

Barrels, Tricks and Ranching, Oh My!

Bev has found a
VRH partner in
Gatalata Nicker.

Lifelong cowgirl Beverly Sparrowk has excelled in a unique variety of disciplines.

By Kaycie Timm

VERSATILITY RANCH HORSE EVENTS WELCOME RIDERS OF ALL AGES and backgrounds to compete with their horses in a wide range of ranch horse events. While some exhibitors have ridden working ranch horses for many years, others have transitioned to versatility from various other disciplines. Beverly Sparrowk, of Clements, California, found VRH competition after dabbling in an interesting assortment of equine sports.

A Versatile Background

IN THE LATE 1960S, BEVERLY STUDIED ANIMAL HUSBANDRY AT Lamar Junior College in southeastern Colorado. She was pursuing a career in that field with her first husband, Dick Hammond. But after a year and a half, she left college – her chosen vocation was far from the traditional path a young professional might follow. Rather than pushing papers in an office,

Bev toured the United States and Canada performing as a trick rider with Dick, his brother-in-law, Butch Morgan, and Bev's longtime friend Karen Womack Vold. Together, the foursome astounded crowds with dangerous feats and impressive stunts.

Although she did not spend all of her childhood around horses, Bev gained some early experience with staying mounted aboard a fast-moving horse. While in junior high school, she and her two sisters – Judy Springer and Ruby Anderson – purchased a mare from a family friend who owned several unregistered Thoroughbred-Quarter Horse crosses. The three horse-crazy sisters scrounged together \$100 of hard-earned cash to buy what they thought was the most beautiful animal in the world. But the girls quickly found that their prized mare had some interesting quirks.

"She was weird," Bev says with a laugh. "We thought she was wonderful, but we discovered she was kind of a runaway."



Barloo's Oakie carried Bev as she performed the Cossack Drag.



Bev doing a one-foot stand during a 1968 performance.

After a few rides in the country near their home, Bev and her sisters found the mare had a habit of running in hot pursuit any time a car passed them on the road. Although the mare caused more than her fair share of injuries, Bev channeled the mare's fiery disposition into a more productive avenue – gymkhana events.

Once Bev tasted the thrill of barrel racing and pole bending, she transitioned into competitive college rodeo, riding a gelding known as Sparky Bob, whom Bev leased from Jack and Jeanette Austin. Bred by Hoss Inman, this horse was the result of an accidental cross between a bucking mare from Hoss' rodeo string and one of his prized Quarter Horse racing stallions. Although never registered, Sparky Bob's speed allowed Bev to compete at such prestigious events as the National Western Stock Show. The duo went on to two wins in barrel racing at the Central Rocky Mountain regional finals and a reserve champion at the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association finals.

After meeting Dick, Bev began trick riding aboard an unregistered Quarter Horse mare called Torch. As she grew more serious in her trick career, Bev purchased Barleo's Oakie, a 1961 sorrel gelding whom she trained as a barrel horse and trick mount. For the next nine years, Bev and her friends entertained crowds at major rodeos across the nation with their horseback stunts.

Bev recalls one particularly memorable performance in Pendleton, Oregon, where her team rode on a track surrounding a football field with grandstands on either side. With this nontraditional layout, the performers had to split their stunts on either side of the track so both sides of the audience could

watch simultaneously. After each stunt, they would trot around the stands and switch sides with the other riders, making the performance even more physically demanding than usual.

Another unique track, this one in Salinas, California, challenged Bev and the other riders' ability to travel exceptionally quickly. Rather than a traditional oval shape, the track in Salinas was an extremely long straightaway running in front of the grandstand. By the end of the stretch, the horses would be running so fast they would almost wobble, Bev says.

In Salinas, soldiers from the local army base often attended the "California Rodeo" free of charge during the week when attendance was lower. Bev loved performing for the servicemen, who always showed their excitement with much cheering and applause.

"They were the best crowd," Bev recalls. "It didn't matter what we did, because they were so appreciative of everything."

But the joys of performance did not come without some difficulty. While performing full time, Bev and her fellow riders often drove all night for several consecutive days from one rodeo to the next. Once, the team traveled straight through from Edson, Alberta, to Colorado Springs, Colorado, stopping only for fuel and to briefly unload the horses.

However, Bev's love for the sport kept her pushing on through long trips and tiring performances. As the team grew more popular, Bev developed an expertise for a few particular strap tricks, including a full fender drag and one maneuver called the Cossack drag.

"When my horse went around the corner, my head was pretty close to the ground," Bev says. "Everybody was always afraid my horse would step on my hair, because it was really long."

In addition to strap tricks, Bev and Karen integrated some groundwork and vaults, which was almost unheard of for female trick riders. The two women became well known on the trick riding circuit for their daring feats and remarkable horsemanship.

About five years after Bev and Dick divorced, Bev retired from trick riding and moved to California. Taking a job with a rodeo stock contractor, the cowgirl transitioned to a safer, office-based position. Another retired rodeo cowboy, who had taken up ranching after hanging up his bronc riding spurs, held an office in the same building where Bev worked. After discovering they had previously met on the rodeo circuit, Bev and the rancher – Jack Sparrowk – got re-acquainted and eventually began dating. In 1978, the couple married and combined their families, including Jack's three children John, Julie and Jeff, as well as Bev's son, Reed Hammond. Bev and Jack will celebrate 40 years of marriage on December 9.

As the new wife of a successful rancher, Bev discovered her animal husbandry education had done little to prepare her for life on the ranch.

"It's not textbook," Bev says. "I had a lot to learn about ranching and working cattle."

On the Sparrowk ranches, Bev also developed her culinary skills by cooking for crews of hungry cowboys. However, Bev's passion remained tied to horses, and she assisted Jack in breeding and raising a few ranch horses each year. After a lifetime of riding, Bev found yet another avenue to foster her competitive side when she discovered AQHA Versatility Ranch Horse shows. For the past five years, Bev has challenged herself to expand her portfolio of horsemanship skills by mastering this up-and-coming discipline.

"Riding horses on the ranch is a little bit different than trying to show a ranch horse in VRH events," Bev admits.

Showing Her Versatility

BEV FIRST COMPETED IN VRH EVENTS ON A RETIRED CUTTING mare named Tarzanni, whom she purchased from a friend. This 1999 sorrel mare by San Par and out of Taris Sug by Son O Sugar, gave Bev a solid foundation on which to begin learning the intricacies of this new discipline. Bev started looking for a replacement horse when a knee injury took "Annie" out of competition and into the pasture to serve as a broodmare. When Bev failed to find another equally-seasoned horse, she purchased a young gelding, Curlenas Starlight, from Vernon and Kay Dennis of Caldwell, Idaho. Bev competed for more than a year on "Finn," a 2010 sorrel gelding by Shady Lil Starlight and out of Pecas Curlena by Pecas Olena.

"I really enjoyed him, and we learned a lot from each other," Bev says.

But, even after some training, the gelding was not quite what Bev needed to feel completely comfortable in VRH events. After admiring Gatalata Nicker, better known as "Lacy," in the arena, Bev jumped at the chance to bring the mare home as soon as she was offered for sale. Lacy, a 2009 sorrel mare by Boomernicker and out of Peppys Little Gata by Senor Peppy Gato, exhibited traits Bev admired, including a quiet disposition and conformation that reminds Bev of the gelding she barrel raced on in college.

"She looked like she would take care of a 75-year-old woman," Bev says. "And she does."

After selling Finn, Bev purchased Lacy and the pair began racking up accolades at VRH competitions across California and Arizona, where they competed in the Sun Country Round-Up AQHA and Western States Versatility Ranch Horse Association shows.



Bev Sparrowk

KAYCIE TIMM

This past June, Bev and Lacy traveled from California to show at the Zoetis AQHA Versatility Ranch Horse World Championships, the National Ranch and Stock Horse Alliance National Championship and the AQHA Level 1 Cattle Championship. They finished 15th out of 47 in the NRSHA limited amateur trail class. Overall, Bev completed her first AQHA world show with nothing but positive feelings about Lacy's performance.

"I really enjoyed it," Bev shares. "The people were just wonderful and the atmosphere was great."

Most of all, Bev was impressed with the efficiency of the show staff and camaraderie among attendees. She found complete strangers willingly helping their fellow exhibitors and making new friends in the process. After trying her hand at rodeo, trick riding, ranching and now VRH, Bev has spent her life developing relationships throughout the horse industry. Through highs and lows, her love for the American Quarter Horse has remained constant. And for this cowgirl, the fun with VRH has only just begun. 🐾

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