companion horse when trailering. As a lesson horse, Stevie says Gilbert's always at the perfect level for his rider.

"I can put a 6-year-old on him, and he won't move a muscle, or I can put on an adult who wants to do eventing, and he'll be full of fire. If I put a western saddle on him, he'll drop his head and walk through a puddle. If I put a hunt saddle on him, he'll leap over it."

The bond between them is so strong, Stevie once rode Gilbert 10 miles bareback on the trail with just a rope around his neck. "I'd never do that on any other horse," she says.

His most recent sport is endurance. In his second 25-mile endurance ride, he placed third, just 20 minutes behind the winner, and that was with Stevie trying to get him to slow down.

Gilbert's currently hanging out in California, where he'll live for a year with one of Stevie's friends while Stevie works in South Africa for Trojan Horse Animal Wrangling and Stunts. Stevie's friend reported that while she was riding him near a winery, a bus load of tourists started snapping photos of him,



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For all his talents, it might be Gilbert's friendly attitude and willingness to be an ambassador that set him apart the most. Here, he attracted the attention of some tourists at the Danza del Sol winery in Temecula, California.

some even asking if they could have a photo taken while sitting on him. Of course, Gilbert obliged.

While he's waiting for Stevie's return, Gilbert will be a lesson horse, take younger riders on fox hunts and continue to train for endurance rides. You can read about Gilbert's experiences on the website Road to Tevis, www.len.rns.mybluehost.me.

When Stevie returns, she plans to do some working equitation and mounted shooting with Gilbert. Why not? There's even a chance for him to represent the Quarter Horse with the American Endurance Ride Conference in the 2018 Tournament of Roses Parade.

Stevie believes Gilbert is an ideal ambassador for the American Quarter Horse. Working with Gilbert has cemented her respect for Quarter Horses and what they can do.

"I really think people underutilize them. If you expect it out of them, you will get it," she says.

While Gilbert's talent and versatility are impressive, Stevie says, "it's his heart and mind that blow me away. The sheer multitude of disciplines he has excelled at and his friendly attitude toward people and true affection he seems to have for his lesson students. Also his playful and inquisitive but high-energy nature set him apart from other Quarter Horses I've owned, shown and known. I'm just so lucky to have him and so proud of him." ■

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